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Suspending the Termination of the Visiting Forces Agreement: Navigating the Geopolitical Currents of the Philippines-US Alliance

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Introduction

On 11 February 2020, the Duterte administration announced that it has officially sent to the United States (US) government the notice of termination of the 1998 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), a military pact that provides the legal framework for the exercises and training activities between Manila and Washington.¹ The notice of termination triggered a 180-day period before the VFA formally ceases to remain in effect. Following weeks of discussions on the issue, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) announced on 1 June 2020 that Manila is suspending the termination “for six months” which is “extendible by the Philippines for another six months” after which the 180-day countdown to the formal termination shall again resume.² In other words, at present, Manila would still proceed with the abrogation of the VFA albeit in an extended timeline. In view of the foregoing, the paper aims to discuss how the possible abrogation of the VFA may affect the Philippines’ national security. In addition, the paper also seeks to answer the following questions: 1) How does the VFA figure in the Philippines-US alliance and the security environment of the Asia-Pacific?; 2) What are the security challenges stemming from the abrogation of the VFA? Are there opportunities?; and 3) What are the prospects for the Philippines-US security ties in a post-VFA era?

This paper³ shall be guided by a broadly realist understanding of small power behavior. Matthias Maass observed that a “small state can be understood as a unit that is materially deficient (small) or, alternatively, as a unit that lacks relevance (little)”⁴ to the “form and operation of the international system.”⁵ In this context, Maass defined small powers as “units that are individually irrelevant to the states system.”⁶ Indeed, major powers have been called as “rule makers” or “price makers” while small states are “rule takers” or “price takers.”⁷

Cognizant of the structural factors that govern international relations, it must be noted that small

powers are not completely without agency. Michael Magcamit pointed out that small powers’ behavior in the international system is governed by its recognition of limited capabilities to pursue their strategic interests,⁸ preference to work within the framework of international law and organizations,⁹ and display “high levels of paranoia” in international affairs, i.e. viewing geopolitics as a “pernicious activity” which “brings more risks than opportunities.”¹⁰ Moreover, small powers, in general, favor the status quo instead of “plotting to thwart and revise” the current order.¹¹ Instead of upending the status quo order, the foreign policies of small powers are designed to mitigate power asymmetry, broaden the diplomatic space for maneuver and choice, and expand the resources upon which they can use in times of stress.¹²

Using these theoretical underpinnings, this paper argues that, mindful of the Asia-Pacific strategic environment, the decision to abrogate the VFA is at variance with Philippine national security interests as a small power. While the Manila-Washington alliance is far from perfect, supporting continued US presence through the implementation of the VFA is consistent with the Philippines’ efforts in mitigating its geopolitical vulnerabilities.

VFA and the Philippines-US Alliance

The VFA is a bilateral security agreement signed by the Philippines and the US on February 10, 1998. In essence, the VFA provides the legal basis and framework for the presence and treatment of US forces in the Philippines. Among others, the VFA governs the entry and departure of US forces,¹³ driving and vehicle registration,¹⁴ criminal jurisdiction,¹⁵ importation and exportation,¹⁶ and movement of vehicles and aircraft.¹⁷ Among others, the VFA serves as legal basis for the conduct of joint military exercises between Filipino and American forces, such as the annual “Balikatan” (shoulder-to-shoulder) exercises, and the “Kaagapay ng mga Mandirigma ng Dagat” (KAMANDAG or cooperation of

warriors of the sea) amphibious landing exercise.

