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The Philippines 2014-2015: Domestic Politics and Foreign Relations, A Critical Review

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The Chinese-American Race for Hegemony in Asia

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
and Nicola Mocci

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The Philippines 2014-2015: Domestic politics and foreign relations, a critical review

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This article analyses some of the key issues in Philippine domestic politics and foreign policy during the years 2014 to 2015. The analysis is divided into two main parts. First, the article examines domestic politics from the lens of political corruption, President Aquino's good governance programme, and electoral politics. Second, the article examines the principal patterns of power relations and key issues in regard to the Philippine government's foreign policy and international diplomacy strategy — with a particular focus on bilateral relations with the United States, the rise of China and the territorial disputes, and regional economic integration in the context of the ASEAN. The main argument here is that the key patterns of domestic and foreign policies and strategies of the Philippine government under the Aquino administration reveal historically constituted shortcomings of the Philippine state in autonomously steering its own long-term development outcomes, primarily because of two factors: the internal struggles amongst various elite factions within the state-society nexus and the peripheral and US-centric roles that the country plays in the international system.

> My hope is that when I leave office, everyone can say that we have traveled far on the right path, and that we are able to bequeath a better future to the next generation. Join me in continuing this fight for change.
>
> Philippine President Benigno Aquino III[1]

1. *Introduction*

Elected based on his «good governance» platform, President Benigno Aquino III's legally mandated presidential term started last June 30, 2010, and his presidency is expected to last until mid-2016. The quotation above is cited from the last paragraph of Aquino's speech, which he gave when he was inaugurated as the 15th President of the Republic of the Philippines. Amidst the last few months of the Aquino presidency, did his leadership live up to the promise of «good governance» he so willingly invoked during his campaign and in the inaugural address? How did the Aquino administration address key issues of domestic politics and foreign policy?

1. *Inaugural Address 2010. Speech of Benigno S. Aquino III, President of the Philippines, 30 June 2010* (http://www.gov.ph/2010/06/30/inaugural-address-of-president-benigno-s-aquino-iii-english-translation).

This article analyses the key developments in Philippine domestic politics and foreign policy during the years 2014 to 2015. The analysis is divided into two main parts. First, the article examines domestic politics from the lens of political corruption, economic development, peace and conflict, and electoral politics. Second, the article examines the principal patterns of power relations and key issues in regard to the Philippine government's foreign policy and international diplomacy strategy – with a particular focus on bilateral relations with the United States as well as the territorial disputes in the region in the context of the rise of China as a regional power. The main argument here is that the key patterns of domestic and foreign policies and strategies of the Philippine government under the Aquino administration reveal historically constituted shortcomings to autonomously steer towards its own long-term development goals, primarily because of two factors: the internal struggles amongst various élite factions within the state-society nexus *and* the peripheral and US-centric roles that the country plays in the international system. The analysis of this article begins in the next section with a discussion on key issues in domestic politics in the Philippines during the years 2014 and 2015.

2. *Domestic politics*

Similar to the previous administration of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001-2010), current President Benigno Aquino III commenced his mandate with a massive campaign against «bad» politics through his *daang matuwid* (straight path) governance brand. Aquino's candidacy in the 2010 national elections could not have been timelier: the death of his mother, former President Corazon Aquino, who had become the symbol of Philippine democracy, occurred when Arroyo was facing serious corruption and electoral fraud allegations. In his inaugural speech in 2010, he vowed to transform politics by getting rid of patronage politics, junketeering, «senseless spending», and bribery.[2] The focal point of his reputed social contract with the people was «transformational change», which highlighted what he aspired to accomplish: a dramatic transition from a failed leadership that incited cynicism to an ethical one bound to stimulate renewed hope for the country.[3] This is manifest in the usual narrative of his annual State of the Nation Address that extols his administration's accomplishments against the backdrop of pressing corruption and culture of impunity, both treated as an inheritance from Arroyo and her henchmen.

2. 'Inaugural Address 2010, Speech of Benigno S. Aquino III, (English translation), June 30, 2010', *Official Gazette* (http://www.gov.ph/2010/06/30/inaugural-address-of-president-benigno-s-aquino-iii-english-translation).

3. 'A Social Contract with the Filipino People', *Official Gazette*, (http://www.gov.ph/about/gov/exec/bsaiii/platform-of-government).

The unfortunate reality of Asia's «oldest democracy»[4] being trapped in the cycle of changelessness cannot be understood through piecemeal narration of each presidency. Likewise, adjectives attached to democracy, like «cacique», «clientelist», «élite», «oligarchic», and «bourgeois» could only offer new perspectives if dovetailed with the three formidable historical chapters that form the present political reality in the Philippines.[5] The first is the Spanish colonization (1565-1898). Spain ruled and influenced the Filipinos mostly through Catholicism. With 86% of the population being Roman Catholics, the church has a decisive influence on domestic politics, particularly concerning the choice of leaders and their fate and social policies, such as the approval of the Reproductive Health Law.[6] Politicians are known to solicit political support from the Roman Catholic Church and other Christian denominations, most notably *Iglesia ni Cristo* (Church of Christ), given their huge religious following and remarkable reach to ordinary citizens. Moreover, the predominance of Catholicism has had a huge impact on the people's perception and treatment of Muslim minorities in the country.

The second historical chapter influencing the political present of the Philippines is represented by the American colonization (1898-1946). Operating as a tutelary colonial state to introduce democracy in the Philippines, the US allowed Filipinos to conduct free elections and hold government offices under the supervision of the American administration. Since the

4. Salvador Santino F. Regilme Jr., 'Why Asia's Oldest Democracy Is Bound to Fail: Analyzing Post - 1986 Philippine Democracy', *Journal of Developing Societies*, pp. 1-27 (forthcoming).

5. These are prevailing characterizations in the most prominent works on Philippine politics. For instance: Benedict Anderson 'Cacique Democracy in the Philippines: Origins and Dreams', *The New Left Review*, Vol. 1, Issue 169, May-June 1988; John Sidel, *Capital, Coercion and Crime: Bossism in the Philippines*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999; Carl H. Lande, *Leaders, Factions and Politics: The Structure of Philippine Politics*. New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Monograph No. 6, 1965; Paul D. Hutchcroft, *Booty Capitalism: The Politics of Banking in the Philippines*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1998.

6. The Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act of 2012, or Reproductive Health (RH) Law, ensures the universal access to contraceptive methods, sexual education, and maternal healthcare. The implementation of the RH Law was halted, due to claims that it promotes artificial contraceptive methods and even abortion, which may be detrimental to women's health. The strongest opposition comes from the members of the Catholic Church who argue that the law is against family values and the right to life of the unborn. In 8 April 2014, the Supreme Court of the Philippines ruled the RH Law as constitutional. Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) President Socrates Villegas called for the support of the Catholic faithful «to maintain respect and esteem for the Supreme Court». See *CBCP Statement on RH Law, Statement of Archbishop Socrates Villegas, CBCP President* (http://www.cbcpnews.com/cbcpnews/?p=33728). For an in-depth discussion of the influence of the Catholic Church on the Reproductive Health Bill debate, see Eric Marcelo O. Genilo, SJ, 'The Catholic Church and the Reproductive Health Bill Debate: The Philippine Experience', *The Heythrop Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 6, November 2014.

