

The Philippines: Navigating the Fine Line Between Defense and Diplomacy

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The recent announcement that the Philippines is ramping up its military spending[1] has sparked a mixture of concern, intrigue, and heated debate. At the heart of this decision is the nation's increasingly volatile geopolitical situation, especially in light of its longstanding tensions with China over territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Many observers have expressed worry that this move could unintentionally open the door for the Philippines to become embroiled in a larger proxy war, one that pits the United States and China against each other on Philippine soil or within its maritime boundaries. These concerns draw a striking parallel to the ongoing situation in Ukraine, where global superpowers have become entrenched in a fierce struggle for influence, leaving smaller nations caught in the crossfire.

In many ways, the Philippines finds itself positioned in a similarly precarious situation, where the balance of power between the U.S. and China has the potential to greatly affect the country's fate. The Philippines has long been a key ally of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region, yet its proximity to China and the ongoing territorial disputes, particularly in the South China Sea, create a delicate diplomatic environment. While the Philippines has every right to bolster its defense capabilities in response to the growing threat posed by China's assertive actions, it must also weigh the broader implications of such an increase in military readiness. The critical question remains: how can the Philippines navigate these murky waters, ensuring it strengthens its national security while avoiding entanglement in a geopolitical power struggle that could undermine its sovereignty and regional stability?

China's tactics, often described as aggressive and coercive, are undeniably a driving force behind the Philippines' growing desire to enhance its defense posture. Beijing's expansionism in the South China Sea—referred to by many as “bullying”—has taken a toll on the region's stability, with China asserting control over disputed waters and building artificial islands, all while disregarding international rulings such as the 2016 arbitral ruling that invalidated China's claims. In this context, it's no surprise that the Philippines feels compelled to strengthen its military forces to ensure the protection of its territories and its maritime resources. With China's growing economic, political, and military power, it is understandable that the Philippines sees the need to invest in defense to avoid becoming vulnerable to further territorial encroachment.

However, while security concerns are paramount, the Philippines must be mindful of the long-term consequences of its military build-up. The U.S., as a traditional ally, has expressed support for the Philippines in the face of China's growing influence. However, the Philippines must tread cautiously, being careful not to become a pawn in a larger geopolitical game. The ongoing U.S.-China rivalry poses a complex challenge for the Philippines, as Washington

and Beijing vie for dominance in the region. There are legitimate fears that the Philippines could inadvertently become entangled in a broader conflict between the two global superpowers, as tensions over issues like Taiwan, trade, and regional security continue to simmer. Such a scenario would not only put the Philippines at risk but also compromise its ability to assert itself as an independent, sovereign nation with the power to chart its own course.

The Philippines' path forward requires careful diplomacy and an unwavering commitment to safeguarding its national interests. Defense capabilities must be strengthened but this should not come at the expense of diplomatic engagement and cooperation with other nations in the region. The Philippines must explore strategies that allow it to build strong regional partnerships, particularly with ASEAN nations, to ensure collective security without becoming overly reliant on any one external power. A multilateral approach to security—one that balances military preparedness with open dialogue and collaboration—can provide a counterbalance to China's growing influence while preserving the Philippines' autonomy.

The Philippines faces the complex task of balancing its national defense needs with its desire to avoid deeper involvement in the geopolitical struggles between major powers. The country's actions must be guided by strategic foresight and a keen understanding of its role in the broader regional and global context.

Strengthening its defense is crucial, but it must be done in such a way that does not drag the Philippines into a larger, more dangerous conflict. At the same time, the Philippines must take every opportunity to engage in diplomatic efforts, reaffirming its commitment to peaceful dispute resolution and regional cooperation. Only through a well-calculated and balanced approach can the Philippines ensure its sovereignty, protect its people, and maintain its stability in the face of an increasingly complex and volatile global landscape.

Raising the Stakes: Military Investment and the David versus Goliath Dilemma

At the heart of this debate lies a potent image of David versus Goliath: Can the Philippines, with its relatively modest military, truly stand up against the sheer military might of China? As the Philippines looks to increase its defense budget, the primary concern is how effective this spending will be in the long run. China, with its vast resources and cutting-edge military technology, is far ahead in terms of raw military power. Even with an increase in spending, the Philippines' capacity to match China fire-for-fire is virtually unattainable, especially in a full-scale war scenario.

