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The Three Biggest Security Challenges for the Philippines

*The three biggest security challenges for the Philippines in the next 5-10 years will emanate externally from the great power contest in the Indo-Pacific region and internally from violent extremism, radicalisation, and the communist insurgency, argues stars alumnus **Marvin SALAZAR** of the Philippines' National Security Council. To tackle these challenges, the Philippines follows the dynamic security-development nexus, which reinforces the idea that economic development and security are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing concepts: economic development is a precondition for national, internal and external security – and vice versa.*

1. The regional security under the Indo-Pacific framework

Great power contest in the Indo-Pacific region has always been part of the Philippines' security and economic architecture considering its geostrategic significance to global trade and commerce. However, it is only in recent years that the region has regained an unprecedented geopolitical focus from Indo-Pacific powers notably China, Russia, India, Japan, Australia and the US as evidenced by their foreign policy strategies. The global center of gravity has indeed shifted from "Asia-Pacific" to "Indo-Pacific" turning the region into the newest spot of strongest rivalry over resources and influence among great powers. This inevitably gives rise to a whole new set of geopolitical threats and complicated realities that we need to confront being part of this highly interconnected region. The changing Indo-Pacific regional architecture results in significant risks not just for international security but more importantly for global markets.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that the greater participation of the Philippines is being strongly coveted in the Indo-Pacific great power competition. The country is inevitably an instinctive player for two main reasons:

- While the Philippines is by no means a middle power, its ties with the major powers, coupled with its strategic location and claim to the South China Sea, naturally increase its relevance in the Indo-Pacific game.
- The Indo-Pacific powers recognize the centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as the key driving force in the realization of their respective agenda in the region. Thus, the Philippines and other member states are presented with a host of diplomatic, economic, security opportunities and challenges.

And so we ask, how does the Philippines navigate safely through the political and economic threats of the shifting power dynamics and distribution in the Indo-Pacific regional environment? How does our government ensure the protection of our national development and economic plans from these geopolitical risks?

The Philippine government is fully cognizant of this new geopolitical reality. In fact, our national security policy 2017-2022 identifies great power rivalries and other threats to the hegemonic power of the US as one of the country's national security challenges in the external milieu. While the Philippines acknowledges the fact that the US remains a global superpower, the rise of other regional powers is now also gaining significance. The Philippines administration is very much abreast of these new power dynamics and is consistently on the lookout for opportunities beneficial to our national interests. In addition,

the Philippines is also sensitive to the varying interpretations of the “Indo-Pacific” concept of the major powers involved including ASEAN itself. The concept is widely used but it remains less understood due to its continuously evolving nature. The differing views of the key players with regard to the “free and open Indo-Pacific” concept tell us to temper our geopolitical expectations as this sets limits to their ability and willingness to partner with us.

Amidst this accelerating strategic competition, the Philippine government is striving for an independent foreign policy via a dual-track approach: Firstly steering the country closer towards new strategic partners namely China, Russia and India; while secondly keeping traditional allies, particularly the US, militarily, economically and politically engaged. The country is now embarking on a more independent stance through a hedging strategy as a response to the challenges of the evolving regional and global security environment. The administration is delicately engaging in a balancing act for the attainment of our national security and developmental aspirations. The Philippines is continuously exercising critical judgment to prevent itself from getting caught up in the middle of competing spheres of influence and to remain in a strategic position where it can reap both the security and economic benefits of strong relations with our old and new allies.

2. Internal security: violent extremism and radicalization

The Philippines’ internal security landscape is largely confronted with the issue of terrorism from two fronts: the violent extremists group and the communist terrorist group under the communist party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing – the new people’s army (NPA). The interconnected threat of violent extremist and communist groups continues to undermine our aspirations for socio-political stability and economic development. While it is true that the Philippines government has triumphantly ended the Marawi conflict in 2017, which is tagged as the “bloodiest” and “longest” battle in recent Philippines history, the fact remains that we are still far from winning the fight against violent extremism and radicalization. There are still a lot of things that need to be done. Many experts have concluded that the Daesh terrorist group was all but finished in the Middle East. However, the group is slowly creeping and moving to regions with soft and porous borders such as the Southeast Asian region.

As such, we are fully cognizant of the possibility that the enemies would eventually re-group, retrain and merge with other elements for another attack. This gives us a compelling reason behind the need to expediently develop a more holistic approach which combines “hard” and “soft” measures to curb violent extremism and radicalization in the Philippines. While traditional security measures – or strictly military or law enforcement techniques – are vital components in addressing violent extremism, soft measures that seek to understand and moderate the radicalization process by engineering the individual’s integration into society are also equally needed.

It is for this reason that we are pushing for the immediate adoption of a national action plan for preventing and countering violent extremism in the Philippines (NAP P/CVE-Philippines). The strategy follows a “Whole of Nation Approach” and convergence of the local government units. The action plan likewise fulfils the call of the United Nations general assembly for member states to develop their respective national plans of action to prevent and counter violent extremism.

In addition, our P/CVE-efforts also lie with the passage of the Bangsamoro basic law (BBL). It is set to minimize the threat of violent extremism and radicalization in the

Philippines and will resolve two key national security issues: first with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and second with the violent extremist groups. The non-passage of the BBL is a serious grievance against Bangsamoro and a potent source for the loss of faith of the Moros in the peace process.