Americans lacked a sufficient number of civilians to administer a colony, they ruled indirectly through landed élites and clans that – then and now – govern important regions. This meant that the few existing local economic élites and the «ilustrados» («learned» or «enlightened ones»), namely the members of the educated class, which had taken shape during the Spanish colonial era, were absorbed into the «administrative» machinery to get their political support. In return, these classes were protected from seditious and popular opposition. Many of these élites developed a «directing class» mentality. Such belief in their status as an educated and usually well-to-do class granted them the privilege to act as the «natural leaders» of the popular mass.[7] Although Filipinos are generally grateful for the American heritage of electoral democracy, it is difficult to deny that it gave birth to the modern Philippines' political ills. In Benedict Anderson's words, «it was above all the political innovations of the Americans that created a solid, visible 'national oligarchy'».[8]

The third and last historical chapter to mould the Filipino political present is the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution,[9] which became both the country's boon and bane. The peaceful movement led by the alliance between the Catholic Church, the opposition élites, and the middle class restored Philippine democracy after over two decades of dictatorship under Ferdinand Marcos. The 1983 assassination of Benigno Aquino Jr., perhaps Marcos's fiercest political rival, significantly influenced the Filipino public's choice for his wife, Corazon Aquino, for president. Nevertheless, despite a new type of government, familiar faces facilitated the continuity of traditional patronage politics amidst a change of leadership. The peaceful EDSA revolution has since morphed into a tool for both destroying and seizing power, with two more EDSAs following as if to mock the original. Specifically, the EDSA 2 Revolution in 2001 resulted in President Joseph Estrada's resignation on the count of plunder and corruption allegations. Only three months after Gloria Macapagal Arroyo was sworn into office, another «EDSA» occurred, only to reinstate Estrada. The irony is that the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution also produced the «EDSA system» that «encouraged maximum factional competition among the élite while allowing them to maintain a united front against any change in the system of social and economic inequality».[10] That is, in spite of their name, the

7. Julian Go, 'Colonial Reception and Cultural Reproduction: Filipino Elites and United States Tutelary Rule', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol. 12, No. 4, December 1999.

8. Benedict Anderson, 'Cacique Democracy in the Philippines: Origins and Dreams'.

9. EDSA People Power Revolution derived its name from Epifanio delos Santos Avenue, where the demonstrations took place. The Archdiocesan Shrine of Mary, Queen of Peace was built in EDSA to commemorate the 1989 People Power Revolution.

10. Walden Bello et al., *The Anti-Developmental State: The Political Economy of Permanent Crisis in the Philippines*, New York: Zed Books, 2004, pp. 1-8.

second and third EDSAs are by no means revolutionary. Therefore, we find the two presidents, Estrada and Arroyo, who were brought down by EDSAs, now occupying official positions. Estrada is currently the Mayor of the Philippines' capital city, Manila, while Arroyo is serving as a Congresswoman representing her native province, Pampanga.

Political reforms, no matter how well intended, are deeply conditioned by these historical factors. Years 2014 and 2015 are as good as any other year to illustrate the recurring or even deepening problems of Philippine domestic politics throughout the past decades. In 1991, prominent political scientist David Wurfel described Filipino politics from Ferdinand Marcos (1965-1986) to Corazon Aquino (1986-1992) in terms of «development» and «decay».[11] Despite being cognizant of the minor developments that took place during the transition, he was wary of the real possibility that the new Corazon Aquino-led regime would restore the old crony system in the guise of democracy. This is a prophecy that seems to be confirmed by Corazon Aquino's son's fast track to the presidency.

The focus of this section is to discuss three enduring issues in Philippine domestic politics, particularly as they manifested themselves in the years 2014 to 2015: (1) political corruption, (2) conflict and development, and (3) democracy and elections. As we shall see, Benigno Aquino III had a promising start but, eventually, was unable to prevent further political decay for the Philippines.

2.1. *Political corruption*

One of the most sensational corruption scandals, the Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF) scam, broke out during the Aquino administration. PDAF, or what is popularly known as «pork barrel», are lumpsum funds given to legislators to be used at their discretion to finance public infrastructure and development projects. Politicians have always been notorious for «pork-barrel» funding small-scale, often dubious projects, such as basketball courts and road reconstruction, to boost their popularity among voters.[12] However the PDAF scandal revealed the gravity of corruption behind closed doors.

The scandal came to light in July 2013, when one of the country's leading newspapers, *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, published a series of exposé articles about what the National Bureau of Investigation called the «mother of all scams». An estimated amount of 10 billion pesos (2.13 billion US

11. David Wurfel, *Filipino Politics: Development and Decay*, Quezon City. New York: Cornell University Press, 1988.

12. The majority of Philippine local government officials put their faces and names on banners at projects and events to solicit credit and attention from their constituencies. A bill banning such practice is pending in the Congress.

dollars) «pork barrel» funds were stolen from the government.[13] The chief operator Janet Lim Napoles solicited «pork barrel» from legislators to fund what later transpired to be ghost projects and fictitious non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Her vast networks in government agencies and the Congress had allowed the projects to go unchallenged for the past ten years. Some of Napoles's most influential accomplices included top legislators Juan Ponce Enrile, a nonagenarian who had been intermittently serving the government since the 1970s, Jinggoy Estrada, Joseph Estrada's son, and Bong Revilla, a son of a former senator. After a series of deliberations on whether the Senate should probe into the case, the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee[14] finally began its investigation on 1 April 2014. The Supreme Court declared PDAF unconstitutional seven months later.

While the investigations took place, the Aquino administration continued to fight corruption. Early in 2014, it recovered a part of Ferdinand Marcos' ill-gotten wealth and returned it to the national treasury. Aquino abolished six non-performing government-owned and controlled corporations to streamline and improve public services. A number of appointed officials were also charged with graft and corruption, including another Estrada, E.R. Ejercito, who was unseated after being found guilty of misuse of election funds.

In spite of the Aquino administration's trumpeted accomplishments, it has also fallen victim to its own anti-corruption strategy. Following the PDAF scam, the public began to scrutinize Aquino's own undisclosed and unaudited 220-billion-peso (4.7 billion US dollars) «pork barrel».[15] His administration was even accused of illegally spending public funds through his Disbursement Acceleration Program (DAP), a stimulus economic programme designed to efficiently allocate the budget through fund reassignment and «unprogrammed funds» spending. After a series of investigations and impeachment motions filed by the opposition and civil society groups, in July 2014, the Supreme Court ruled the DAP unconstitutional. However, the Aquino administration's motion for reconsideration was partially granted in early 2015, leaving the DAP issue unresolved. This caused a deep rift between the executive and judiciary branches,[16] as well as Aquino and Department of Budget Management Secretary Florencio Abad, who was the co-executor of the DAP project.

