

Empire's Archipelago: U.S. Strategic Presence in the Philippines from 1898 to 2025

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The U.S. presence in the Philippines spans more than a century, beginning with the seizure of the islands from Spain in 1898 and continuing into the present era of rising tensions with China. This relationship has been marked by profound violence, dependency, and strategic opportunism. During the Philippine-American War (1899–1902), U.S. forces waged a brutal counterinsurgency that killed hundreds of thousands of Filipino civilians—actions some historians argue constitute genocide. Yet even after formal independence in 1946, the islands remained a central pillar of America’s Pacific military strategy. From Cold War airbases to post-9/11 counterterror operations and today’s missile deployments under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), the Philippines has served as both battlefield and buffer in America's shifting global posture. As nuclear-capable systems are now installed in Luzon—aimed at China—the echoes of past empire return in high-tech form. This article traces the arc from occupation to strategic client state, asking what is truly sovereign in a relationship built on asymmetry, and whether the Philippines can reclaim autonomy in the shadow of empire.

Keywords: Philippine-American War, U.S. imperialism, genocide, Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, military bases, Cold War, Subic Bay, Clark Air Base, nuclear weapons, U.S.-China rivalry, colonial legacy, Moro resistance, neocolonialism, strategic autonomy, American empire, Southeast Asia, Luzon, regional security, missile deployment, Filipino sovereignty. A collaboration with GPT-4o. CC4.0.

I. Introduction: The Archipelago at the Edge of Empires

The Philippines has long occupied a place of exceptional strategic significance—geographically, politically, and militarily. Comprising over 7,000 islands, it forms a natural arch between the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean, commanding vital shipping lanes, chokepoints, and access to the Asian mainland. For centuries, global powers have vied for influence over these islands, from Spanish colonizers to American generals, Japanese invaders to Cold War strategists. In the 20th and 21st centuries, the United States has maintained a continuous—if evolving—presence, treating the Philippines as both a forward operating base and a proving ground for its global ambitions.

At the heart of this analysis lies a core historical and ethical question: How has U.S. involvement in the Philippines evolved from the violent annexation of 1898 to the quiet rearmament of 2025? This paper investigates not just a chain of events, but a continuity of mindset—where conquest becomes partnership, and where sovereignty is granted only within strategic limits. From the scorched villages of Samar to the radar domes of Northern Luzon, U.S. actions in the Philippines trace an arc of power projection that blurs the line between ally and instrument, liberation and occupation.

II. The Philippine-American War (1899–1902): Imperial Beginnings

Causes of Conflict After the Spanish-American War

The seeds of the Philippine-American War were sown in the final months of the Spanish-American War in 1898. Filipino revolutionaries under Emilio Aguinaldo had already declared independence from Spain and established the First Philippine Republic, expecting recognition and support from the United States—whom they initially viewed as allies in the anti-colonial struggle. Instead, the Treaty of Paris (December 1898) transferred control of the Philippines from Spain to the United States for \$20 million, without consulting any Filipino representatives. This betrayal—combined with growing U.S. military occupation

and racial contempt toward the Filipino people—ignited a new war, this time against a former ally.

Filipino Resistance and U.S. Response

Filipino forces, initially organized along conventional military lines, were quickly overwhelmed by U.S. firepower and restructured into a decentralized guerrilla campaign. The American response was swift and brutal. What began as a war between armies rapidly devolved into a war against the population. American troops implemented scorched-earth tactics, burned villages, destroyed crops, and executed suspected guerrillas—often with little to no evidence. Entire communities were forcibly relocated into “zones of protection,” akin to concentration camps. Civilians outside these zones were treated as enemy combatants.

Death Toll and Scorched-Earth Tactics

The war claimed the lives of at least 200,000 Filipino civilians, though some estimates exceed one million when accounting for famine, disease, and sustained repression in subsequent years. In provinces like Batangas and Samar, U.S. military commanders implemented a campaign of total war. The infamous order by General Jacob Smith to turn Samar into a “howling wilderness” and to kill everyone over the age of ten epitomizes the scorched-earth mindset. General J. Franklin Bell in Batangas used mass incarcerations and starvation as tools of counterinsurgency. These campaigns, far from isolated incidents, reflected official policy at the highest levels of military command.

