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Key Points and Policy Recommendations

- The Philippines-Vietnam strategic partnership should be advanced as a vehicle for foreign policy goals.
- The Philippines-Vietnam strategic partnership should be advanced as role-enhancing arenas to respond to specific concerns in the international system. The two countries can provide complementary efforts in the attainment of sustainable development in the region.
- The Department of National Defense through the Armed Forces of the Philippines should continue to pursue military/naval exchanges, knowledge sharing, and exercises in pursuit of regional security and stability.

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The Philippines – Vietnam Strategic Partnership: Its Historical Development and Importance to the Philippine National Security

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Former Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario noted that Vietnam is the Philippines' third strategic partner after the United States and Japan. He further remarked that "there is a special bond between the Philippines and Vietnam," which is one of the basis of the strategic partnership.¹ Foreign Service Institute officials Julio Amador III and Jeremie Credo define a strategic partnership as the "elevation of bilateral exchanges that creates room for bilateral strategic dialogue mechanisms that are conducted at the ministerial level."² Shared values, interests, and principles should be the basis of a strategic partnership wherein it is expected to go beyond a security-oriented arrangement by developing the political, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of the partnership.³ Del Rosario believed that the Philippines-Vietnam strategic partnership "enhances cooperation on a comprehensive basis" ranging from security, trade, and cultural ties.⁴

The Philippines and Vietnam formally established diplomatic relations on 12 July 1976, wherein it was characterized as "warm" and "friendly". Bilateral relations between the two countries were focused on developing economic and socio-cultural cooperation for their mutual interests.⁵ However, both countries' security interests started to converge with China's increasingly aggressive tactics over its territorial claim in the South China Sea (SCS). Vietnam started to strengthen its military capabilities and became diplomatically proactive in internationalizing the SCS issue. Relatedly, the Philippines filed its arbitration case against China's historic claims in the Permanent Court of Arbitration while establishing security partnerships with Japan and Australia.⁶

The Philippine and Vietnamese governments decided to elevate their bilateral relations to a strategic partnership by signing a Joint Statement on 17 November 2015. The rationale of the strategic partnership is based on "amity, equity, mutual respect and cooperation" and both countries would "build upon and enhance existing bilateral mechanisms, operationalize concluded agreements and seek even newer avenues to deepen cooperation in various

fields.”⁷ Aside from a bilateral commitment to peacefully resolve territorial and jurisdictional disputes and ensuring a rules-based international order in the SCS, both countries would increase defense cooperation to enhance their respective capabilities to combat traditional and non-traditional security threats.⁸

Although the Duterte administration recalibrated its foreign policy towards a closer geopolitical confluence with China, the Philippines assured Vietnam that it will not abandon its Arbitral Award.⁹ Further, ongoing efforts are done to further strengthen the partnership that range from holding defense dialogues, implementing existing agreements and dialogue mechanisms, and enhancing cooperation in specific areas such as maritime security and transnational crime, among others, to support each other at an ASEAN-led fora.¹⁰ The Philippines-Vietnam strategic partnership sends a clear signal that small claimant states can converge to increase their political clout and collective strength in confronting China’s assertive unilateral actions in the South China Sea.¹¹

The study will explore the importance of the Philippines-Vietnam strategic partnership to the country’s national security. It will also look into the different factors in the relations of the two countries that influenced the Philippine national security. Further, the study will discuss the national defense establishment’s crucial role in strengthening the partnership’s defense relations.

BACKGROUND OF THE ISSUE

Early maritime trading relations between the Philippines and the Kingdom of Champa took place around the 16th and 19th centuries. Under the Spanish colonial occupation, Filipino troops were drafted under the Spanish army to support the French Annexation of Vietnam during the 1800s.¹² However, formal diplomatic relations between the Republic of the Philippines and the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) started

on 14 July 1955 after the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. The 1954 Geneva Accords divided the country at the 17th parallel with the north under communist forces led by Ho Chi Minh and the south retained by Emperor Bao Dai. With the fear of Southeast Asia’s eventual downfall to communism, the US government prepared a republican form of government to replace the weak Bao Dai government. Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem became the first President of South Viet Nam and his government primarily faced socio-economic devastation and a scarcity of human and material resources for the country’s rehabilitation.¹³

While the Philippines did not officially participate in the Geneva Accords, Vice President and concurrent Foreign Affairs Secretary Carlos P. Garcia declared that settlements from the negotiations would be considered concerning Philippine foreign policy. Later, Garcia urged Filipino leadership to recognize South Vietnam due to the Diem regime’s actions to contain communism.¹⁴ President Ramon Magsaysay extended official recognition to the Republic of Viet Nam on July 15, 1955, based on possessing the attributes of a sovereign and independent state and recognized by forty-seven countries. Furthermore, South Viet Nam’s recognition would bolster anti-communist support and efforts under the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO).¹⁵