The VFA is a crucial component of the Philippines-US alliance which is anchored on the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT). Under the latter, Manila and Washington agreed to “act to meet the common dangers in accordance with its constitutional processes” in the event of an “armed attack in the Pacific Area.”¹⁸ The allies also agreed to “develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.”¹⁹ These provisions of the MDT can fully be implemented if Washington has military presence in the Philippines. During the Cold War, the presence of US forces in country was governed by the Military Bases Agreement (MBA). However, with the Philippine Senate’s decision not to extend the MBA in 1991, there was a need for a treaty to govern the presence of American troops in the Philippines pursuant to a transitory provision under the 1987 constitution: “After the expiration in 1991 of the [MBA], foreign military bases, troops, or facilities shall not be allowed in the Philippines except under a treaty duly concurred in by the Senate.”²⁰

From a broader perspective, the VFA operationalizes the Philippines-US alliance, which is but part of a broader network of US-led system of alliances and partnerships in the Asia-Pacific region. Apart from the Philippines, the US has bilateral alliances with Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand. It also has security partnerships with, among others, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Viet Nam. The US-led system of alliances and partnerships is part of the regional security architecture, with the multilateral platforms—in particular those led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—as another crucial component.²¹ Far from an obscure security agreement, the VFA is crucial for the operationalization of a decades-old alliance which is a component of the Asia-Pacific regional security architecture.

Abrogating the VFA: Challenges Ahead

Survival is the primordial interest of all states—large, middle, and small. In pursuing that interest however, small states “must not be assumed [as]...simply downsized version of larger states.”²² Due to their relative size and the disparity of power vis-à-vis the major players in the international arena, small states face significant strategic constraints in ensuring that their national security interests are protected and enhanced. Indeed, mitigating geopolitical vulnerability is a strategic imperative for small states. Unlike great powers, small states cannot primarily rely on their

capabilities to ensure their security. Forging security relationships with other countries is, in many ways, more important for small states. In this regard, the abrogation of the VFA presents the Philippines with major strategic challenges.

First, the termination of the VFA would amplify the Philippines’ geopolitical vulnerability, and may affect the dynamics of major power competition in the region. According to the Philippines’ National Security Strategy (NSS), “[t]he rivalry of major powers, spawned largely by the rise of China, is the most important long-term strategic concern of the Asia-Pacific region.”²³ The increasing role of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in international affairs should not come as a surprise. Rising powers have often sought to match their economic wealth with geopolitical influence. Owing to their reinvigorated confidence, rising powers may be more assertive in pursuing certain interests which may sometimes be at variance with the interests of other countries. Strategic adjustments, decided to a large degree by major powers, may be needed to reflect new geopolitical realities. However, small powers, as pointed out earlier, generally support the status-quo international order from which they have and continue to benefit. In this context, small powers like the Philippines must pursue two strategic objectives which, at times, may not necessarily be compatible with each other: adapting to the changing geostrategic environment, and protecting its core interests, which may be incongruent with the interests of the rising power. In any case, the strategic environment engendered by major power competition amplifies a small power’s sense of vulnerability.

There have been different views on how Philippine foreign policy should adjust to the changes in the strategic environment underpinned by the US-China geopolitical competition. Before the Duterte administration issued the VFA’s termination notice in February 2020, there were similar initial attempts in the past.²⁴ One of the proponents of VFA abrogation in the Philippine House of Representatives previously argued that such an action provides Manila with an opportunity to alter China’s actions because “it is the fear of military encirclement by Washington that is driving China’s behavior” in the South China Sea (SCS).²⁵ However, even if it wishes to be insulated from strategic rivalry, the tragedy of its geography dictates that the Philippines would inevitably be influenced by major power competition. Situated between the SCS and the broader Pacific ocean—essentially the grand chessboard of Washington and Beijing—the Philippines’ geographic location and natural resources have, according to the 2018 NSS,

“provided a strong temptation to expansionist powers.”²⁶

Indeed, even without significant US presence, China would continue its bid for maritime expansionism in the region. This was the case in 1995. That year, China, exploiting the power vacuum²⁷ precipitated by the Philippine Senate’s 1991 decision²⁸ not to extend the presence of US bases, seized Mischief Reef from the Philippines.²⁹ Clearly, without a balancing force, China’s quest for preeminence in the region would go unrestrained, at times to the detriment of small powers. After all, China appears to be determined in gradually exercising dominance in the Asia-Pacific’s First Island Chain—which includes Aleutians, Kyushu and Okinawa of Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Borneo, thus encapsulating both the East China Sea and the SCS—and the Second Island Chain—which includes the other islands in the Japanese archipelago, and the Bonin and Marshal Islands.³⁰