Analysis: Do These Acts Constitute Genocide?

While the term genocide was not yet coined in 1902, modern standards invite reevaluation. Under the 1948 UN Genocide Convention, genocide involves acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial,

or religious group. The deliberate killing of civilians, destruction of livelihood, and targeting of Filipino identity through education and propaganda suggest genocidal characteristics. U.S. rhetoric at the time, often couched in racist, dehumanizing language, provided ideological cover for mass violence. Though no international tribunal has labeled it as such, a growing number of scholars and human rights advocates argue that the war's conduct—especially in Samar and Batangas—meets the threshold of genocide in both intent and effect.

Long-Term Effects on Filipino Political, Cultural, and Educational Systems

The war and its aftermath reshaped the Philippines' trajectory for generations. The U.S. imposed a colonial government, systematically dismantling the nascent institutions of the First Philippine Republic. The Filipino elite were co-opted into a new political class loyal to American interests, forming the foundation for future oligarchies. The U.S. launched a sweeping campaign of cultural assimilation, promoting English as the language of instruction, transforming the educational system to mirror American values, and portraying the war as a "benevolent assimilation" rather than conquest.

This reengineering of society left deep scars. The eradication of Filipino nationalist consciousness, the entrenchment of patron-client politics, and the normalization of foreign tutelage profoundly shaped Filipino identity. The echoes of this transformation continue to influence debates over sovereignty, military cooperation, and national autonomy today—especially as the Philippines once again becomes a staging ground for foreign power projection.

III. The Colonial Era and Bases Agreement (1902–1946)

U.S. Civil Governance and Assimilation Efforts

Following the official end of the Philippine-American War in 1902, the United States shifted its approach from direct military conquest to civil governance under the banner of “benevolent assimilation.” President William McKinley and later

colonial administrators framed the occupation as a civilizing mission. The Philippine Commission, initially led by William Howard Taft, implemented a series of institutional reforms: introducing American-style public education, a U.S.-modeled legal system, and a restructured economy tied to American markets.

English became the medium of instruction in schools, and a new Filipino elite—educated under this system—emerged as intermediaries between American authorities and the local population. These elites were granted limited participation in governance, culminating in the Philippine Assembly (1907) and later the Philippine Senate (1916) under the Jones Act, which vaguely promised eventual independence.

Yet beneath this veneer of liberal reform, the colonial system entrenched economic dependency, suppressed labor movements, and narrowed political power to a small landed class. The effect was a managed colonialism—consent manufactured through selective inclusion, with Filipino nationalism kept in check by both patronage and military readiness.

Suppression of Resistance Movements: The Moro Wars

While “peace” had been declared in Luzon and the Visayas, fierce resistance continued in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, home to Muslim Moro communities. From 1902 to 1913, the U.S. waged a series of campaigns—collectively known as the Moro Wars—to subjugate the southern Philippines. These campaigns featured unilateral abrogation of treaties, destruction of mosques, and indiscriminate killing of civilians.

Two of the most infamous massacres occurred at Bud Dajo (1906) and Bud Bagsak (1913), where hundreds of Moro men, women, and children were slaughtered after retreating to mountain fortresses. President Theodore Roosevelt praised the military for its “bravery,” while critics in the U.S. and abroad decried the bloodshed. The underlying objective was to consolidate national territory under U.S. rule by erasing Islamic sovereignty and integrating Mindanao into the broader

colonial project. This sowed the seeds of long-term ethnic and religious conflict that still simmers in the region.

Role of the Philippines in U.S. Pacific Strategy During WWII

By the 1930s, the Philippines had become a cornerstone of U.S. strategy in the Asia-Pacific. American military planners viewed the archipelago as a vital buffer between the continental U.S. and imperial Japan. Massive installations such as Clark Air Field and Subic Bay Naval Base were constructed as forward bases. Though nominally governed by Filipino officials under the Commonwealth government, real power—especially in military affairs—remained firmly in U.S. hands.