13. 'NBI Probes P10-B scam: pork, government funds used in ghost projects', *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 12 July 2013.

14. The Senate Blue Ribbon Committee investigates alleged violations committed by members of the government and government agencies. Its main purpose is to propose laws or legislative amendments in lieu of the investigated misdeeds. The Committee's membership is based on elections among senators.

15. Rigoberto Tiglao, 'Biggest secret of all: Aquino's P220 billion pork barrel', *The Manila Times*, 29 June 2014.

16. 'DAP dancing: The President versus the Supreme Court', *The Economist*, 2 August 2014.

Insofar as the PDAF scam was concerned, Napoles was indicted in April 2015 and sentenced to *reclusión perpetua*, or 40 years of imprisonment without parole, while her chief collaborators – senators Enrile, Estrada, and Revilla – were found guilty of plunder. These results were highlighted by Aquino as one of the achievements of his administration's *tuwid na daan* (straight path) campaign. However, these four major players were down but not out, as shown by the fact that Revilla's and Napoles' bail petitions were denied in the first division of *Sandiganbayan*, the Philippines collegial appellate court. At the closing of the period under review, Napoles' lawyers were contemplating an appeal to the Supreme Court.[17] She also attempted to seek refuge in the Catholic Church through the Catholic Bishops Conference of the CBCP. Her request was turned down on the basis of existing church law that does not allow the episcopal conference to become a guarantor of the accused.[18]

To the public's surprise, Enrile was released from jail in August 2015, due to «humanitarian reasons». Not only that, but he has also returned as a senator *and* has recently been active in Senator Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s vice-presidential bid campaign for 2016. The irony is clear: From being Ferdinand Marcos' loyal defence minister, then a key figure in ousting the dictator, he is now looking into bringing back a Marcos into the executive branch. As for Aquino, when asked if it would be acceptable to grant the same pardon to Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, who is under hospital arrest, due to serious spine complications, his reply was negative.[19]

With such a mixed record, it is difficult to pass a positive judgment on Aquino's anti-corruption campaign. His insistent allusion to Arroyo's malefactions is gradually losing its magic in convincing the public that his administration is emphatically different. It is also unlikely for Aquino to escape DAP and PDAF allegations with ease. He is currently facing a fifth impeachment complaint for questionable spending.[20] Yet, Aquino appears undeterred by detractors and deaf to the fact that only three in ten Filipinos in 2014 still believed in his «straight path». [21] Aquino continues to vow that his government will weed out all sources of corruption.

17. 'After denial by Sandiganbayan Napoles' camp mulls elevating bail plea to SC', *GMA News Online*, 19 October 2015.

18. 'CBCP refuses Napoles' plea to be taken into Catholic Church's custody', *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 8 July 2014.

19. To date, international lawyer, Amal Alamuddin Clooney is handling Arroyo's petition. According to Clooney, Arroyo's detention is a violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. They are not filing for the former president's release on the grounds of humanitarian reasons.

20. '5 Impeachment bids prior to Aquino's 5th SONA', *The Daily Tribune*, 25 July 2014.

21. 'Pulse Asia: Only 3 in 10 Filipinos believe Aquino fulfilled «tuwid na daan» promise', *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 13 October 2014.

2.2. *Economic development*

According to recent research, the most compelling concern for the ordinary Filipino is the absence of significant upward social mobility, which requires the following policy priorities: (1) improving/increasing the pay of workers, (2) controlling inflation, and (3) fighting graft and corruption in the government.[22] Yet, beneath all the chaos within élite factions mentioned above, the Filipino public is finding it increasingly difficult to have faith in the government's current efforts to improve social and economic conditions.

The Aquino administration formulated the Philippine Development Plan 2011-2016 to address these problems through «inclusive growth», which means extending economic benefits to the poorest and marginalized sectors. In late November 2015, the Philippine National Statistics Authority announced that the Philippines has the third fastest GDP growth of 6.4% in Asia, following China and Malaysia with GDP growths of 6.9% and 6.8%, respectively.[23] The government attributes the growth to its prudent fiscal management and political stability. The World Bank even described the Philippine's economic transformation from being a «sick man in Asia» to being «Asia's rising tiger».[24] In his two previous State of the Nation addresses, President Aquino stressed the administration's economic accomplishments with commendable statistical data on increased foreign direct and domestic investments, employment opportunities, and manufacturing capabilities.[25]

Despite these accomplishments, poverty indicators have not dramatically changed since 2003.[26] In July 2015, prominent Filipino economist Cielito Habito observed that the Philippine economy witnessed a positive breakout in 2014 in three counts: prices, jobs, and income. However, he saw the recent economic slippages, particularly in the field of providing jobs and attracting foreign direct investment, as signs of the government losing

22. 'Pulse Asia Research's June 2015 Nationwide Survey on Urgent National Concerns', *Pulse Asia Website*, 24 September 2015.

23. 'Philippine economy grows by 6% in Q3', *Philippine Star*,26 November 2015.

24. The World Bank, *Press statement of Motoo Konishi, Co-Chair of Philippine Development Forum*, 6 February 2013 (http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/speech/2013/02/06/Press-Statement).

25. Government of The Philippines, *State of the Nation Address 2014, Speech of Benigno S. Aquino III, President of the Philippines*, 28 July 2014 (http://www.gov.ph/2014/07/28/benigno-s-aquino-iii-fifth-state-of-the-nation-address-july-28-2014); *State of the Nation Address 2014, Speech of Benigno S. Aquino III, President of the Philippine*s, 27 July 2015 (http://www.gov.ph/2015/07/27/president-aquino-sixth-sona).

26. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, Philippine's poverty incidence in 2014 was registered at 25.8%. This rate is not significantly different from the World Bank data of 24.9% in 2003 and 25.2% in 2012. See 'Poverty Incidence among Filipinos registered at 25.8%, as of first semester 2014', *Philippine Statistics Authority*, 6 March 2014.

the momentum for growth.[27] In fact, the IBON Foundation, a leading non-stock and non-profit organization, characterized the economy under Aquino as «worsening exclusivity».[28] The IBON Foundation report indicates that the Philippine unemployment rate of 7.0% is the worst in Asia. Job shortage and underemployment are major reasons why Filipinos, especially the most educated, decide to work abroad.[29] High commodity prices and low average income have diminished the ordinary individual's purchasing power. At the same time, the lack of investment in the agricultural and other local industries also undermines the government's efforts in attracting foreign direct investments for economic growth. While the latter only provides short-term and limited impact, investing in local industries, on the other hand, would yield long-term benefits, including providing sustainable livelihood to agricultural workforce.

