

## The Role of the Philippines in the World

*By Kyra Lüthi*

### Introduction

First association most people have when they think about Asia are countries like China, Japan or India, as they are big countries, present for a long time on the world map. During the past decades, Hong Kong and Singapore have also gained a lot of attraction worldwide as business and financial hubs of Asia. These are indeed the key players in Asia but the biggest continent in the world is not only composed of these few states. It is home to 48 countries and 4.5 billion people with different ethnicities and cultures that

comprise the world's most ancient civilizations. So regardless of a country's geographical size and sustainability, each one is vital in playing a role in the global economic and political order. Unfortunately, more often than not, the South East Asian countries and most specifically the Philippines, if not forgotten, is commonly underestimated in the contribution that it provides in the international arena due to the multiple misconceptions about the country's general conditions. But in reality, the Philippines

has always been in the global scheme from the earliest times up to today, therefore it is important and relevant to learn more about its history, involvement and influence on relations in Asia and globally.

## **Overview of the country**

The Philippines - the tropical archipelago located in the Southeast part of Asia is composed of 7,641 islands with 108 million citizens to date. Over twelve million Filipinos live overseas, comprising one of the world's biggest diasporas. With its scattered islands, the country has also one of the most diverse cultures with 187 indigenous Philippine dialects, two official languages, Filipino and English, and is the only predominantly Christian country in Asia-Pacific with 80.6% Christians, mostly Roman Catholics, followed by Muslim Filipinos, composing 5% of its total population. The diversity is impacted by the strategic location of the country and rich colonial history. It is surrounded by China and Japan in the north; Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore in the west; and Brunei and Indonesia in the south. The influences of such neighboring countries are the main reasons of having multiple dialects and religions since the pre-colonial period. This also started healthy relationships because of the establishment of barter trade system among the mentioned countries.

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When Spain arrived in the leadership of the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan in 1521, under the reign of King Philip II (hence the country's name), Christianity and globalization were successfully introduced in the country. Although Magellan was killed shortly during the tribal wars after claiming the islands, the Spanish was able to colonize the country for the next 333 years. In 1898, the country finally gained independence from Spain but was ceded to United States with the Treaty of Paris. The Philippine-American war officially lasted only for 3 years and a Peace Proclamation was signed in 1902, but the hostilities continued until 1935 when the country was declared self-governing commonwealth under the Tydings-McDuffie Act. During World War II, the Japanese invaded and took full control over the islands. This war destroyed the capital city of Manila killing over one million people both Filipinos and Americans. At the end of the war on July 4<sup>th</sup> 1946 the Philippines finally gained full independence as the Republic of the Philippines. Owing to the fact of post-war casualties and atrocities, the country conventionally had huge political and social stability struggles that still affect its stands today. The endless political conspiracies and internal conflicts hurdled and weakened

general developments, having left the country to look for strong support from its allies.

### **Early globalization and OFWs**

The US is the Philippines' best and closest ally after Indonesia. With both countries' shared history since the 18<sup>th</sup> century up to fighting together in World War II, the dominance of the partnership is powerful to the point of permitting the establishment of US military bases in its most strategic islands. But even if this is of great importance, the island country has always been in the international scene since the Spanish regime. Apart from religion, Spain also brought the system of education and form of government which are the major factors that attained the Philippines to globalization. As a matter of fact, it became the most multilingual country in all of Asia being known for speaking multiple global languages: Spanish, Filipino, Chinese (Mandarin), English, and French.

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The country's national hero, Dr. José Rizal who was born and raised in Manila, went to Madrid, Paris and Berlin to further his education in ophthalmology. Interestingly, he was under the tutelage of the famous and renowned Dr. Louis de Wecker. But Rizal was not the first

and only Filipino who was able to travel and study in Europe. There were a lot of other recognized Filipinos of different expertise and backgrounds that made huge impacts internationally. Considering its strong relations with the European nations that was under the Early Renaissance Era, the Philippines became one of the more advanced states in Asia in the 15th century. Furthermore, the country was involved in the World War II fighting side by side with the US; and as one of the original members of the United Nations, it accepted and welcomed Jews and other Holocaust refugees that no other Asian country would dare to do.

After the devastating war and endless political conflicts, the economic growth of the country began to fall, but the thing that helped revitalize the Philippines was the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) - they are currently considered as the "Heroes of the Nation". With over tenth of its total population as OFWs, around an estimated number of 11 million people, the money sent back to the families' of the workers as remittance amounts to not less than 31 billion dollars per year, strategically boosting the country's economic growth. Working abroad became a social fabric of the country, therefore the number just keeps increasing every year. The top four countries with significant Filipino communities are first of all the US amounting to over four million workers, followed by Saudi

Arabia with 900,000, then Canada with 800,000 and the UAE with 700,000.

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Filipinos work as production, service, professional (mainly nurses and engineers) and maritime industry workers: as seamen and merchant marine crew. In view of the fact that there are strong colonial influences and cultural divergence that the Philippines has, the citizens are known to be naturally adaptive and dedicated workers with commendable qualities regardless of the culture of the new country they are immigrating to. Truly, the OFWs became the great spark of the international relations of the archipelago in the modern era as it has encouraged the active involvement of the this country in various organizations such as the ASEAN, APEC and of course, the United Nations.