When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941, it quickly followed with the invasion of the Philippines. U.S. General Douglas MacArthur was forced to retreat to Australia, famously declaring, “I shall return.” The Japanese occupation (1942–1945) was brutal, but American return operations in 1944–45 devastated Manila and much of the country. Civilian casualties during the Battle of Manila alone are estimated at over 100,000, and much of the capital was left in ruins.

The war confirmed the Philippines’ strategic vulnerability and importance: whoever controlled the islands controlled the sea lanes and chokepoints between East Asia and the Pacific. This realization would shape American military posture for decades to come.

Transition to Commonwealth Status

In 1935, the U.S. and Filipino leaders established the Commonwealth of the Philippines—a transitional administration meant to prepare the country for full independence within ten years. Under President Manuel L. Quezon, the Commonwealth combined Filipino governance with continued American oversight, especially in defense and foreign policy. The Tydings–McDuffie Act

legislated this roadmap to independence, while reserving U.S. military rights and property.

Yet the Commonwealth status was, in many ways, a half-measure—a concession to Filipino nationalism that preserved American strategic interests. Even after WWII, when the Philippines formally gained independence in 1946, the terms of separation included the Military Bases Agreement, which granted the U.S. sweeping control over key facilities for the next 99 years. Independence was achieved, but not autonomy.

IV. Cold War Outpost and Neocolonial Continuity (1946–1991)

Formal Independence in 1946—but Continued U.S. Military Dominance

On July 4, 1946, the United States officially granted independence to the Republic of the Philippines. While this marked the formal end of colonial rule, the structure of U.S. influence remained deeply entrenched. Independence was granted under the condition of a Military Bases Agreement (MBA), which allowed the United States to retain control of 23 military installations, most prominently Clark Air Base in Pampanga and Subic Bay Naval Base in Zambales. These bases were effectively American sovereign territory within a nominally independent nation.

Moreover, the Philippine economy remained heavily dependent on U.S. trade preferences and aid, while Filipino political elites—many educated in the U.S. or groomed during the colonial era—remained closely aligned with Washington. This set the stage for what many scholars describe as a period of neocolonial continuity: while political sovereignty was achieved in name, military and economic subordination persisted in practice.

Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base

Clark Air Base became the largest American airfield outside the continental United States, hosting a range of strategic bombers, fighter aircraft, and transport fleets. It served not only as a logistical hub but also as a staging point for U.S. military

operations across the Pacific. Subic Bay, one of the finest natural harbors in Asia, was transformed into the largest U.S. naval facility in the Western Pacific. Together, these two bases formed the linchpin of American power projection in Southeast Asia.

Both installations were equipped with advanced communications, surveillance systems, and storage facilities for weapons, fuel, and matériel. During the height of the Cold War, they were considered vital to deterrence strategy, allowing the U.S. to maintain rapid-response capability across East and Southeast Asia.

Strategic Importance During the Korean and Vietnam Wars

During the Korean War (1950–1953), Clark Air Base was essential for airlift operations and for deploying fighter squadrons to the Korean Peninsula. Subic Bay facilitated the movement of naval vessels supporting United Nations forces. The bases were also critical during the Vietnam War (1955–1975). Subic became a key supply and repair center for the U.S. Seventh Fleet, while Clark handled medevac operations, troop rotations, and bombing missions over North Vietnam and Cambodia.

In essence, the Philippines served as a rear-area sanctuary for American wars in Asia, hosting thousands of U.S. personnel and hundreds of aircraft and ships. However, the human cost—both in terms of moral complicity and local exploitation—was immense. Sex work flourished around the bases, drug markets followed the troops, and communities near the installations were subjected to toxic waste, noise pollution, and heavy surveillance.

Local Resistance Movements and Anti-Base Activism

By the 1970s and 1980s, local resentment toward the U.S. presence had reached a boiling point. Leftist groups, Catholic social justice activists, and nationalist intellectuals increasingly criticized the bases as symbols of continued colonial domination. They argued that the U.S. military presence made the Philippines a

target in the event of superpower conflict and that sovereignty was meaningless so long as foreign soldiers controlled Filipino soil.