There are criticisms on what Washington may or may not have done in the region, particularly in the SCS.³¹ In the past decade, China seized Scarborough Shoal, and created artificial islands in the SCS. Among others, it can be argued that without significant American military presence in the Philippines as it did when the US bases were present during the Cold War, Washington’s extended deterrence may have factored less in Beijing’s strategic calculus. It can likewise be argued that at least prior to the rapid island-building initiative, the differences in American and Philippine interests were more emphasized—the former on freedom of navigation and overflight, and the latter on sovereignty and territorial integrity.³² The operating environment has since been transformed. With China having military outposts in the SCS, the interests of the allies converge in constraining Chinese behavior in maritime domain. Indeed, Washington, in part through the VFA,³³ has thus far been able to deter China’s plan to create an artificial island in Scarborough Shoal³⁴—the last piece in Beijing’s “strategic triangle” in dominating the SCS.³⁵

The Philippines-US alliance is far from perfect. An asymmetrical relationship coupled with a history of colonialism, the alliance has encountered some frictions through the years, such as incidents involving erring US service members.³⁶ It has likewise been argued that the VFA and the MDT do not guarantee Washington’s aid in the event of an armed conflict in the SCS.³⁷ It is important to note, however, that the US has clarified its treaty commitments to the Philippines. In a joint press conference with Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr on 1 March 2019 held in

Manila, US Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo declared that “the [SCS] is part of the Pacific” and that “any armed attack on Philippine forces, aircraft, or public vessels in the [SCS] will trigger mutual defense obligations under Article IV of our MDT.”³⁸ More importantly, Secretary Pompeo’s verbal commitment on the MDT is now part of US law. The 2020 US National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) provided that “an armed attack on the armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft of the Republic of the Philippines in the Pacific, including the South China Sea, would trigger the mutual defense obligations of the [US] under Article IV of the [MDT].”³⁹

To note, the dynamics of abandonment and entrapment are usually part of alliance relationships. Hence, Manila’s apprehensions on whether or not Washington will carry out its treaty obligations is not surprising. Nevertheless, assuming *in arguendo* that the US will not intervene on behalf of the Philippines’ in the event of armed conflict in the SCS, the VFA nevertheless provides Manila with three advantages. First, the VFA provides the Philippines with the opportunity to enhance the capability of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) through exercises and training activities, as well as access to defense articles and equipment. From 2016 to 2019 alone, Washington provided Manila with 554.55 million US dollars, including 287.75 million US dollars in the realm of military financing for the acquisition of defense articles.⁴⁰

Second, the VFA provides a platform for cooperation and assistance in addressing non-traditional security challenges. Indeed, US forces provided much needed help in the aftermath of the 2013 super-typhoon Yolanda/Haiyan,⁴¹ and the 2017 siege of Marawi by the Maute Group, which posed as an affiliate of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).⁴²

Third, from a broader perspective and particularly in a peacetime context, it cannot be denied that the US has the economic and military wherewithal to balance against an increasingly assertive China. In this strategic milieu, continued US military presence in the Philippines—which the VFA provides—and in East Asia is critical in maintaining regional power equilibrium. While far from the ideal for some, this situation is arguably the most optimal for the Philippines in mitigating its geopolitical vulnerability. An alternative is the complete elimination of the US military footprint in the Philippines which, as the early 1990s suggests, would further unleash the remaining restraints on China’s maritime expansionist agenda—thus amplifying Manila’s geopolitical vulnerability. In other words, the

decision to terminate the VFA—or any mechanism that would allow the presence of US forces in the Philippines—would help facilitate Beijing’s efforts to alter the status quo to its favor.

Second, the VFA abrogation may potentially affect the trajectory of Philippine security relations with other countries, particularly with strategic/comprehensive partners. The Duterte administration came into office determined to introduce major shifts in Philippine foreign policy, particularly with respect the Manila’s relations with Beijing. Early in the new administration, observers labelled Duterte’s approach as a “pivot to China,”⁴³ i.e. pursuing close relations with Beijing despite overlapping claims in the SCS—a stark contrast to the frosty bilateral ties under President Benigno S. Aquino III.

