

U.S., PH to expand intel sharing

Written by Administrator
Friday, 15 June 2012 16:49



President Benigno Aquino III (center) with the board members of the new U.S. Philippines Society at their inaugural gala dinner at the Mandarin Oriental in Washington on June 7. First Row (L-R): Mr. Jaime Augusto Zobel de Ayala (Ayala Corp); Mr. Dado Banatao (Tallwood Venture Capital); Ambassador Thomas Hubbard (McLarty Associates); Ms. Emily Beizer (JP Morgan Chase); Ms. Loida Nicolas Lewis (TLC Beatrice); Atty. Cirilo Noel (SGV); Mr. Washington SyCip (Society Honorary Co-Chair; SGV); Mr. Aurelio Montinola III (BPI); Mr. Ramon del Rosario, Jr. (PHINMA); Mr. Manuel V. Pangilinan (Society Co-Chair; PLDT); H.E. President Benigno S. Aquino III; Ambassador John Negroponte (Society Co-Chair; McLarty Associates); Mr. Dennis Wright (Peregrine); Ms. Doris Magsaysay-Ho (Magsaysay Shipping); Mr. Maurice Greenberg (Society Honorary Co-Chair; Starr International Company, Inc.); Ambassador John Maisto (Society President); and Mr. Robert McDonald (Procter & Gamble). Back (R-L): Ambassador Karan Bhatia (GE); Atty. Leo Canseco (Society Legal Advisor); Mr. Henry Howard (US Education Finance Group); Mr. Allen Flickinger (Chevron); Mr. Jay Collins (Citigroup); and Mr. Hank Hendrickson (Society Executive Director).

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WASHINGTON — The U.S. and the Philippines said last Friday they are expanding intelligence sharing and cooperation on maritime security, as President Barack Obama reiterated Washington's desire to be viewed as a Pacific power.

Mr. Obama met at the White House with President Benigno Aquino III against the backdrop of a two-month standoff between Philippine and Chinese vessels at a disputed shoal in the South China Sea.

China's assertive behavior in those waters has served to bolster Manila's 60-year alliance with Washington, which thrived during the Cold War but ebbed after nationalist political forces prompted the closure of American military bases in 1992.

Mr. Obama thanked Mr. Aquino for what he called "excellent cooperation" on economic, defense and other issues.

Mr. Aquino earlier declared the allies are at a "new juncture in our relations."

The security and military cooperation with the Philippines "is a reminder to everybody that the United States considers itself, and is, a Pacific power," Mr. Obama said.

Mr. Aquino, the son of democracy heroes, has emerged as a willing partner of the U.S. as it looks to build a stronger presence in Southeast Asia, a region neglected during a decade of war in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The two sides are discussing how to enhance the U.S. military presence in the Philippines, beyond the decade-long counter-terrorism training mission in the country's south that involves hundreds of American troops.

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The U.S. and the Philippines are bound by a Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT).

The Philippines has been seeking a clear public statement that the U.S. would come to its defense should it face attack.

The U.S. has restricted itself to saying it would honor its obligations under the MDT.

No further statement was forthcoming last Friday, and neither leader mentioned China.

At a lunch hosted earlier for Mr. Aquino at the State Department, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton welcomed an easing of the tensions at the disputed Scarborough Shoal in the past week, as China and the Philippines withdrew some vessels from a lagoon at the center of the standoff.

Clinton reiterated U.S. interest in peaceful resolution of disputes in the South China Sea.

“The United States has been consistent in that we oppose the use of force or coercion by any claimant to advance its claims, and we will continue to monitor the situation closely,” Clinton said.

Mr. Obama made a sidelong reference to the South China Sea (West Philippine Sea) dispute.

“We have a strong set of international norms and rules governing maritime disputes in the region,” Mr. Obama said.

Coastal Watch

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Clinton said the U.S. and the Philippines are working closely to increase information and intelligence exchanges and coordination on maritime domain issues.