Under the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos (1972–1986), resistance movements such as the New People’s Army (NPA) gained strength, partly fueled by anti-imperialist rhetoric. Marcos, while benefiting from U.S. support, faced growing domestic opposition that linked his authoritarianism to American strategic backing. In 1983, U.S. military personnel were implicated in crimes ranging from assaults to environmental violations, deepening public discontent.

Following the People Power Revolution in 1986, democratic space reopened, and anti-base sentiment became a mainstream political force. The Philippine Senate in 1991 voted to reject the renewal of the U.S. Bases Agreement, forcing the withdrawal of American forces and marking what appeared to be a decisive end to nearly a century of military occupation.

Yet history would prove this to be only a temporary withdrawal. The logic of military necessity—soon reframed under the War on Terror and later the Indo-Pacific pivot—would return U.S. forces to Philippine soil in new forms, under new names, with the same strategic aims.

V. Post-Cold War to the War on Terror (1991–2015)

Closure of U.S. Bases in 1991 and Temporary Pullback

In a moment of national assertion, the Philippine Senate in 1991 rejected the renewal of the U.S.-Philippine Military Bases Agreement, effectively ending nearly a century of continuous American military occupation. This landmark decision was driven by a surge of nationalist sentiment, growing awareness of environmental degradation, crimes committed by U.S. personnel, and the belief that true sovereignty required foreign forces to leave.

In November 1992, the last American troops formally vacated Subic Bay and Clark Air Base, marking what many Filipinos saw as a restoration of dignity and a closing

chapter on neocolonialism. Yet this retreat was more symbolic than structural. While large-scale bases were shuttered, strategic relationships never fully dissolved. The United States maintained low-level military cooperation and economic influence, quietly preparing the ground for a return under new circumstances—and new legal frameworks.

Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA)

The Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), signed in 1998, marked the beginning of America's return to Philippine soil under the auspices of joint cooperation rather than permanent basing. While VFA allowed temporary deployment of U.S. troops for joint exercises and humanitarian missions, it granted U.S. personnel broad legal immunity and allowed for substantial operational flexibility. Critics argued it functioned as a legal backdoor to renewed military presence.

Following the attacks on September 11, 2001, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) was signed in 2014. Under EDCA, the U.S. was allowed to pre-position weapons, construct facilities, and station troops rotationally at selected Philippine bases—without owning them outright. This agreement carefully avoided the politically loaded term “permanent base,” but in practice recreated key aspects of U.S. forward deployment, especially in strategic locations such as Palawan and Luzon.

These arrangements were not ratified by the Philippine Senate, sparking constitutional concerns and public protests. Nonetheless, successive Philippine administrations—citing regional security and the rise of China—embraced the agreements as part of a “mutual defense” strategy. The military footprint returned, just in a more decentralized and deniable form.

U.S. Counterterrorism Operations in Mindanao Post-9/11

The War on Terror provided the United States with a new rationale for embedding military operations in the Philippines, particularly in Mindanao, a historically contested and militarized region with active Moro separatist movements. In 2002, the U.S. launched Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines, deploying Special Forces and intelligence units under the guise of “training and advising” the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).

Focused on dismantling groups like Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah, the campaign transformed Mindanao into a theater of asymmetric warfare, with U.S. drones, electronic surveillance, and occasional direct action missions. While officially non-combatants, U.S. personnel were involved in several firefights and joint raids, and their presence blurred the lines between training and active combat.

Civil society organizations raised concerns about collateral damage, displacement of indigenous communities, and the militarization of humanitarian aid. The American presence, while effective in degrading militant networks, was also accused of reinforcing a state of permanent militarization in southern Philippines. As in earlier eras, security partnerships were tied to political loyalty, with local elites benefiting from U.S. patronage while the broader population bore the costs.

By 2015, the Philippines had once again become an operational hub for U.S. regional strategy—not through conquest or occupation, but through legal agreements, joint exercises, and the logic of counterterrorism. These frameworks laid the groundwork for the next phase: the return of conventional military infrastructure and forward deployments aimed not at terrorism, but at China.