On 23 July 2018, the president signed the republic act 11054 or the organic law for the Bangsamoro autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao. The passage of the law is crucial to the full implementation of the comprehensive peace agreement with the MILF that in turn would achieve three things: first, it would provide for the peaceful transition of the MILF from an armed group to legitimate political actors. This would allow the MILF to compete in fair and free elections where they can pursue their rights and aspirations solely through democratic means. Secondly, it would lead to the establishment of a more representative and responsive autonomous government and finally, it would ensure the continuation of development initiatives that address the widespread poverty and delivery of basic government services in Muslim Mindanao.

On 25 January 2019, the national plebiscite board of canvassers proclaimed that the BBL has been ratified by majority of the people with a total of 1,540,017 “Yes” votes out of 1,980,441 registered voters. Ratification means the creation of the Bangsamoro autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). It will now replace the autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

3. Internal security: the communist insurgency

Meanwhile, on the communist terrorist group front, the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People's Army (CPP-NPA) continues its insidious operations with the end-state of overthrowing our democratic government through violent means and replacing it with a people's revolutionary government. The group continues to harass the business sector in Mindanao and exploit people in the countryside through its extortion-related activities and violent attacks. For 50 years, it has successfully masqueraded itself as “the champion of the poor masses” to exploit their vulnerabilities in order to attract them to join the armed struggle. It has also triumphantly infiltrated the government through legal and paralegal means to deliberately weaken the state and discretely build up its armed strength. Lives were lost, people displaced, properties destroyed and resources wasted in our 50-year battle against the communist insurgency.

As a strong response to this perennial issue, president Rodrigo Duterte signed a proclamation in December 2017 to formally declare the CPP-NPA as a terror organization. The designation is expected to achieve its purpose of cutting off both international and local funding to eventually weaken their operations.

To complement the ongoing military efforts against the CPP-NPA, president Duterte signed the executive order No. 70 on 4 December 2018, which aims to end local communist armed conflict through a comprehensive national peace framework. This is the Philippines government's decisive action in response to the national security policy 2017-2022 which calls for the end of all armed threats in the Philippines and heal the rifts that divide the nation. It likewise adopts the strategic goals and objectives expressed in the national security strategy 2018 via a “Whole of Nation Approach” in guaranteeing public safety and good governance. Through the creation of a national task force, which is chaired by the president himself, the Executive Order (EO) 70 primarily envisions to formulate a “Whole of Nation Approach”-driven national peace framework which contains principles, policies, plans and programs that will bring inclusive and sustainable peace

and address the root causes of insurgencies and other armed conflicts. It also aims to ensure interagency convergence and promote participatory governance. After all, good governance is at the heart of the new strategy of the government against communist insurgency. It is all about strengthening government presence, delivering basic services and addressing the socio-economic issues of the people which are being exploited by the communist organization. The combined efforts of our military offensive against the CPP-NPA and sustained development initiatives to empower communities are set to weaken their forces significantly, with the hope of ultimately bringing them back to the fold of the law.

A military solution alone is not enough to end the local communist armed conflict in the country. This is our key takeaway from the initiatives of our past leaders. Thus, the present administration is now going beyond the traditional military framework to include soft approaches which include changing the Filipino mind-set and undertaking reforms in the national and local governance for strong nation-building. With this new approach, all agencies of the government, plus the support of the private sector, are vital in winning this fight. In our quest for a more peaceful and secure future, every individual, every sector of civil society, is enjoined to work hand-in-hand with the government.

Right now, there is no national level negotiation with the CPP. The government has terminated the peace negotiation after their refusal to accept the set conditions for the resumption of the talks. But this does not mean that we have completely abandoned the peace process. President Duterte reiterated that resuming peace talks with the CPP-NPA is still on the table. He is still leaving a “small window” for the government and the communist rebels to forge a peace agreement at a later time. In the meantime, we are continuing our peace efforts under the localized peace process framework.

In sum, the government is working double time to end violent extremism and communist insurgency by 2022 using the security-development framework as our general strategy. The Philippines now follows the dynamic security-development nexus, which reinforces the idea that economic development and security are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing concepts. This means that economic development is a precondition for national, internal and external security – and vice versa. This new operational model is strongly anchored on developmental efforts side by side with security operations making it a whole of government affair. For we believe that enduring peace is contingent upon meeting the fundamental needs of the people.

These are the foresights, policy and program strategies, and hopes of the Philippines’ government which we want to impart to the rest of the world. The Philippines is determined to promote its national interests in the community of nations, seek partnership with those who share our values and accord full respect to the rule of law and democratic norms and institutions.

Marvin L. Salazar (ml.salazar@nsc.gov.ph) is a National Security Specialist at the Strategic Studies Branch of the National Security Council, Republic of the Philippines. He is the desk officer for geopolitics of South Asia, including the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and Turkey. He also handles a number of strategic issue-areas such as politics and mass media communications, disaster risk reduction and anti-terrorism information and education. Marvin obtained a Master's Degree in International Studies and a Bachelor's Degree in Journalism – both from the University of the Philippines.

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