The IBON Foundation also questions the quality of jobs the government boasts to have generated. Their report indicates that one-third of the total number of employed individuals are either self-employed or unpaid family workers, and therefore, increased employment rates do not necessarily mean improved quality of work conditions.[30] In addition, the wealth of the Philippines' richest has grown by 250% since 2010.[31] Chinese Filipinos and mestizos mainly make up this socio-economic group who monopolizes the country's major industries and applauds the government economic achievements. In short, the celebrated growth has been generally inclusive of the rich, yet highly exclusive of the poor.

To improve the Filipinos' education and marketability, the Aquino government led an education reform programme in line with the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals. Called the *K to 12 Program*, it seeks to improve the Filipino students' skills and competency necessary for the job market. It also aims to elevate the Philippine education system to international standards.[32] The basic education curriculum will be brought up from the current 10-year to a 12-year pre-university education. Filipino students who have reached their senior year are given the choice to choose a track: aca-

27. Cielito F. Habito, 'Recent economic slippages', *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 28 July 2015.

28. 'Economy under the Aquino administration: Worsening exclusivity', *IBON News*, 28 July 2014.

29. Salvador Santino F. Regilme Jr., 'Is International Labor Migration Good for Democratic Consolidation?', *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, Vol. 25, No.1, January 2013, pp. 97-103.

30. 'Over one million jobs generated under Aquino poor in quality', *IBON News*, 5 October 2015.

31. 'Aquino Legacy: Wealth of the richest tripled', *IBON News*, 24 July 2015.

32. Being the only Asian country and among the three countries with a 10-year pre-university cycle, the Philippines clearly lags behind the Washington-accord and Bologna Process' prescribed 12-year basic education required in an entry-level engineering position and university admission and professional practice in European countries.

demic, technical-vocational-livelihood, or sports and arts. After completing the requirements for a K to 12 degree, students will have the option to either work right after finishing secondary school or pursue a university degree. In any case, adding two more years in basic education is expected to give them a better chance for their pre-university education to be officially recognized abroad, both in university enrollment and professional employment. The two-pronged projected outcome of (1) holistic and competent students and (2) more job opportunities within and outside the country are expected to have a huge positive economic impact. The programme incremental implementation began in 2012 and expects completion in 2018.

However, the initial eagerness of the Filipino public in the *K to 12 Program* is transforming into cynicism.[33] Indeed, critics are wary of the paucity of resources allocated to implement such dramatic change in the education system. The planned additional two years in the pre-university curriculum pose a logistical nightmare for the government, which has been dealing with classroom and teacher shortages for a very long time. The situation is much worse in areas with problematic supplies of textbooks and learning materials.[34] The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) is concerned about the possible increase in dropout rates and the negative impact on academic and non-academic personnel, who are likely to face unemployment in the process.[35] According to a report jointly issued by the Commission on Higher Education, the Department of Education, the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority, and the Department of Labor and Employment, the reduction in college enrolment may affect approximately 25,090 employees.[36] Classroom shortages in public high schools may also lead to a higher dropout rate. An estimated one million students entering senior high school are expected to leave school because they cannot afford to transfer to private institutions. The government created the Tertiary Transition Education Fund to be disbursed in 2016 in order to address these logistical problems.

On a more principled level, critics consider the *K to 12 Program* as «exploitation» and «abuse of power». Various mass protests called for the suspension of the programme's implementation, if not altogether scrapping

33. 'Majority of the Filipinos support K to 12 education program – SWS Survey', *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 17 July 2012.

34. Shortage and undelivered books in peripheral areas is a recurring problem. According to the Commission on Audit (COA) the Department of Education was reported to have wasted Philippine Peso 608 million worth of books that were ordered yet not suitable for the new, enhanced curriculum. Teachers are also complaining about undelivered K to 12 books.

35. 'CBCP Statement on Catholic Schools and K to 12 Program. Statement of Socrates Villegas, D.D. CBCP President', *CBCP News* (http://www.cbcpnews.com/cbcpnews/?p=37539).

36. '25,090 teaching, non-teaching personnel to lose jobs when K-12 is in full swing', *GMA News Online*, 4 May 2015.

it. The government's harshest critics come from the civil society's left-wing organizations, which are worried that the programme may lead to further labour exploitation, especially among children and the youth. A number of public schools nationwide have played host to anti-K to 12 demonstrations, usually led by teachers, students, and parents. The Manila Science High School, one of the top public high schools in the country, filed a petition against the Aquino government to annul K to 12 to the Supreme Court on the grounds of «abuse of discretion».[37] Another group composed of university professors and academics, *Alyansa ng mga Tagapagtanggol ng Wika* («Defenders of the national language») or *Tanggol Wika*, also filed a case against the programme for deliberately undermining the Filipino language and native literature in favour of more «economically productive» courses.[38]

The programme's unpopularity is largely due to the adverse short-term consequences caused by its implementation. In fact, a point has been reached where no spin on the part of the government can assuage the doubts and fears of a conspicuous part of the public. So far, there have been a total of six petitions to stop the K to 12 programme. The government, nevertheless, remains convinced that the long-term social and economic benefits would later overshadow the current and foreseeable setbacks.

Lastly, another key issue for Philippine economic policy under the Aquino administration is regional economic integration within the framework of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In principle, regional economic integration includes the following key goals: «(a) a single market and production base, (b) a highly competitive region, (c) a region of equitable economic development, and (d) a region fully integrated into the global economy»[39]. To a substantial extent, the relatively impressive economic performance of the country under the Aquino administration was driven by a variety of domestic and international factors, including the country's commitment to be part of the ASEAN regional economic integration agenda.

Indeed, this ambitious region-wide economic integration plan is also matched by the Aquino administration's relatively unprecedented economic governance measures that seek to bolster the country's economic competitiveness and political preparedness for ASEAN integration. As one of the country's most influential economists, Harvard-educated Bernardo Villegas assessed the Philippine's current economic state in the following words: «Only an earthquake like in Nepal and several typhoons like Yolanda can disrupt the growth of the Philippine economy. This is because of the political

37. 'Another petition vs. K to 12 to be filed before SC today', *The Philippine Star*, 23 June 2015.

38. 'Tanggol Wika group asks SC to stop K-12 Program', *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*. 15 April 2015; 'Filipino language advocates to seek help vs. new CHED curriculum', *GMA News Online*, 2 December 2014.