VI. Return to the Archipelago: Aiming Missiles at China (2016–2025)

Reassertion of U.S. Military Presence Under EDCA

After decades of ambiguous military engagement, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) moved to the center of U.S.-Philippine relations by the mid-2010s. Although signed in 2014, it wasn't until 2016 onward—amid escalating tensions in the South China Sea—that the agreement was operationalized with speed and focus. EDCA allowed the United States to build infrastructure, pre-position weaponry, and maintain rotational troop deployments across select Philippine military bases without technically violating the country's constitutional ban on permanent foreign bases.

The rise of President Rodrigo Duterte, despite his initial overtures to China and criticism of American arrogance, did not prevent the continuation of these defense agreements. In practice, Duterte's government allowed the quiet expansion of U.S. access, reflecting the complex reality that Philippine security forces remained heavily dependent on American training, technology, and strategic support. By the early 2020s, the United States had effectively re-established a network of regional hubs—a subtler but no less potent version of its Cold War-era presence.

Installation of Facilities at Strategic Northern Bases (e.g., near Luzon Strait)

The most significant shift under EDCA came with the designation of new EDCA sites in northern Luzon, just across the Bashi Channel from Taiwan—a flashpoint in any future U.S.-China conflict. Bases such as Lal-lo Airport in Cagayan, Naval Base Camilo Osias, and Basa Air Base in Pampanga were upgraded to host long-range surveillance systems, runway extensions, munitions storage, and anti-air and missile defense platforms.

Although U.S. officials described these deployments as defensive and precautionary, leaked reports and satellite imagery suggest that dual-use facilities capable of hosting missile-capable aircraft and hypersonic delivery systems are now embedded within Philippine territory. This effectively transforms the

Philippines into a forward-operating platform for preemptive or retaliatory strikes in the event of a U.S.-China war over Taiwan or contested maritime zones.

Joint U.S.-Philippine Military Exercises and Missile-Capable Deployments

Annual joint exercises such as Balikatan (meaning “shoulder-to-shoulder”) have expanded in scope and intensity, often simulating amphibious island defense, anti-ship missile launches, and electronic warfare operations. The 2023 and 2024 iterations of Balikatan saw the largest-ever participation of U.S. troops, along with live-fire drills in regions close to Taiwan—an unmistakable signal to Beijing.

In parallel, U.S. deployments included the presence of HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems) and Patriot missile batteries, and the positioning of U.S. Navy electronic surveillance aircraft in Philippine airspace. The doctrinal language of “interoperability” has now evolved to include full-spectrum deterrence, placing the Philippines at the center of American integrated deterrence strategies.

The Philippines as a Forward-Operating Platform in a Potential U.S.-China Conflict

What was once a debate over base sovereignty has been replaced by a new strategic architecture, in which the Philippines functions as a launchpad for U.S. operations in the Western Pacific. Its geography makes it essential: close enough to Taiwan and the South China Sea to matter, but outside China’s immediate missile saturation zone.

This positioning ensures the Philippines will be an early target in the event of armed conflict between the U.S. and China. Its territory may host the first exchange of fire in a Taiwan Strait confrontation, placing Filipino lives, cities, and infrastructure at direct risk. The logic of deterrence has now been extended to the doorstep of Manila, with little public debate or transparent cost-benefit analysis.

Local Reactions, Sovereignty Debates, and Geopolitical Risk

Despite formal government approval, these developments have not gone uncontested. Local governments—particularly in Cagayan province—have expressed strong opposition to the militarization of their communities. Catholic bishops, progressive groups, and anti-imperialist coalitions have condemned the reinvigoration of U.S. military dominance, arguing that it undermines Philippine neutrality, escalates regional tension, and revives colonial patterns of strategic submission.

Polls indicate growing public anxiety about being caught between superpowers, especially given the Philippines' inability to control or even fully monitor the use of EDCA facilities. Critics question whether the supposed protection from China comes at the cost of national sovereignty, economic independence, and civilian safety.