Interestingly, while the Duterte administration has been keen to forge closer relations with China, it has nevertheless sustained its predecessor’s initiative in pursuing strategic partnerships with countries in the region. The NSS also called for “enhancing bilateral relations, strengthening alliances [sic] and strategic partnerships, and developing new security or cooperation arrangements.”⁴⁴ Indeed, a closer examination of the developments in the Philippines’ strategic/comprehensive partnerships with Australia⁴⁵, Japan⁴⁶, and Viet Nam⁴⁷ would arguably point to more continuity than disruption, particularly in the realm of training activities and exercises, transfer of defense equipment and assets, and overall diplomatic cooperation.

However, despite such continuity, the termination of the VFA—and even the subsequent suspension thereof—produced a cloud of uncertainty over the trajectory of the security relations with the Philippines’ strategic/comprehensive partners. Without the VFA, it is difficult to comprehend how the annual Philippines-US Balikatan exercises could be held in a similar degree and magnitude as it had been in past couple of years. Apart from capacity-building, the Balikatan exercises also promotes interoperability. It is must be noted that Balikatan appears to have evolved from a bilateral exercises to increasingly a more multilateral endeavor. Since 2012, Australia, Japan, Viet Nam, and some other countries have participated in Balikatan as observers.⁴⁸ Following the Philippine Senate’s concurrence with the Australia-Philippines VFA in 2012, Canberra became an actual participant in Balikatan.⁴⁹ Without the Philippines-US VFA, the future of the Balikatan—which strengthens cooperation not just between Manila and Washington but also like-minded partners—is very uncertain. As

Foreign Secretary Locsin pointed out: “While the VFA is a bilateral agreement between the Philippines and the US, there may be repercussions in the way other US-allied and/or US-friendly countries – e.g. Japan, Australia, South Korea, Singapore, and Israel – perceive and/or conduct their foreign relations with the Philippines should it be decided that the agreement be terminated.”⁵⁰

Beyond the issue of Balikatan, the termination of the VFA raises a more important concern: the issue of reliability—and indeed credibility—of the Philippines as a security partner. As pointed out earlier, the VFA operationalizes Manila’s security relations with Washington—the Philippines’ only formal treaty ally. If Manila can easily terminate a crucial defense agreement with its military ally, how can other countries ensure that their respective security cooperation with the Philippines would not be readily set aside? The negotiation, signing, and subsequent implementation of a VFA are possible courses of action to further strengthen defense cooperation with other Philippine security partners. However, with the decision to terminate the VFA with Washington based in part on travel restrictions imposed on some Philippine officials, reservations could arguably be made on the reliability and credibility of Manila to continuously engage in long-term security cooperation. Indeed, states, particularly small powers, require a degree of consistency when it comes to strategic policy. It signifies the country’s determination and resolve in advancing its national security interests while pursuing common interests with other countries. Such consistency is important in harnessing a small power’s credibility with its security partners. Without credibility and reliability, the long-term trajectory of the Philippines’s security cooperation with other countries would be more ambiguous.

Philippines-US Alliance: Post-VFA Prospects

It is very likely that should Manila proceed with the termination of the VFA, the Philippines-US alliance would be significantly be downgraded. As argued earlier, VFA is a major security agreement that operationalizes the military alliance. Without the VFA, the provisions of the MDT on capacity-building, and mutual defense would be very challenging to implement. A similar scenario happened in the aftermath of the closure of US bases in the early 1990s. As Renato De Castro observed: “Both Washington and Manila tried to project a business-as-usual image of their security relations. However, neither could conceal the fact that this once-close and

vibrant bilateral alliance against international communism had been relegated to the periodic convening of the US-Philippine[s] Mutual Defense Board, and to the holding of the yearly Balikatan exercise....Washington significantly downgraded its political and military relations with Manila by declaring that the US could not guarantee the external defense of the Philippines since American forces had lost facilities from which they could operate.”⁵¹