39. 'ASEAN Community 2015: Integration for Whom?', *IBON International Policy Brief*, 21 April 2015.

reforms made by former President Cory Aquino up to the incumbent.»[40] In addition, Philippine Finance Secretary Cesar Purisima attributed the country's remarkable economic performance to three factors: «First, transparency. People are being allowed to evaluate if changes are really happening. Two, rule of law and the responsiveness of the government. And others are inclusiveness, accountability and participation.»[41] In particular, the country's top trade official Gregory L. Domingo highlighted landmark policy interventions in promoting micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in bolstering the local economy. Considering the severe problem of heavy traffic in Metro Manila's main roads, Domingo clarified that the Philippine government «do[es] invest in the right infrastructure», whereby the administration «tripled our [the] infrastructure budget from around 165 billion Philippine pesos in 2010 to 535 billion» in 2015.[42] Another key economic issue for the government was addressing the constitutional restrictions imposed on foreigners in terms of ownership of land. In particular, several local economists, including Gerardo Sicat, who was a former top economic adviser to the Philippine government. He was called for eliminating restrictions to foreign nationals in terms of land ownership, access to natural resources, and opportunity to invest in public infrastructure (current restriction in the 1987 Philippine Constitution limits foreigners ownership in these fields to 40% of the total value of the property in question).[43]

2.3. *Peace and conflict*

Integrating the Muslims into a predominantly Christian state continues to be a multifaceted challenge for the Philippines. Muslims comprise approximately 5% of the country's population, 58% of which are in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Those who live in this region are collectively called «moros» (the Spanish word for «moors»), an identity that morphed from its derogatory Spanish colonial roots to its present self-identification function.[44] While the protracted armed conflict in

40. Chrisee Dela Paz, 'AEC 2015: Will PH Firms Be Market Disruptors?', *Rappler*, 21 May 2015.

41. *Ibid*.

42. 'Philippines Seen Gaining Substantially From Asean Integration', *Inquirer Business*, 6 September 2015.

43. 'Foreign Ownership Limits Hinder Phl Growth Potential', *Philippine Star*, 3 June 2015.

44. It is important to note that non-Muslim ethnic minorities called the *lumads* are also part of the ARMM. Since they comprise the minority of the region, some of them have assimilated to the *Moros*' struggle for self-determination and territorial autonomy. For more, see Oona Paredes, 'Indigenous vs. native: negotiating the place of Lumads in the Bangsamoro homeland', *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2015. Also, an ongoing major concern is the successive killings of *lumads* in Mindanao by military and paramilitary groups.

ARMM is often depicted in religious and ethnic terms, it is also a form of resistance against the national government based in «imperial» Manila. Like their counterparts in other Southeast Asian states, the inhabitants of this region represent a group of people whose settlement in the archipelago predates colonization, which they have more or less continuously resisted for centuries. In fact, the «moros» have resisted Spanish, American, and Japanese occupations and have more or less uninterruptedly been fighting for a separate territory and identity from the centre since the Spaniards colonized the archipelago.

While the relationship between the Philippine state and the Muslims in Mindanao was relatively amicable in the 1920s, the rise of new intellectuals and counter-élites revived the demand for greater autonomy 50 years later. The Corregidor Jabidah massacre in 1968, when 28 Muslims were brutally murdered, and the Martial Law imposed in 1976 compounded the conflict between the government and the Muslims in the south. Internal ideological conflict in the *Moro National Liberation Front* (MNLF), whose struggle was originally based on the search for self-determination of peoples in the region, regardless of their religion, gave birth to a number of religious-based breakaway groups. The most notable among them are the *Moro Islamic Liberation Front* (MILF) and Abu Sayyaf, born in 1978 and 1991, respectively.[45] Because of such groups' insurgent and violent methods, the Philippine government and the international community consider them threats to peace. The United Nations and the US classify Abu Sayyaf as a terrorist group with support from international terrorist network, al-Qa'ida.[46]

Aside from this, the region is a magnet for criminal activities, such as kidnapping, murder, and ethnic violence. The *New People's Army*, an armed communist rebel group, is known to be very active in the area. The long-standing armed conflicts result in the death and displacement of hundreds of thousands of local citizens. Economically, the ARMM is among the poorest regions in the country, with a poverty incidence rate of 48% in 2012.[47]

45. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is the biggest rebel group in the Philippines. Contrast to the MNLF, who seeks to establish an independent Mindanao state, the MILF aims to create an independent Islamic state and is therefore religiously driven. The Abu Sayyaf group is a militant Islamist separatist group that has established terrorist networks outside the Philippines, including Malaysia and Indonesia.

46. Salvador Santino F. Regilme Jr., 'A Theory of Interest Convergence: Explaining the Impact of US Strategic Support on Southeast Asia's Human Rights Situation, 1992-2013', PhD Dissertation, Department of Political and Social Sciences, Freie Universität Berlin, 2015, pp. 108; Salvador Santino F. Regilme Jr., 'Bilveer Singh on the «Taliban» of Southeast Asia', *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2009, pp. 89-92.

47. 'Highlights of the 2012 Full Year Official Poverty Statistics', *Philippine Statistics Authority Web Site* (http://www.nscb.gov.ph/poverty/2012/highlights_fullyear.asp).

The region contributes only 1.3% to the Philippine national economy, the lowest among 18 administrative regions.[48]

In other words, both history and socio-economic conditions exacerbated the already deep resentment that Muslims feel against the national government. The ceaseless armed clashes between separatist groups and the military are clearly manifestations of such problems.

Peace negotiations with the Muslims in ARMM have been taking place since the 1989 Tripoli Agreement, which granted partial autonomy to the region. Ultimately, these negotiations have not led to a solution of the ongoing conflict, both because of disagreements among faction groups within the Bangsamoro itself and the lack of consistency on the part of the national government.[49] For instance, when President Joseph Estrada declared an all-out-war against the MILF, his infamous roasted pork feast nearby a mosque caused further agitation, even among the moderate Muslims. The Arroyo administration has tried to revive the peace talks with the help of Malaysian representatives, yet the subsequent military attacks on the MILF camp caused the tragic unraveling of its efforts to settle with the Bangsamoro.

The years 2014-2015, however, saw what could be a turning point in the relationship between the central government and the secessionist groups in the southern Philippine island of Mindanao. The Aquino administration, together with Malaysian and Japanese leaders, has been working towards reaching a peace agreement with the MILF since 2012. The Framework Agreement of the Bangsamoro in 2012 and the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in 2014 were two milestones reached by the Aquino administration in dealing with the «moros». Moreover, at the closing of the period under review, the Congress was deliberating the passage of the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL), which promises to give further autonomy to the Bangsamoro. The law should guarantee the rights of self-governance and self-determination for the Bangsamoro, under the general supervision of the central government. To ensure greater and distinct autonomy, the law stipulates that the relationship between the Bangsamoro and the central government shall be considered «asymmetrical».[50]

48. 'Davao Region's economy records the fastest growth in 2014', *Philippine Statistics Authority Web Site*, 30 July 2015 (http://www.nscb.gov.ph/pressreleases/2015/psa_pr-20150730-sn1-01_grdp.asp).

49. Bangsamoro is a collective term for the thirteen ethno-linguistic groups in the ARMM. While the term 'moro' is technically linked to being a Muslim, the current usage of Bangsamoro includes non-Muslims, Christians, and the *lumads,* who believe that the Moro is a separate national identity from the majority of the Filipinos.

50. Under the BBL, the Bangsamoro region will be granted expanded autonomy from the central government. This means that unlike local governments, the region will have more legislative powers and fewer central government interventions. See *Article VI, Bangsamoro Basic Law*.