Meanwhile, Beijing has issued repeated warnings and conducted military drills near Philippine-claimed waters, signaling that Manila's deepening alignment with Washington has not gone unnoticed. The Philippines has become once again the keystone in someone else's empire—armed this time not with rifles and flags, but with sensors, missiles, and mutually assured destruction.

VII. Ethical Reckoning: From Genocide to Geostrategy

Continuity of Violence Under Different Names: "Pacification" vs. "Stabilization"

From the burning of villages in Samar to missile deployments in Cagayan, the language used to justify U.S. military action in the Philippines has changed—but the underlying logic has not. In the early 20th century, the term was "pacification": the act of violently suppressing resistance and reordering society under imperial authority. Filipino resistance to American annexation was portrayed not as a fight for independence, but as a disorder to be cleansed. Mass killings, starvation campaigns, and scorched-earth tactics were thus framed as unfortunate necessities of civilization.

In the 21st century, the term is “stabilization.” Drone strikes, joint counterterrorism operations, and strategic base construction are couched in the rhetoric of regional peace and “mutual defense.” But the moral inversion remains: it is assumed that violence is acceptable so long as it serves a higher geopolitical order. The targets shift—from Filipino revolutionaries to jihadist insurgents to rival great powers—but the ethical framework remains disturbingly consistent: those who resist American objectives are illegitimate, and intervention is framed as benevolent—even when it invites war.

The Legacy of Jacob Smith and the Echo in Modern Counterinsurgency

General Jacob H. Smith, infamous for ordering troops in 1901 to kill anyone over the age of ten on the island of Samar, remains a symbol of unrestrained imperial brutality. He was court-martialed not for the order itself, but for the embarrassment it caused U.S. diplomacy. The logic that Smith embodied—total war against the non-compliant—was never truly disavowed. It was rebranded.

In Mindanao, U.S.-backed operations against Abu Sayyaf and other insurgent groups often involved indiscriminate airstrikes, displacement of indigenous communities, and a narrative that erased the long history of Moro sovereignty. These were not genocidal in the legal sense, but they reflect a continuity of thought: that Filipino territory, especially its southern and Muslim regions, is a proving ground for U.S. tactics in counterinsurgency and hybrid warfare.

Smith’s “howling wilderness” may now wear the uniform of Special Forces trainers, humanitarian advisors, and drone operators, but the wilderness remains. It is still carved out by power from above, not consent from below.

Neocolonialism Rebranded as Partnership

Where colonialism once justified itself with open declarations of civilizing missions, neocolonialism hides beneath the language of partnership. The Philippines is now called an “ally,” a “mutual defense partner,” and a “sovereign

actor.” But when agreements like the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) are signed without Senate ratification, and when U.S. troops enjoy extraterritorial legal protections, the substance of control outweighs the symbols of sovereignty.

American military planners now speak of “lily pads” and “distributed lethality”—deploying capabilities across multiple, modular locations to avoid political backlash and enhance survivability. The Philippines is one such lily pad. Its land, people, and geopolitical location are strategically useful, but only insofar as they serve U.S. regional objectives. Unlike true partners, Filipinos are rarely given a voice in shaping these objectives—only in managing their consequences.

This is imperialism without flags, occupation without colonies, domination via doctrine and contract. It is a colonial structure updated for the age of multipolar geopolitics and deniable infrastructure.

The Role of the Philippines in America’s Evolving Imperial Logic

Over more than a century, the Philippines has functioned as a laboratory of empire. It was here that the U.S. first transitioned from continental conquest to overseas expansion, here that it tested its early counterinsurgency doctrines, and here that it shifted from direct rule to client-state management. In every stage—military occupation, Cold War bastion, counterterrorism outpost, and anti-China node—the Philippines has remained central to America’s strategic imaginary: the idea that dominance in Asia begins with control of this archipelago.

In this evolving logic, the Philippines is not merely a place, but a mechanism: a force multiplier, a sensor node, a buffer zone. It is what the Romans called a “foederatus”—a subordinate ally given conditional autonomy, always expected to bleed first.

The ethical reckoning comes not only from past sins, but from present roles. If the Philippines is once again drawn into war—not as a sovereign actor but as an asset in someone else’s playbook—then the genocide of the past will not have been a tragic exception. It will have been the blueprint.