It has been argued that, should the VFA termination come into effect, the Philippines would have the option of neutrality,⁵² or a recalibration of its strategic alignment in favor of Beijing.⁵³ Downgrading the alliance would allow the Philippines to “move towards a position of neutrality” which suggests “rejecting outright alignment with Washington on the configuration that the country is better off balancing between the United States and China in the pursuit of its national interests.”⁵⁴ In a strict sense, neutrality “means the particular status, defined by international law, of a State not party to an *armed conflict*.”⁵⁵ In peacetime, however, having a robust security relations with the one country is not necessarily inconsistent with forging close relations with another state. Wartime is, of course, a different matter altogether. Nonetheless, maintaining the VFA is not mutually exclusive from promoting better relations with Beijing, as well as diversifying security relations with other nations. Despite the rhetoric of the leadership, forging a clear-cut strategic alignment with China is, for now, largely inconceivable. After all, Beijing’s actions in the SCS, particularly the creation of artificial islands and military outposts therein, pose a “grave threat to [Philippine] national security,” according to Manila’s National Defense Strategy (NDS).⁵⁶ Indeed, the costs of VFA abrogation outweighs purported opportunities.

Policy Considerations

In the formal notification of the suspension of the VFA termination, the DFA cited “political and other developments in the region.”⁵⁷ In subsequent pronouncements, Foreign Secretary Locsin explained that the Duterte’s decision is because of the COVID-19 “pandemic and heightened superpower tensions,”⁵⁸ particularly in the SCS. ⁵⁹ Indeed, the decision to suspend the VFA’s termination is a welcome development. Even amid the COVID-19 outbreak which originated in China, Beijing continues with its assertive behavior in the SCS, including the sinking of a Vietnamese fishing boat, and the sending of the Haiyang Dizhi 8 to conduct a seabed survey in

Malaysia’s exclusive economic zone.⁶⁰ In addition, Beijing’s decision to create new administrative districts in the South China Sea,⁶¹ as well as a February 2020 incident in which the Chinese navy ship pointed a radar gun at a Philippine navy vessel,⁶² prompted a diplomatic protest from Manila.⁶³ In June 2020, Secretary of National Defense Delfin N Lorenzana warned about China’s reported plan to establish an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in SCS, stressing that such move by Beijing “would arrogate unto itself a vast sea considered to be a global commons that has been opened for millennia to all for navigation and fishing.”⁶⁴

Nonetheless, there is still a strategic imperative to withdraw the VFA’s notice of termination altogether. Cognizant of the Philippines’ relative weakness, terminating the VFA would amplify its geopolitical vulnerability as a small power, potentially harming the trajectory of security cooperation with other countries and the dynamics of international security affairs of the Asia-Pacific. In other words, abrogating the VFA is at variance with the Philippines’ national security interests as a small power. As pointed out earlier, small powers are generally supportive of the status quo order—preferring to work in the existing geopolitical framework in order to broaden the diplomatic space for maneuver and choice, and expand the resources upon which they can use in times of stress. Since regaining its independence in 1946, the Philippines’ alliance with the US has been a major pillar of its defense and foreign policies. Interestingly, the current Philippine government also reaffirmed the strategic importance of continued US engagement in the security of the Asia-Pacific. The NSS provided that a “continuing US security presence in the Asia Pacific is a **stabilizing force**, particularly with the growing complexity of security challenges that confront the region.”⁶⁵

Rescinding the notice of termination of the VFA would provide the Philippines the opportunity to thoroughly leverage the recent changes in US foreign policy in the region, particularly with respect to the maritime claims in the SCS. On 13 July 2020, US Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo announced that Washington is “making clear” that “Beijing’s claims to offshore resources across most of the [SCS] are completely unlawful, as is its campaign of bullying to control them.”⁶⁶ Reaffirming Manila’s victory in the 2016 Philippines v. China case, the same statement also provided one of Washington’s publicly stated expression of support to the Philippines to date: “The PRC cannot lawfully assert a maritime claim – including any Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claims

