

## Guest Column

# This is Fine: What Lies Ahead for the Philippines under Another Trump Term

By Edcel John A. Ibarra

*On balance, for the Philippines, Donald Trump performed better than expected during his first presidency, which suggests that the Philippines will probably be fine under another Trump presidency.*

The first Trump administration offered security guarantees on the South China Sea the Philippines sought but never received under President Barack Obama. Trump officials declared that armed attacks in the South China Sea, including those by paramilitary forces like the Chinese maritime militia, fall under the Philippines-US Mutual Defense Treaty. They also abandoned the US' previous stance of neutrality on the territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea, siding with the Philippines' maritime claims as affirmed by the 2016 South China Sea Arbitration award (though remaining neutral on territorial issues). These policy shifts translated into more US freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea during Trump's four years than Obama's eight. Moreover, for the first time, the US had imposed economic and visa sanctions against Chinese companies and individuals involved in land reclamation and militarisation in the South China Sea. Beyond the South China Sea, the US assisted the Philippines in retaking



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Marawi City from Muslim militants in 2017 and in rehabilitating it.

However, worries remain that Trump's transactionalism could mean new costs for the Philippines. At risk is the additional USD 500 million in military assistance the Biden administration has pledged to Manila this year. Yet, experience from Trump's first term suggests that his demands for payments were targeted toward wealthier allies in Europe, Northeast Asia, and Oceania. Still, Trump's free pass for Manila was not because he saw the Philippines' strategic value to the US: Trump was willing to let go of the Philippines-US Visiting Forces Agreement if it reduced Washington's expenses. Perhaps Trump acknowledges that military assistance to the Philippines is relatively cost-effective. For example, the USD 500 million aid package, a one-time payment, represents just 1 percent of the USD 34 billion the US spends annually on its bases in Japan and South

Korea. Moreover, the 2014 Philippines-US Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement did not re-establish US bases in the Philippines, and the actual facilities require much lower maintenance costs.

Moreover, even if a second Trump administration reduces US military presence and assistance and withdraws from security trilaterals and minilaterals, the Philippines could still rely on fellow US allies. During Trump's first term, worries persisted that his unpredictability might drive US allies in Asia to bandwagon with China. The Philippines tried this under President Rodrigo Duterte. But instead, US allies began bolstering their partnerships with fellow US allies and like-minded countries, a trend that continued under President Joe Biden. For example, Japan, Australia, and South Korea have provided military and economic assistance to and have forged strategic partnerships with the Philippines, counterbalancing China's growing influence in the country. This spoke-to-spoke cooperation has transformed the San Francisco System of US bilateral alliances in Asia, with Japan and Australia now elevated into regional hubs.

In the economic domain, US allies have succeeded in reviving the Trans-Pacific Partnership after Trump withdrew the US from the deal. The revived agreement, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), shows that US allies can step up when the US backs down.

Yet, risks remain for the Philippines. Trump could be lured by China to reduce US military presence and assistance by offering a deal he could not refuse, such as if Beijing makes major economic concessions. If this does happen, Manila must rely on its own burgeoning maritime capabilities or increase joint patrols with like-minded countries in the South China Sea.

Trump will also likely abandon the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and retreat from regional and global cooperation on non-traditional issues, especially climate change. If the US withdraws from IPEF, the Philippines could double its efforts to join the CPTPP as an economic hedge. At the least, Manila must position itself to benefit from another potential round of US-China trade conflict, as it had missed out on the gains from friendshoring during Trump's first term. For now, the Philippines can rely on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), its recent free trade deal with South Korea, and existing economic agreements with Japan and the European Union.

On non-traditional issues, a US retreat would open space for other powers, even ASEAN, to demonstrate leadership. True multipolarity could emerge from this opportunity.

A second Trump administration will probably continue or even intensify US assistance to the Philippines. If not, the Philippines and its partners in the region are

more prepared now to support themselves  
and each other.

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