Bilateral relations between the Philippines and South Vietnam were based on humanitarian relief and assistance. The Diem government requested humanitarian aid from the Philippines as their country was facing socio-economic challenges. The Junior Chamber International Philippines, or the Filipino Jaycees, did private humanitarian operations to South Vietnam. Operation Brotherhood was proposed at the height of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu wherein Filipino Jaycees would go to Viet Nam and provide humanitarian assistance relief: refugee work, medical and sanitation care, and socio-economic programs from 1954 to 1956.¹⁶

During the Garcia Administration, the Philippines received President Diem in 1958 and signed a Treaty of Friendship with South Vietnam in 1959. In 1962, President Diosdado extended economic and technical assistance to the country by dispatching a medical and engineer battalion mandated through Republic Act 4162.¹⁷

However, the Philippines became indirectly involved in the Vietnam War in 1957. The Diem government faced the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam or the Viet Cong, which successfully employed guerrilla warfare against US and South Vietnam military forces. Additionally, villages in the country were unprotected and living in poverty, disease, and discontent, making them a prospective breeding ground for Viet Cong recruitment.¹⁸ Therefore, US President Lyndon B. Johnson mandated Asian SEATO members to support and contribute to the American efforts in Vietnam. While Thailand lent some of its bases and a military combat team for US operations, the Philippines sent the Philippine Civic Action Group to Vietnam (PHILCAG V) as its contribution to the Vietnam War.¹⁹

PHILCAG V was created by Republic Act 4664 wherein the Philippine Congress authorized the President “to increase Philippine economic and technical assistance to South Vietnam.”²⁰ Socio-economic projects were to be done by engineer construction, medical, and rural community development teams drawn from volunteers and under a Philippine command. The civic action group was provided with security support while the US and the Free World Military Forces provided their supplies and equipment.²¹ The PHILCAG V arrived in gradual batches from July 28 to October 19, 1966, and were immediately tasked with four major projects, namely: the clearing of the Thanh Dien forest into a large resettlement area for 2000 war-displaced families, public works construction at the Tay Ninh province, daily program of medical, dental, and hygienic assistance in various Vietnamese villages, and Filipino

surgical teams assigned in numerous provincial hospitals in South Viet Nam.²²

However, the Vietnam War symbolized the US’s failure to contain communist expansion in Asia and signaled President Ferdinand Marcos to review the country’s foreign policy orientation. During the Marcos Administration, he started to broaden economic and trade relations with communist countries. Marcos further shifted regional cooperation with both Asian communist and non-communist countries.²³

The Philippines started to open communication lines with North Vietnam even before the defeat of the South Vietnamese government. The Philippines and Vietnam formally began their diplomatic relations on 12 July 1976, mainly directed on economic and socio-cultural cooperation.²⁴ The Philippines and Vietnam signed numerous agreements on enhancing trade and techno-scientific relations. In terms of socio-cultural activities, both countries held respective exchanges and visits among public sector officials, members of the academe, and their private business communities. During the 1980s, the Philippines enjoyed economic relations with Vietnam through a positive balance of trade with Philippine exports consisting of food, construction materials, chemicals, and other related products. During the Ramos Administration, Philippine-Vietnam economic and trade relations further improved which resulted to the increase in business ventured in the country. However, the investment still ranked the lowest and trade was limited to certain types of products.²⁵ In 1994, the Joint Committee on Economics, Science, and Technology between the two countries was established. In 2002, a Framework on Bilateral Cooperation in the First Quarter of the 21st Century and Beyond was approved during the Arroyo Administration.²⁶

The Philippines and Vietnam began to have common defense and security concerns over the South China Sea (SCS). In 2009, China submitted the “Nine-Dash Line” to the

United Nations (UN) wherein it claimed historical and sovereign rights over the lands within its lined boundary. Aside from engaging in artificial island-building in the SCS area, China pursued aggressive gray zone tactics in Philippine waters while conducting illegal oil drilling activities near Vietnam's EEZ.²⁷ China's actions led the two countries to enhance their bilateral security cooperation. In October 2010, the DND and the Vietnam Ministry of Defense signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) on Defense Cooperation which created a framework for strengthening cooperation in defense and military information, equipment and technology, and defense industry.²⁸ The Philippine Navy (PN) and Vietnam People's Navy (VPN) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on October 26, 2011, which entailed naval cooperation in consultations, specifically personnel interaction and training exchange.²⁹