**Position of the Philippines in the current global political and economic relations**

ASEAN (the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations) is one of the most important organizations that the island country is a part of as it promotes economic, political, security and cultural cooperation among its members. ASEAN was originally composed of

Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, and later on Brunei, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam joined the membership. ASEAN was founded in 1967 to fight against communism, impose a nuclear-free zone and promote a free-trade region. Granted that ASEAN directly involves the countries in the region, it does not exclude other neighboring states from participating, such as China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand, which is now known to be called ASEAN Plus Six.

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In 2017, ASEAN celebrated its 50th anniversary in Manila and turned its chairmanship to the Philippines under the current President Rodrigo Roa Duterte. During the conference, it was discussed that the non-tariff barriers will be the number one focus to establish a common market. If this is ever truly implemented, then this would mean less tax or no-tax on imported goods and services which would result into labor and capital mobility in the region. Notwithstanding the fact that the citizens of all the member countries were looking into resolving the dispute over the islands of South China Sea as top priority, the common market goal is also of importance.

ASEAN continues to provide substantial favorable circumstances for the Philippines such as adhering to more summits and conferences like the APEC or the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation - promoting free trade throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Member states include all ASEAN Plus Six, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the United States, Mexico, Chile, Peru and Russia.

Being a founding member of these organizations enormously benefitted the Philippines in boosting its own economic stability by attracting all other member states in investing in the archipelago. With these foreign investments, the country is able to develop the industrial and business sectors easier. The most significant of such would be the highways and expressways that other countries supported in constructing to provide more efficient traffic flow for citizens, as well as hotel and casino development projects mostly from Japan, South Korea, China and other countries to foster tourism. It is said that the Philippines has the biggest potential to become the Las Vegas of Asia because of the ongoing developments in the newest Entertainment City located in the capital. Most importantly, the Philippines profits from the establishment of Business Process Outsourcing or call centers of international companies such as Samsung, AT&T, Verizon, GoPro, FitBit, Hilton, HSBC and other companies from the US, Canada, Australia, East Asia, Europe and even Middle East. With

English as one of the official languages of the country, it is undoubtedly appealing to global companies in outsourcing their call centers to the archipelago. Such advancements create opportunities for the Philippines to engage in various aspects of international relations such as cultural, educational, military and political.

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In the cultural and educational perspective, young Filipinos are given the chance to get involved in international study exchange programs that equip and prepare the future generation for implementing continuous growth in the country through globalization. It also allows the youth in collaborating and cultivating with other young people from different countries all over the globe in conferences like the prestigious United Nations Youth Summit annually held in New York, US.

### **New outlook toward Russia and China**

The Army of the Philippines has been strongly tied with the American forces for the longest time until President Duterte turned to Russia, a co-member of the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic

Cooperation). Such new association is deemed to focus more on bilateral political, economic and social relations between the two states. This has been solidified when Duterte met with the Russian President Vladimir Putin during the APEC Conference 2017 in Vietnam, followed by the official five-day visit of Duterte to Moscow to discuss the security and defense relations initiative.

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It was said that military observers from the Philippines will be sent to Russia to determine which training exercises the Filipino troops could participate in. Among the other discussions were the purchases of a thousand trucks of different kinds such as dump trucks, long-haul trucks and platform trucks for the benefit of the extensive “Build, Build, Build!” Project. Agricultural trade was also conversed having Philippine fishing companies export products to Russia. But the most interesting subject that was discussed was the space-research relations wherein there will be an “*intergovernmental framework agreement on space cooperation*

*that will include use of Russian rockets to launch Philippine payloads as well as establishment of a receiving station for the Global Navigation Satellite System”,* according to the Philippine Space Act. This act will finally allow and enable Filipino scholars to learn space-technology development of the highest end.

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The new administration of the government under President Duterte certainly has intriguingly new and different strategies in improving the international relations of the Philippines by speaking with the countries that had not been traditional partners of this island county. Apart from Russia, there are also the political and business engagements with China. Despite the territory dispute in the South China Sea, the island country turns to Beijing for oil and dam investments. The endless controversies with these exchanges have been going on for more than five years and yet the political partnership between the two countries seem to develop even stronger.

## Conclusion

Currently considered as the Rising Tiger of Asia, the Philippines has always been in the international scene across the world history. Its bewildering participation from doing barter trade with its neighboring countries before it even became a Spanish colony, to being involved in modernization and globalization with European nations in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, then advancing to American innovations and now, finally under its own initiatives - is unquestionably a proof that each country has its own share in making history of influencing the world. In today's era, the Filipinos are recognizably distinguished because of its top sector: labor. The Overseas Filipino Workers, working in the most demanding technical industries like medicine and health as doctors, nurses, midwives; construction as engineers,

architects, builders, and most importantly maritime as seamen responsible for the movement of products and goods worldwide, the Filipinos do not only positively affect their country's own benefits but also of the world as they share their extensive expertise and knowledge in their respective fields. Filipinos are global movers and history makers - the remarks of strength and courage from a country that should not be disregarded.

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