While everything went relatively well,[51] skepticism girdles the BBL's passage. In January 2015, the Mamasapano incident in the ARMM province Maguindanao shook what seemed to be a somewhat smooth transition for both parties. With an estimate of 250 casualties, including 44 Special Action Force (SAF) policemen and 18 MILF members, the incident became a litmus test for Aquino's sincerity about the peace process. As the blame game between the President and SAF Commander Napeñas on who was responsible for the tragedy transpired,[52] the public's opinion regarding the BBL's efficacy as a solution to the conflict grew largely negative.[53] The Mamasapano clash raised serious doubts about the ability of a more autonomous Bangsamoro to address the precarious condition of Maguindanao. Significantly, the investigations that ensued became a reason to postpone the BBL deliberations in the Senate. Meanwhile, Aquino's trust rating dropped from 59% in November 2014 to 38% four months after the incident.[54]

Besides the clash, it seems that the BBL has its own structural and internal problems. The bill has been pending for almost a year because of disagreements among lawmakers and between lawmakers and the Bangsamoro representatives. Whereas Philippine lawmakers assert the «unconstitutionality» of MILF's demands for autonomy, MILF Chief Negotiator Mogaher Iqbal accused them of justifying their reluctance to devolve more

51. There were a few high-profile disturbances in the region, including the Zamboanga Crisis in 9 September 2013, where some rogue members of the MNLF attacked Zamboanga City, a highly urbanized, predominantly Catholic city in Mindanao.

52. During the investigations, Aquino blamed SAF Commander Getulio Napenas for acting alone and defying his orders. Napeñas, on the other hand, argued that he was in fact following orders from suspended Philippine National Police Chief Director Alan Purisima, who was Aquino's close friend and was allowed to work in the operation despite his suspension. The issue has yet to be resolved and is pending further investigations in the year 2016. See 'Palace blames Napeñas', *Philippine Star*, 12 February 2015; 'Napeñas: PNoy, Purisima gave «implied» order to continue Mamapasano ops', *GMA News Web Site*, 11 February 2015.

53. Supposedly owing to the incident, a survey conducted by Pulse Asia two months after the incident shows that 44% of Filipinos opposed the passage of the Bangsamoro Basic Law. However, the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility also warned against the unethical and sensationalized version of the media that may have swayed the public towards a negative direction. Despite this, MILF Chair Al-Haj Murad affirmed his commitment to the peace process. See 'Pulse Asia Research's March 2015 Nationwide Survey on the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL), the Mamasapano Operation, and the Presidential Resignation', *Pulse Asia Web Site* (http://www.pulseasia.ph/UB2015.html); 'Media coverage of the Mamasapano Clash: Unethical, inflammatory and sensationalized', *Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility*, 4 March 2015; 'Gov't to pursue BBL passage, won't give up on goal of Bangsamoro peace, progress', *Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process Web Site* (http://www.opapp.gov.ph/milf/news/govt-pursue-bbl-passage-won%E2%80%99t-give-goal-bangsamoro-peace-progress).

54. 'Pulse Asia Research's March 2015 Nationwide Survey on Presidential Performance and Trust Ratings', *Pulse Asia Web Site* (http://www.pulseasia.ph/UB2015.html).

power to the region because of their «very conservative interpretation of the Constitution».[55] The gridlock in the senate gave civil society groups, academics, the church, and the business sector the impetus to appeal for the passage of a fair Bangsamoro law. However, to echo Mindanao peace and conflict specialist Rizal Buendia, «The threat of national disintegration will continue until an appropriate institutional framework for political governance which can accommodate Mindanao's social and ethnic diversity is ensconced.»[56] So long as the government commits itself to strategies similar to the past, a peace agreement is unlikely to take effect.

2.4. *Democracy and elections*

With the next general election scheduled for 9 May 2016, in the period under review, democracy and electoral issues have attracted a lot of attention. Accordingly, during the closing months of 2015, the media agencies were preoccupied with either generating or twisting information for public consumption. On the one hand, allegations to discredit candidacies, ranging from citizenship issues to corruption scandals, provided an incredible spectacle, bemusing the public opinion.[57] On the other hand, political realities seemed to dampen the usual Filipino hope for political salvation.

Like other leaders whose term is about to end, Aquino appears to have invested the last months of his mandate in creating legacies. These include the attempt at reducing the influence of dynasties or political clans in the government. Filipino kinship politics continues to survive through violence and rent-seeking behaviour.[58] The stronghold of the members of a limited number of important families on both national- and local-level politics breeds corruption and poverty in many areas.[59] Presently, 70% of the Philippine Congress members belong to dynasties, some of which have close ties

55. Mong Palatino, 'Philippine Bangsamoro Deal in Danger of Collapse', *The Diplomat*, 8 August 2014.

56. Rizal G. Buendia, 'The Politics of Ethnicity and Moro Secessionism in the Philippines', *Asia Research Center Working Paper 2004/11*, Perth: Asia Research Center, Murdoch University, November 2007, p. 18 (http://dspace.africaportal.org/jspui/bitstream/123456789/23945/1/The%20politics%20of%20ethnicity%20and%20Moro%20secessionism%20in%20the%20Philippines.pdf?1).

57. On one hand, Grace Poe, the daughter of action star Fernando Poe Jr., who ran and lost to Arroyo in 2004, is among the top candidates for presidency in the upcoming 2016 national elections. There are appeals for her disqualifications on the basis of citizenship as she holds a US passport. Vice President Jejomar Binay is also among the top presidential candidates, despite facing corruption charges.

58. Alfred W. McCoy, 'An Anarchy of Families: The Historiography of State and Family in the Philippines', in McCoy A. (ed.), *An Anarchy of Families: State and Family in the Philippines*, Quezon City: Ateneo Manila University Press, 1994, p. 1-32.

59. Ronald U. Mendoza, et al. 'Inequality in democracy: Insights from an empirical analysis of political dynasties in the 15th Philippine Congress', *Philippine Political Science Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2012, pp. 132-145.

with the economic élites.[60] Surnames like Aquino, Roxas, Osmeña, Marcos, and Cojuangco have occupied government seats since 1902. Even without focusing too much on surnames, patronage politics still plays a dominant role in the social, political, and economic spheres, affecting the integrity of elections and making difficult inclusive growth in the country.

As a legal safeguard against this abuse of power, the 1987 Constitution stipulates that «the State shall guarantee equal access to opportunities for public service, and prohibit political dynasties as may be defined by law».[61] Interestingly, several versions of the Anti-Dynasty law have been passed for over two decades to make the constitutional clause more specific, each without a hint of success.

During the period under review, the political scandal involving Vice President Jejomar Binay became a major reason for suddenly rekindling the urgency to approve a new and more stringent anti-dynasty bill. The Binays have been a dominant political clan in Makati, the country's business and financial hub situated in central Metro Manila. Vice President Binay and his family members are facing corruption charges. His son, Jejomar Binay Jr. was recently dismissed from public office due to corrupt spending and dishonesty. Vice President Binay is also Aquino's formidable political opponent, and he is one of the Presidential candidates for the upcoming 2016 national elections.