Dialogues between the DND and Vietnam Ministry of Defense were also agreed upon and established. The Philippine-Vietnam Vice Minister's Defense Strategic Dialogue (VMDSD) was created in May 2014. It served as a platform to discuss regional security issues and explore numerous areas of defense cooperation from maritime security, preventing and countering violent extremism, to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.³⁰ The Philippine-Vietnam Joint Defense Cooperation Working Group (DCWG) was created according to the 2010 Memorandum. The working group oversees existing cooperation activities between the two defense departments such as navy personnel training, military training and education exchanges, and additional interaction at the Northeast and Southwest Cay.³¹ The DCWG is also tasked to explore and expand avenues of defense cooperation such as combined defense and foreign affairs ministerial meetings, junior officer exchanges, intelligence analysts exchange, defense industry and logistics cooperation, and closer cooperation for cooperation in multilateral fora.³²

The height of Philippine-Vietnam relations was its elevation to a strategic partnership. In November 2014, former presidents Benigno S. Aquino III and Truong Tan Sang agreed to convene the first meeting of the Joint Commission on Concluding a Strategic Partnership during the 22nd Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders' Summit in Beijing.³³ During the 2015 APEC Summit in Manila, Former Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario and Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Pham Binh Minh signed the agreement, which finally advanced the Philippines-Vietnam bilateral relations into a strategic partnership.³⁴

MAJOR CASE ISSUES

The Nature and Implications of the Philippines-Vietnam Strategic Partnership

The term strategic partnership presents a relationship that is beyond just defense and security issues. It elevates a certain partnership to conduct comprehensive bilateral exchange and ministerial level dialogue on economic, and functional socio-cultural cooperation. For the Philippines and Vietnam, this was formally forged with the declaration of a Joint Statement in 2015 on the basis of "amity, equality, mutual respect and cooperation" and due to the evolving political, economic, and security architecture in the region."³⁵

In international relations, a strategic partnership between two countries can be defined as "a specific form of bilateral relations between states and between states and non-state actors which through their presence shapes the social structures of the international system and provides venues for bilateral relations and realization of international roles."³⁶ Michalski, from the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, argues that the shifting balance of power between the United States and China is one of the main reasons why strategic partnerships are being forged in order to

establish principles and normal of liberal order. Nonetheless, some strategic partnerships are most commonly forged as “devices to strengthen existing alliances” and to broaden social interaction not limited to military cooperation in order to also expand the alliance to a wider set of participants and stakeholders.³⁷

Former Foreign Affairs Secretary of the Philippines Albert del Rosario explained that the country shares a special bond with Vietnam and a mutual economic interest in recognition and support of ASEAN’s centrality and unity in the complex and evolving regional environment.³⁸ Though there are some principles and values that the two countries do not share, the benefit of the partnership overweighs its differences.

In terms of defense and security, the Philippines and Vietnam called for the pursuit of a rules-based international order in the SCS. It would be pursued through increased exchange of views, cooperation, and mutual support in regional and international cooperation mechanisms. Their mutual commitment to peacefully resolve territorial and jurisdictional disputes and differences, ensure maritime security and safety, freedom of navigation and overflight in the SCS is reaffirmed. Finally, both countries did not only call for the full and effective implementation of the ASEAN-China Declaration of Conduct (DOC) but for the prompt negotiations and conclusion of a Code of Conduct (COC).

Amador and Credo posit that a strategic partnership is not “equated to a security-oriented agreement between two states, directed at certain parties or states” and “cannot be agreed upon on the basis of expediency.”³⁹ Strategic partnerships are expected to go beyond the realm of security by enhancing its political, economic, and socio-cultural cooperation. Therefore, the SCS issue should not be the “be-all and end-all” of the Philippines-Vietnam strategic partnership.

However, aside from common interest in defense cooperation and elevation of bilateral exchanges and mechanisms on socio-cultural ties, maritime and ocean affairs, and techno-scientific cooperation, the strategic partnership also advocates for the strengthened cooperation in non-traditional areas such as agriculture, search and rescue operations, marine environmental protection, and oil spill preparedness.⁴⁰

In terms of economic partnership, there were also initiatives to improve bilateral trade relations with a goal to increase two-way trade to a modest USD 3 billion by 2016.⁴¹ By 2019, Philippine exports to Vietnam totaled to USD 1.146 billion (approx. PHP 57 billion) with an annualized rate of 11.1% from USD 130 million (approx. PHP 6.5 billion) in 1996. The country mainly exported integrated circuits, electrical transformers, and printed circuit boards. In the same year, Vietnamese exports to the Philippines amounted to USD 3.89 billion (approx. PHP 194 billion) with an increased annualized rate of 14.3% from USD 181 million (approx. PHP 9 billion). Its main products were composed of rice, broadcast equipment, and cement.⁴²