The crux of the matter, however, may not lie in attempting to outgun China, but rather in creating a credible deterrent. This involves investing in strategic capabilities such as advanced air defense systems, naval assets, and cybersecurity—tools that can make any potential aggressor think twice before engaging in hostile actions. The true aim for the Philippines should be to develop defense mechanisms that raise the costs of aggression, making any military action against it an unattractive option, rather than pursuing an arms race that could result in an unsustainable military posture.

The Geopolitical Tightrope: Avoiding the Pitfalls of Entanglement

While bolstering military defenses may appear essential in the face of Chinese expansionism, the Philippines must walk a delicate line in the broader geopolitical context. It

is a given reality that the Philippines has long been a close and subservient vassal of the United States, and its security ties with Washington can be considered a key element of its defense strategy. Having this in mind, an offhand notion that the U.S. can provide the Philippines with a strategic military advantage is not a far-fetched option to bolster the nation's defense in times of crisis. However, the Philippines must exercise extra caution about becoming too deeply entangled in any conflicts, particularly those involving the United States and China.

The risk of becoming a pawn in a larger geopolitical game is ever-present. While American support may be viewed as valuable, it should not come at the expense of the Philippines' independence in decision-making or its sovereignty. The goal should be to ensure that whatever international alliance is forged, it should be balanced by an independent, non-aligned approach that prevents the Philippines from being drawn into a broader conflict. A defense strategy based on autonomy and flexibility should be prioritized, ensuring that the country remains the architect of its own destiny rather than being thrust into unwanted confrontations.

Diplomatic Solutions: Building Bridges, Not Just Walls

The Philippines should give high priority to exploring diplomatic avenues that promote peace and regional cooperation over and above the military option. In the face of Chinese aggression, multilateral dialogue is a critical tool that must not be overlooked. Engaging with international forums such as the United Nations, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and, most notably, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) could help the Philippines forge a regional coalition that promotes collective security and diplomatic solutions.

By fostering solidarity among ASEAN nations, the Philippines can create a united front that discourages unilateral actions in the region, such as China's encroachments into disputed maritime territories. Economic partnerships, cultural exchanges, and confidence-building measures can go a long way in decreasing tensions, building trust, and promoting regional stability. Through these efforts, the Philippines can actively engage with its neighbors to ensure that the region remains a zone of peace and cooperation, rather than one dominated by power struggles.

A Dual Approach: Defense and Diplomacy for Lasting Peace

As the Philippines reasonably strengthens its defenses, the ultimate challenge will be how to balance the imperatives of military preparedness with the desire for lasting peace. The country's strategic position requires a well-thought-of approach, one that avoids the extremes of aggressive militarization or total appeasement. A balanced strategy that integrates military readiness with a stronger commitment to diplomacy could provide the Philippines with the best chance to safeguard its interests while promoting regional peace.

This approach requires wisdom, foresight, and a commitment to long-term stability, as well as the ability to adapt to changing dynamics. The Philippines must carefully weigh the risks and rewards of military engagement, recognizing that defense is not only about deterrence but also about ensuring the conditions for diplomacy to thrive. By focusing on national sovereignty, resilience, and mutual respect with other nations, the Philippines can develop a strategy that secures its future without falling prey to external pressures or larger geopolitical machinations.

Charting a Path Forward: A Vision of Sovereignty and Peace

History has demonstrated the difficulty of navigating such turbulent geopolitical waters. However, with a balanced strategy, the Philippines can stand firm in its pursuit of national sovereignty while ensuring the safety and prosperity of its people. The key is not to be drawn into the destructive patterns of past colonial and imperial ambitions, but to foster a future where the nation remains strong, independent, and free from the looming shadows of conflict.

The task ahead is undeniably daunting, but it is also one filled with opportunity—an opportunity for the Philippines to assert itself as a leader in Southeast Asia, unyielding in its defense of sovereignty and unshakeable in its pursuit of peace. The path forward will require unwavering resolve, strategic brilliance, and a steady hand in both defense and diplomacy. In doing so, the Philippines can position itself as a beacon of stability in a volatile region, ensuring that its future is one of independence, peace, and prosperity for generations to come.

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Note

[1] "[Philippines](#) shores up defenses with increased military spending" by Gordon Arthur

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