derived from Scarborough Reef and the Spratly Islands – vis-a-vis the Philippines in areas that the Tribunal found to be in the Philippines’ EEZ or on its continental shelf. Beijing’s harassment of Philippine fisheries and offshore energy development within those areas is unlawful, as are any unilateral PRC actions to exploit those resources. In line with the Tribunal’s legally binding decision, the PRC has no lawful territorial or maritime claim to Mischief Reef or Second Thomas Shoal, both of which fall fully under the Philippines’ sovereign rights and jurisdiction, nor does Beijing have any territorial or maritime claims generated from these features.”⁶⁷ This statement from the US Government is significant because it signaled a major shift in foreign policy. For years, Washington has largely maintained its neutrality over the merits of the claims in the SCS.⁶⁸ However, under the July 13 statement, Washington has publicly called out China over its excessive and illegal 9-dashed line SCS claim.

The day after Secretary Pompeo’s announcement, the US Department of State further elaborated on Washington’s position in SCS. Assistant Secretary of State David R. Stilwell, the US top diplomat of East Asian and Pacific affairs, stated that the US “have made very clear our opposition to any PRC harassment of the Philippines or any other nation in the [SCS],” and that “[a]ny move by the PRC to physically occupy, reclaim, or militarize Scarborough Shoal would be a dangerous move on the part of the PRC and will have lasting and severe consequences for the PRC’s relationship with the [US] as well as the entire region.”⁶⁹ The Philippine Department of National Defense (DND) welcomed the US statement on the maritime claims in the SCS, and urged Beijing to comply with the Arbitral Tribunal’s 2016 ruling, and “abide by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) to which it is a signatory.”⁷⁰

Manila could leverage the shift in US SCS policy by altogether withdrawing the notice of termination, which has added another layer of uncertainty in an already unpredictable security environment. This course of action would provide more stability in the Philippines-US alliance, and allow the two countries to move forward with enhancing security cooperation, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the allies must fast-track the execution of the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which is designed to implement the MDT and VFA. Among others, EDCA provides for the increased rotational presence of US forces in “agreed locations” in the Philippines.⁷¹ Without the VFA, the status of EDCA would be engulfed in uncertainty. If Manila would no longer terminate the VFA, the allies could reinvigorate EDCA’s implementation. Since its signing

in 2014, there has thus far only been one major project completed under EDCA, i.e. a humanitarian assistance and disaster relief warehouse in Cesar Basa Air Base in Pampanga.⁷²

Moreover, in providing more stability in the alliance by maintaining the VFA, the two countries can focus more on deliberating and developing courses of action on how to counter Beijing’s efforts in dominating the SCS. In particular, China has been employing gray zone tactics in the SCS.⁷³ Gray zone action has been defined as “coercive and aggressive in nature, but that is deliberately designed to remain below the threshold of conventional military conflict and open interstate war.”⁷⁴ Hence, such gray zone tactics may fall short of an “armed attack” as provided for in the MDT. China has been changing the status quo without firing a shot through gray zone tactics such as the seizing of Scarborough Shoal, creation of artificial islands, and deployment of maritime militia.

To note, maintaining the VFA does not mean Manila would construe US national interests as its own national interests. Being formal allies does not mean that they have the same interests in all issues. On the contrary, as independent states with separate set of challenges shaped in part by their geographical configuration and location, the Philippines and the US have their own national interests. There are times when their national interests converge, which largely forms the basis of their diplomatic and security cooperation. Nonetheless, there could be instances where the appreciation and pursuit of compatible national interests may differ. In this regard, the foreign policy of the Philippines, being a small power, must always remain nimble to adapt to changing and unpredictable security environment. As pointed out earlier, the fears of abandonment and entrapment are common dynamics present in alliance relationships. The Philippines should prepare for scenarios that the US would not carry out its treaty obligations to the Philippines, or—even inconceivable at the present—completely withdraw from the Asia-Pacific region altogether. This does not suggest that the Philippines should terminate the VFA. Rather, this means that the Philippines should leverage its alliance with the US in order to strengthen its military capabilities in part through the VFA. Building up military capabilities and maintaining robust security relations with other countries are not mutually exclusive objectives.⁷⁵ By providing a legal basis for military training and exercises, the VFA complements Philippine efforts to boost the capabilities of the AFP. Manila should seize this opportunity to constantly strengthen its relations with Washington as the latter continuous to engage the region. Together with other US allies and partners