Whether Aquino is taking advantage of Binay's unpleasant political standing or is seriously concerned because of the ill effects of dynastic politics, his decision to push the anti-dynasty bill earned him general approval. The bill, once passed, would limit the number of similar surnames in the government. Interestingly, Aquino himself is part of a long-standing Cojuangco-Aquino dynasty. His relatives are among the richest people in the Philippines. His uncle Eduardo «Danding» Cojuangco was both a former crony of Marcos and Corazon Aquino's cousin. Should Aquino be successful in making the Anti-Dynasty Bill his political legacy, over 150 congressmen will be affected. Some of Aquino's detractors have criticized the Anti-Dynasty bill as a toothless law aimed at glorifying Aquino's presidency.

Indeed, the domestic political developments in the Philippines during the years 2014 and 2015 appear to be mixed but are *still* welcomed by the Filipino public – an attitude that is starkly different from the one towards the previous administration.

3. *Foreign policy*

As a former Spanish colony for more than 300 years and the first colony of the United States (US) in the first half of the 1900s, the Philippines

60. *Ibid*.
61. *The 1987 Philippine Constitution, Article II, Section 26*.

has one of the most Western-oriented foreign policies in the Asia-Pacific region. The Philippines is a US long-standing military ally, whose relationship is based on the Mutual Defence Treaty (MDT), signed on 30 August 1951. In the East Asian region, the Philippines, Japan, and Thailand are the US' only MDT allies. The MDT solidified US-Philippine bilateral relations right after Washington formally ended its colonial domination over the archipelago. During the postcolonial period, the Philippines remained one of the US' most reliable allies in the region during the Cold War, as the archipelagic country functioned as a buffer state against what was then seen as the threat posed by the potential spread of communism from China to Southeast Asia. Even during the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, the US-Philippine bilateral relations remained relatively cordial, despite the fact that the Filipino government, with the support of the Filipino public opinion, eventually decided to remove American military bases in Subic and Clark, then the largest of its kind in the world.[62]

In the post-9/11 period, the Philippines once again became a focal point of US foreign policy, when the Bush administration labelled the country as one of the key allies in the «war on terror» and branded the Southeast Asian region as the «second front» in such global military campaign. In practice, post-World War II foreign policy of the Philippine government is largely shaped by the national and local élites who are mostly sympathetic to the United States. In fact, these élites are strongly influenced by the rich American cultural heritage and prominent political institutions that remained after the colonization period,[63] making possible a process of enduring pro-American socialization of these élites, including the leaders of the country.[64]

It is important, however, to note several cardinal principles that govern Philippine foreign policy, as stated in the 1987 Philippine Constitution and other relevant laws. According to the 1987 Constitution, also known as the «Freedom Constitution», the state disregards war as a matter of national policy, enshrines international law as part and parcel of the national laws, and adheres to principles such as «peace, equality, and justice».65 The Freedom Constitution also advocates for an «independent foreign policy», whereby principles such as «sovereignty, territorial integrity, national interest, and the right to self-determination» constitute some of the supposed key values

62. Andrew Yeo, *Activists, Alliances, and Anti-U.S. Base Protests*, New York City: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 36-40.

63. Alfred McCoy, *Policing America's Empire: the United States, the Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State*, Wisconsin-Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison Press, 2009, pp. 1-14.

64. Natasha Hamilton-Hart, *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions: Southeast Asia and American Power*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012.

65. *The 1987 Philippine Constitution, Article II, Section 2.*

of the government's external relations.66 In addition, the foreign service apparatus of the Philippine state is governed by the Department of Foreign Affairs, in accordance to the Republic Act No. 7157 or the «Philippine Foreign Service Act of 1991», which highlights three main goals for the execution of the country's foreign policy: (1) national security, (2) economic security, and (3) the welfare of the Filipinos based abroad.

Considering the above overview of the governing laws pertaining to the Philippines' foreign relations, this section on Philippine foreign policy and international relations during the years 2014 to 2015 is divided into two main thematic parts: (1) foreign relations with the United States and (2) the territorial disputes in the South China/West Philippine Sea amidst the rise of China as a regional power.

3.1. *Foreign relations with the United States*

During the term of US President Barack Obama, the US foreign policy apparently shifted towards a more Asia-oriented perspective, whereby the long-term goal was to shift a greater percentage of military resources from the Atlantic to the Pacific.[67] Many analysts believe that such a shift, at least from a rhetorical standpoint, represents Washington's clear recognition that the epicenter of global economic and political transformation in the decades to come will be in the Asia-Pacific region. To the extent that the Philippines is one of the only three Mutual Defence Treaty allies of the US in the region, this shift in the US foreign policy has transformed the Philippine international role in ways that are qualitatively different from before. Whereas the post-9/11 US foreign policy of the Bush administration became evident in the Philippine government's increased domestic counter-terror operations, thereby emphasizing domestic security, the Obama administration, particularly during Hillary Clinton's tenure as Secretary of State, spearheaded an external security-oriented bilateral relation with the Philippines. This means, in policy terms, that the increased US militaristic assistance to the Aquino-led Philippine government was a response to the emerging territorial conflict in the South China Sea vis-à-vis the growing military power and political influence of China.

In view of such shifts in US foreign policy and the apparent transformations in the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region, the Philippine and US governments have implemented several new landmark bilateral agreements and policies. Notably, on occasion of the two-day state visit of

66. *The 1987 Philippine Constitution, Article II, Section 7.*

67. Salvador Santino F. Regilme Jr., 'A Theory of Interest Convergence: Explaining the Impact of US Strategic Support on Southeast Asia's Human Rights Situation, 1992-2013', PhD Dissertation, Department of Political and Social Sciences. Freie Universität Berlin, 2015, pp. 155-193; Hilary Clinton, 'America's Pacific Century', *Foreign Policy*, 11 November 2011.

US President Barack Obama in Manila in April 2014, Philippine Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin and US Ambassador to the Philippines Philip Goldberg signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), a 10-year defence arrangement that seeks to bolster American military presence in and assistance to the Philippines.[68] Indeed, this must be viewed against the background represented by the fact that some 25 years earlier, in the early 1990s, the Philippine government evicted American troops stationed in military bases in Luzon, northern Philippines. That was a change triggered by the global American military retrenchment strategy and followed by the US in the early post-Cold War period and by the shifts in the policy priorities of the newly democratizing Philippine government of the time. Considering such critical juncture in the 1990s, the EDCA was indeed a landmark agreement to the extent that it represented an opportunity for the US military forces to have relatively comprehensive access to Philippine military bases and facilities, in ways that were not evident in the 1990s. Specifically, the EDCA enables the US military to have access to at least eight military bases of the Philippine Armed Forces, two of which are located in a strategic position vis-à-vis the highly disputed South China Sea.[69] Apart from that, the goals of the EDCA are not only strictly military but aim to give «the United States greater flexibility to respond to threats and natural disasters in the region.» [70]

3.2. *The rise of China and territorial disputes*

China's rise as an influential global leader has posed immense geostrategic and political challenges to many countries in the Asia-Pacific region, especially the Philippines, which has maintained enduring and close bilateral ties with the United States.[71] One of these challenges that became prominent, especially in the period under review, is the South China Sea/West Philippine Sea (SCS) territorial dispute. China and the Philippines are two of several main claimants to several parts and territories within the SCS region. Although the SCS dispute has existed for several decades, China's unprecedented political, military, and economic rise, coupled with its

68. 'DFA Chief: US Bound to Defend PHL in Case of Attack in West Philippine Sea', *GMA News Online*, 30 April 2014; 'PH, US Eye 8 Military Bases Under EDCA', *ABS-CBN News*, 24 April 2015.