The forging of a strategic partnership indicated an equal responsibility for its planning and implementation. It provided an opportunity to grow existing agreements such as the 2010 Memorandum of Agreement on Defense Cooperation and the 2011 Memorandum of Understanding between the Philippine and Vietnamese Navies. The partnership continued the conduct of joint-naval exercises on search and rescue (SAR) and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations that started in 2014.⁴³ Strategic defense cooperation was also continued as Viet Nam hosted the first VMDS in April 2015 while the Philippines hosted its second meeting in April 2016.⁴⁴

In the onset of the Duterte Administration and its declaration of an independent foreign policy and its pivot

towards China created some bilateral concerns towards its strategic partnership with Vietnam. Nonetheless, the foreign policy by the Duterte administration would allow the country to engage with various major powers that could take advantage of their development assistance, diplomatic support, and defense strengthening from numerous international engagements.⁴⁵

The Philippines' grant of joint development agreements with China caused bilateral concerns with its strategic partnership with Vietnam. It can be expected that there would be possible negative impact on Vietnam's own diplomatic protest and negotiations over the SCS.⁴⁶ Further, when the country assumed the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2017, it did not explicitly include or mention the SCS issue in the 30th and 31st ASEAN Summits in contrast to Vietnam's successful lobbying for its inclusion in the 50th ASEAN Foreign Minister's Meeting.⁴⁷

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

In 2021, Philippines and Vietnam celebrated 45 years of fruitful relationship. Vietnam have provided meaningful assistance such as providing medical supplies for the protection against the COVID-19 disease in 2019. Leaders of the two countries agreed to secure equal access to vaccine against the virus and work towards a sustainable socio-economic recovery.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, there is still a lot more that the two countries can cooperate on. Thus, this executive policy brief would put forward some policy recommendations for consideration in further advancing the strategic relationship of Philippines and Vietnam.

First, ***advance the strategic partnership as vehicles for foreign policy goals.*** With the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic all around that world, the two countries can cooperate on establishing and achieving foreign policy goals of a strategic and economic social nature with one another

to secure assistance in battling with the pandemic. The strategic partnership focuses on people-to-people relations as well as addressing common non-traditional security issues.

There are also other opportunities in which the Philippines and Vietnam can deepen its economic relations by capitalizing on electronics, food processing, and textiles. Further, another foreign policy goal that the strategic partnership can put forward is on the protection and welfare of overseas workers. Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) can be deployed and utilized in the field of education specifically on the English language skills training and development to fill-in Vietnam's diverse labor market.⁴⁹ Strengthening economic cooperation between the two countries can be guided by the continuing the Philippines-Vietnam Plan of Action for the Implementation of the Strategic Partnership for 2019-2024 throughout adversities such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Second, ***advance the strategic partnership as role-enhancing arenas to respond to specific concerns in the international system.*** The Philippines-Vietnam strategic partnership can serve as a vital complementing effort to promote regional peace in stability in the region while putting forward the principles and values of ASEAN centrality and unity.

Though the issues on the SCS are put away from the limelight of security issue discussions and the region and highlighting the ongoing great power politics between US and China, the Philippines and Vietnam can still provide the collective effort to continue the discussion and make initial efforts through its common security interest.

Third, ***the Department of National Defense through the Armed Forces of the Philippines should continue to pursue military exchanges, knowledge sharing, and exercises.*** The continuance of the naval exchange and exercises of the armed forces

of the two countries is sign of the blooming defense and security cooperation of the two countries. This effort further strengthens the expanded scope of the diplomatic relations of the two countries and advances the strategic partnership to a more vital role in pursuing sustainable peace and development in the region.

CONCLUSION

Though the Philippines and Vietnam only formalized and forged its strategic partnership in 2015, it celebrated 45 years of diplomatic relations in 2021. Build on a shared bond, cultural engagements, and a common interest in pursuit of ASEAN centrality and unity, the two countries can be seen as major players that can influence the principles and norms conducive for the regional arena.

Though there are some values that the two countries do not share and have individual approaches in some areas of cooperation, the establishment of a strategic partnership presents a united front and a strong common interest shared by the country that outweighs their differences.

It is important to note that the two countries have fairly implemented defense

and security cooperation in addressing common security issues. The strength of the Philippines-Vietnam strategic partnership is rooted beyond than just on their defense and security cooperation. Decades of strategic partnership have already been established even before its formalization through years of exemplary diplomatic relations through economic, socio-cultural, and people-to-people ties, among others with the intention to promote sustainable development within the region.

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