in the region, the Philippines must encourage Washington to remain engaged in the Asia-Pacific. At the same time, it is important to underscore that, despite the US July 13 SCS statement, the Philippines should always remain careful with its rhetoric and actions in order to prevent miscalculation. Cognizant of the said statement and the 2020 NDAA, Manila and Washington must be prepared for contingencies should Beijing try to test the US commitment to the Philippines.

Allies, no matter how close their bilateral ties may be, are bound to have disagreements and irritants in their relationship. Manila and Washington can nevertheless address their differences through various channels. However, such challenges must not be allowed to consume the overall relationship and endanger their efforts in pursuing their shared interests. Terminating the VFA purportedly in response to differences in certain issues neither addresses the disagreements nor serves Philippine national security interests.

While the structure of the international system is largely defined by the balance of power between or among the major powers, small states are not completely devoid of agency. This suggests that the Philippines, although having an alliance with the US as operationalized by the VFA, can still expand its security and diplomatic cooperation with other countries. After all, the pursuit of survival and autonomy dictates the engagement of all other powers, including those whose interests are at times incompatible with one's own. Many small states in Southeast Asia have pursued hedging approaches in a geostrategic environment where having Cold War-type alignment is increasingly difficult.⁷⁶ The danger therefore is for small states to seriously consider false binary options in the conduct of its foreign policy.⁷⁷

Conclusion

Using a theoretical understanding of small power behavior, this paper examined the national security challenges posed by a potential abrogation of the VFA. Cognizant of their relative weakness, small powers favor the status quo order in order to, among others, broaden the diplomatic space for maneuver and choice, and expand the resources upon which they can use in times of stress. Terminating the VFA would further unleash the remaining restraints to China's maritime expansionist agenda and would help facilitate Beijing's efforts to alter the status quo to its favor. Moreover, the decision also produced a cloud of uncertainty over the trajectory of the security

relations with the Philippines' strategic/comprehensive partners as the VFA termination raises the issue of reliability and credibility. Hence, this paper concludes that the decision to abrogate the VFA is at variance with Philippine national security interests as a small power. While the Manila-Washington alliance is far from perfect, supporting continued US presence through the implementation of the VFA is consistent with the Philippines' efforts in mitigating its geopolitical vulnerabilities. The Philippines must always act with foresight, prudence, and flexibility in the realm of foreign policy because, as Kenneth Waltz argued, "[w]eak states operate on narrow margins. Inopportune acts, flawed policies, and mistimed moves may have fatal results."⁷⁸

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Endnotes

- ¹ This paper is dedicated to Prof. Aileen S.P. Baviera, Ph.D, an international relations scholar, former Dean of the UP Asian Center, and founding President of the think-tank Asia Pacific Pathways to Progress Foundation, Inc. (APPF), who passed away on March 21, 2020.
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- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 31 (italics original).
- ⁷ Maass, *Small states in world politics*, 32.
- ⁸ Michael Magcamit, *Small Powers and Trading Security: Contexts, Motives and Outcomes* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.
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- ¹³ Agreement Between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Government of the United States of America Regarding the Treatment of United States Armed Forces Visiting the Philippines, February 10, 1998 (hereafter referred to as "Visiting Forces Agreement" [VFA]), Art III.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Art IV.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Art V.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Art VII.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Art VIII.
- ¹⁸ Mutual Defense Treaty between the Republic of the Philippines and the United States of America, August 30, 1951, (hereafter referred to as "Mutual Defense Treaty" [MDT]), Art IV.
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- ²⁰ 1987 Philippine Constitution, Art 18, Sec 25.
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- ²³ Philippine National Security Council [NSC], *National Security Strategy (NSS) 2018*, 2018, Quezon City, Philippines: Philippine National Security Council Secretariat, 89.
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