69. 'PH, US Eye 8 Military Bases Under EDCA', *ABS-CBN News*, 24 April 2015.

70. Juliet Eilperin, 'U.S., Philippines Reach 10-Year Defense Agreement Amid Rising Tensions', *The Washington Post*, 27 April 2014.

71. 'China to «Complete» South China Sea Land Reclamation', *BBC*, 16 June 2015; Permanent Court of Arbitration, *Press Release: Arbitration Between the Republic of the Philippines and the People's Republic of China*, The Hague, 13 July 2015 (http://www.pcacases.com/web/sendAttach/1503); Steven Stashwick, 'Naval Buildups in the South China Sea', *The Diplomat*, 15 July 2015.

increasing assertiveness in putting forth its territorial claims, has greatly sharpened and made more dangerous the pre-existing situation. In contrast to Beijing's militaristic and unilateral orientation, Manila has highlighted the need for public diplomacy and called for procedural international law to arbitrate amongst claimant countries. Consequently, President Aquino's government initiated formal legal proceedings to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in mid-2015. This initiative seeks to undermine China's perceived unilateralism, disregard for international law, and increasing militaristic strategy in resolving the dispute.

To be sure, the Philippine public opinion has been increasingly concerned about the ongoing land reclamation activities and the ensuing diplomatic disputes over the SCS islands and reefs. In fact, according to the 2015 Pew Research Center survey, around 91% of the total number of respondents asked from the Philippines claimed that they were «very/somewhat concerned» about the territorial disputes between China and claimant countries in East Asia.[72] Indeed, this apparently overwhelming anxiety of the Filipino public over the current territorial disputes can be seen within the broader context of the US-China rivalry, in which the US, the status quo power, has been increasingly seen as being seriously challenged by China in terms of leadership over the Asia-Pacific region. In the same Pew Research Survey conducted in 2015, around 65% of the total number of respondents expressed serious scepticism over the probability that China «will/never replace» the US, while only 25% believed that China «will/has replaced» the US. Moreover, the 2014 Global Attitudes Survey of the Pew Research Center confirmed that the majority of the respondents from the Philippines viewed the US as the country's «greatest ally», with China as «the greatest threat» – both findings correlated well with how the Aquino government conducted its foreign policy with regard to the major challenges posed by ongoing US-China rivalry.[73]

Essentially, the Aquino-led Philippine government implemented a predominantly US-centric foreign policy, which practically made its bilateral relations with Washington the centrepiece of the Philippine government's foreign policy. While many smaller states in many parts of the world may continue to strategically hedge – or strategically engage with the status quo (US) and challenger powers (China) – the Philippine government chose to bolster its military ties and public diplomacy in support of continuing US leadership in the region. It is worth stressing that this decision has been taken in spite of the fact that «trade between the Philippines and China is not only stable, but also growing», whereby Philippine government statistics

72. See Pew Global Research, *Global Attitude Survey*, especially the years between 2013-2014 (http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/1).

73. *Ibid*.

account for total trade amounting to US$ 14.6 billion in 2013 alone.[74] Hence, it appears that the Philippine government considers it strategically more relevant to place its bet on the continuation of US political and military leadership in the Asia-Pacific region rather than on the growing economic clout and military assertiveness of China. To be sure, during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting held in Manila last November 2015, US President Obama urged the Chinese government to take «bold steps to lower tensions, including pledging to halt further reclamation, new construction and militarization of disputed areas in the South China Sea».[75] Although the US government does not hold any formal position on the territorial demands of various claimant countries, the Obama administration invoked freedom of navigation in the South China Sea region.[76] The Obama administration's decision not to formally take a clear position in the territorial dispute suggests its attempt to balance two seemingly conflicting interests: American interests in bilateral cooperation with China on a wide range of global governance issues vis-à-vis America's security commitments to the Philippines as a military ally.

4. *Conclusion*

This essay analytically examines some of the most prominent issues in Philippine domestic politics and foreign relations during the years 2014 to 2015. The goal herein is not to exhaustively examine the causes and consequences of the prominent socio-political problems that emerged during those years; instead, the aim is to highlight some of those issues in order to tease out how they could plausibly fit in the broader and long-term patterns of power relations within the Philippine state-society nexus.

Based on the illustrative empirical analysis in this essay, we tentatively argue that the issues we examined herein demonstrate two notable long-term patterns of power relations within the Philippine state-society nexus. First, in terms of domestic politics, the Philippine state persistently confronts enduring internal struggles amongst various political-economic élites, all of whom seek to maximize the promotion of their own interests, regardless of the agenda of the ruling presidential regime. Second, in terms of foreign relations, the Philippine state, to a large extent, conducts a US-

74. Andrea Chloe-Wong, 'Philippines-China Relations: Beyond the Territorial Disputes', *The Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies (CIRSS) of the Foreign Service Institute (FSI),* Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs, Vol. 1, No 3, July 2014 (http://fsi.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/2014-07-Philippines-China-Relations-Wong.pdf), p.1.

75. 'Obama Calls on Beijing to Stop Construction in South China Sea', *The New York Times*, 18 November 2015.

76. *Ibid*.

centric foreign policy, despite the constitutional provision that guarantees a supposedly «independent» foreign policy strategy. Such patterns of power relations apparently are not unique to the Philippines; indeed, many states in the Global South are facing severe problems, both as far as internal conflict amongst élites (in many cases, leading to violent conflict) is concerned and in implementing a supposedly independent foreign policy, which, in reality, is still beholden to the interests of more powerful states. Questions about regime consolidation or democratic stability are quite crucial to many of these states, but perhaps a crucial starting point of our analysis is how such severe problems of consolidation are actually outcomes of historically constituted interactions between domestic and transnational factors.77 Finally, the succession of presidential regimes has to be seen within the long-term and enduring patterns of continuity of elite contestation within the Philippine state-society nexus as well as the enduring and prominent role that the United States has in the construction of Philippine foreign policy.

77. Salvador Santino F. Regilme Jr., 'Bringing the Global Political Economy Back in: Neoliberalism, Globalization, and Democratic Consolidation', *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 15, No. 3, June 2013, pp. 277-296.