VIII. Conclusion: A Future Still Not Chosen

The Philippines stands again at a historical crossroads—not unlike the one it faced in 1898, in 1946, in 1991, and in the wake of 9/11. Each of these moments offered a choice: to assert sovereign independence or to become further entangled in the logic of empire. Today, amid rising tensions between the United States and China, that choice has returned with new urgency. But it remains, as ever, obscured by diplomacy, debt, dependency, and doctrine.

At the heart of this moment lies a fundamental question: Can the Philippines define its own path, or will it remain a pawn—sacrificed early, praised late, and remembered only as useful terrain in someone else’s strategy? Sovereign neutrality, difficult though it may be, offers a way forward—one that resists the reflex to align militarily with global hegemons and instead embraces regional cooperation, multilateral diplomacy, and self-determined security. This is not naïveté; it is strategic maturity.

For ASEAN, the implications are profound. If the Philippines cements its role as a forward-operating platform for U.S. power projection, it risks becoming the tripwire in a future war—the battleground rather than the broker. This would fracture the regional consensus that ASEAN has sought to build, where peace and neutrality are favored over proxy alignment. A militarized Philippines undermines not only its own autonomy but also the fragile architecture of regional stability.

And for the Filipino people, the cost is personal. Historical memory is not merely academic—it is generational. The ghost of Jacob Smith still lingers in Samar; the blood on the mountain walls of Bud Dajo still stains the ground. The toxic legacy of Subic Bay and Clark Air Base still pollutes both land and law. To align blindly with any foreign power without reckoning with these memories is to repeat them—not as tragedy, but as routine.

The Philippines has not yet chosen its future. But it must. To delay is to drift—to allow momentum and fear to dictate destiny. And as history shows, those who do not choose are chosen for. Whether through treaties, troop rotations, or targeted

strikes, the archipelago remains valuable—strategically, geographically, and symbolically. But being valued is not the same as being free.

Independence is not a date on a calendar. It is a decision renewed with each generation. The window for that renewal is open now. But how long it stays open will depend not on superpowers, but on the will of a nation that once fought to be born, and now must choose whether to remain free.

Epilogue: A Seat at Which Table?

In the early months of 2025, a new question quietly entered the Philippine foreign policy debate: Should the Philippines join BRICS? The economic bloc—originally composed of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—has recently expanded to include nations like Iran, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Indonesia, drawing growing interest from countries across the Global South. For some in Manila, BRICS represents a long-overdue chance to diversify alliances, step away from Cold War binaries, and reassert true strategic autonomy.

Senate Minority Leader Aquilino “Koko” Pimentel III has emerged as a vocal advocate, urging the Philippines to pursue BRICS membership as a way of hosting dialogue, not missiles. In his view, Manila should serve as a neutral platform in Asia—a place for peace talks, trade forums, and regional coordination, not a launchpad for conflict between empires. His appeal taps into a deeper longing for sovereignty—one that is not merely legal, but moral and geopolitical.

Yet this proposal has met strong headwinds. Critics argue that BRICS, driven by Chinese influence, risks pulling the Philippines into another sphere of dependency—one that might compromise its territorial integrity in the South China Sea. Others point to the country’s structural entanglement with the U.S. military-industrial network: the Mutual Defense Treaty, the Visiting Forces Agreement, and the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. These, they argue, anchor the Philippines to Washington in ways that make true neutrality practically impossible.

Meanwhile, the region is shifting. Indonesia has joined BRICS, and Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam are moving closer to economic and diplomatic cooperation with the bloc. As Southeast Asia increasingly diversifies its alignments, the Philippines' deepening military integration with the United States risks making it an outlier in a multipolar region—a fixed piece in a game that is rapidly reconfiguring.

In this context, BRICS is more than an acronym—it is a symbol of the road not taken. It poses a final question to the archipelago at empire's edge: Will the Philippines define its future through alignment or autonomy, through strategic inertia or geopolitical imagination?

The table is set. A seat may be open. But only the truly sovereign can choose where they sit.

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