She announced the U.S. will support the construction and training of a National Coast Watch Center (NCWC) to help the Philippines monitor its coastline.

Clinton said the U.S. support would come in the form of intelligence exchanges on maritime domain issues and funding the construction of the NCWC, as well as equipment and training.

“The establishment of the National Coast Watch Center is vital in securing the territorial integrity, ensuring the maritime security and protecting the maritime resources of an archipelagic country with a 36,000-kilometer coastline like the Philippines,” Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario said.

“The National Coast Watch Center, which is a concrete realization of President Aquino’s directive, will enable us to know what is happening in our maritime territory on a 24-hour basis,” he added.

Del Rosario said Mr. Aquino signed Executive Order 57 in September, calling for the establishment of a NCWC to be headed by the Philippine Coast Guard to implement and coordinate maritime security operations in the country.

Mr. Aquino, who has presided over an improvement in the Philippine economy, has sought Washington’s help in rebuilding a decrepit military that is in little shape to defend its territorial claims.

Mr. Obama reaffirmed U.S. support for helping the Philippines build a “minimum credible defense posture.”

‘A new era in bilateral relations’

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The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) described Mr. Aquino's visit as an enormous success.

"President Aquino just ushered in a new era in our bilateral relations by successfully laying the foundation for our new strategic partnership with the United States," del Rosario said.

In a statement released shortly after the meeting, the White House said Mr. Obama reiterated to Mr. Aquino Washington's "commitment" to the MDT and assured him of U.S. support to the Philippine Government's ongoing efforts to upgrade the country's defense capabilities.

"President Obama reaffirmed the U.S. Government's support for Philippine efforts to build a minimum credible defense posture, as evidenced by our transfer of a second U.S. Coast Guard cutter to the Philippine Navy, support for the Philippine National Coast Watch System, and the growing number of bilateral exercises and training programs," the White House said in its statement.

"Both President Aquino and President Obama underscored the importance of the principles of freedom of navigation, respect for international law and unimpeded lawful commerce. They expressed his firm support for a collaborative diplomatic process among claimants to resolve territorial disputes in a manner consistent with international law and without coercion or the use of force," the statement read.

The latest assurances from Washington that it would abide by its commitment under the MDT followed the unanimous adoption by the U.S. Senate of a resolution calling for increased defense and security cooperation with the Philippines.

Senate Resolution 481, sponsored by Sen. Richard Lugar (Republican, Indiana), calls for increased cooperation and enhanced bilateral security ties between the two countries, including support for Philippine defense modernization, the rotational presence of U.S. forces and increased humanitarian and disaster relief preparedness activities.

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It also urged Washington to continue its efforts to assist Manila in the areas of maritime security, maritime domain awareness, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and related communications infrastructure to enable enhanced information sharing and overall military professionalism.

The resolution also cited the meetings on April 30 where Clinton and U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta reaffirmed to del Rosario and Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin that Washington remains “fully committed to honoring mutual obligations with the Philippines and that the alliance continues to serve as a pillar of the Philippines-U.S. relationship and a source of stability in the region.”

The resolution also underscored the shared interest of the two countries “in maintaining freedom of navigation, unimpeded lawful commerce and transit of people across the seas and subscribe to a rules-based approach in resolving competing claims in maritime areas through peaceful, collaborative, multilateral and diplomatic processes within the framework of international law.”

Last month, the U.S. handed to the Philippines a second Coast Guard cutter following the transfer last year of a similar 45-year-old vessel that has since become a flagship in the Philippine Navy as the island nation increasingly focuses on its maritime security.

Close U.S. ally Japan is also reportedly preparing to supply the Philippines with 10 smaller, new patrol vessels.

While the Obama Administration has worked to enhance ties with the Philippines, the U.S. is very mindful of its need to get along with China to prevent their strategic rivalry from spiraling into confrontation.