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The State of Philippine-Iran Bilateral Relations, Maximizing Values, Human Potentials and Shared History

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Abstract: *The Philippines and Iran are two important players in the geopolitical transition of Asian and the Pacific region. The geopolitical values that these two countries held over many decades exposes them to rivalries and competition among regional and international powers. In some part of history, they became a closed ally to the United States, while regime change in Iran in the late 1970s had created some sort of difficulty for both countries to improve bilateral relations amidst normalization. This paper therefore seeks to investigate existing domestic and external factors that can help explain the under-developed state of their bilateral relations. In doing so, the paper advances the idea that although the Philippines and Iran are sovereign and independent countries, the course and direction of their relation since the post-1979 event was heavily affected by the US policy vis-à-vis the Philippines and Iran.*

Key words: History, Iran, Philippines, relations, soft power, shared history, geopolitics

Introduction

Since the official establishment of their diplomatic relations and up to 1979, both countries were strategic allies and have shared common interests in defense and security, labor, trade, education, etc. However, the event of 1979 in Iran significantly changed the course of this relations as Iran Islamic government pursued an anti-US stance in its foreign policy while the Philippines struggled to keep its commitment with the United States and at the same time maintaining cordial relations with Iran Islamic government.

Following the 1979 revolution in Iran, it can be observed that Philippine-Iran bilateral relations in term of trade volume, labor flow and political cooperation have significantly reduced and although both countries still maintained cordial relations, they have simply unable to capitalize huge potentials to promote these relationships. The trade volume is somewhat affected by the sanctions as well as the prevailing

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negative images that the West particularly the United States has campaigned against the Islamic republic, while the labor export is significantly affected by the Iran's no labor import policy since the post-Islamic government.

Philippines and Iran are two countries that are geo-strategically located in the Asia-Pacific region. Throughout the centuries and due to its strategic value, Iran's maritime vicinity particularly in the Persian Gulf has been subjected to control and influence not just by Iran itself and its neighboring Arab countries but also of the United States and most recently by China. The vital narrow strait of Hormuz in which Iran has significant control is serving as international passage for international and regional container goods as well as oil and gas tankers from these Arab littoral states in the Gulf towards the bigger markets in Asia and Africa and vice versa. Lies between Oman and Iran, the strait of Hormuz is considered to be the "world's most important oil transit chokepoint" due to a large volume of oil passing through the strait. In 2018, a daily oil flow from the strait is in an average of 21 million per day.¹ Hence, it is safe to assume that Iran is indeed an important regional and global actor in the past, present as well as in the future.

From the Persian Gulf towards the Indian Ocean and from the Indian Ocean towards the Strait of Malacca directed towards the South China Sea and the Pacific lies the Philippines. The Pearl of Orient as many called it also holds a strategic maritime value as it connects the Asia and the Pacific economies. The Philippines is the gate way towards the Pacific region. During the Colonial era, European powers who transacted with China had to do a stopover in the Sulu Archipelago to exchange European goods into Chinese products. Facilitated by the Sultanate of Sulu and aided by the slaves' International trade activities between Europe, India, China and Southeast Asian communities flourished in the area. The "commercial intrusion" of Europe in China at the 18th century contributed also to the "ascendancy of Sulu" in these commercial activities.²

During the Cold War, the Philippines was once again demonstrated its strategic significance for the Western capitalist block who was pushing to take control of the entire region against the advancing communism in China and Vietnam. Hence, the dictum that the fall of Vietnam is the fall of Southeast Asia like the spread of dominoes³ was perceived by the Philippines leadership and its patron-the United States critical and needed to be addresses seriously to save the world from the demons of communism.

The emphasis we put to the relevance of maritime movement for trade and migration in the past centuries and in the present time would likely continue in the fu-

¹ Barden, 2019.

² Warren, 2007: 52.

³ Onion, *et al.*, 2022.

ture in spite of discoveries of new modes of transportation which would help move tradeable goods from one part of the globe to another.

Given this, the paper would like to examine the bilateral relations of the Philippines and Iran as two important maritime nations in the Asia and the Pacific region. In doing so, the paper seeks to look into the challenges and as well as the untapped potentials present in the countries. As vast oceans connect the two countries together both in the past, present and in the future, it is interesting to examine the bilateral relations between the Philippines and Iran as well as to understand how their geopolitical importance to the region and the world become a critical variable in the shaping of the future bilateral relations between their two countries.

Historically, the southeast asian maritime communities that are geographically located between Iran and the Philippines including that of the collecting ports in Canton⁴ during the pre-colonial times may have all aided the historical encounters of Middle East traders including the Persians with the early inhabitants of the pre-colonial Philippine Islands.

Cesar Adib Majul suggested that as early as the ancient times, the Arabs in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula had already navigated the Indian Ocean and this was followed by the Sasanian Persians. The Arabs and ‘possibly’ Persians had a counting house in Canton (Khanfu) which serve as their warehouses as well as a common area to meet for business transactions.⁵

Contrary to the experience of Western colonization in the country, the spread of Islamic religion was not imposed upon the local inhabitants by these Middle Eastern traders and missionaries. Islam as a religion of the southern Philippines went through a natural process of integration and adoption.⁶

The available sources scantily mentioned early Persian encounters with the Filipinos. One reason for this was the migration of Persian traders to the country was somewhat coincided with the era of the Abbasid in Baghdad in which Persian scholars and missionaries shared a common Arabic language in their scientific and philosophical production. The dominance of Arabic language as the medium of communication, writings and probably in terms of missionaries works and trade transactions resulted into a general classification of recording history wherein Arabs as well as Persian alike were categorized as one-that is the Muslim Arabs.⁷ According to Wadi “the Philippines form part of the Islamic world” through the Arab merchants and Sufis belonging to the Makhdumin section in the 13th century.⁸

⁴ Van Dyke, 2005; Schottenhammer, 2010.

⁵ Majul, 2010a: 1; Majul (9) claims that the Muslim Arabs, Persians and Indians were also “taking over more and more of the commercial hegemony of Srivijaya”.

⁶ Donoso, 2015; see also Sevilla, 2017: 7.

⁷ Sevilla, 2021.

⁸ Wadi, 1998: 22; Hernandez, 2016: 142-3.

Moreover, another theory may suggest that Persians and Arabs influences in language, culture and ritual may not be through a direct contact with the locals in the sense that intermediaries such as that of Southeast Asia communities, traders, and missionaries may have brought and introduced these influences to the local inhabitants when they visited the Philippine archipelago. As Majul suggested the initial contact was “made possible by the participation of the latter (Southeast Asian) in the international trade that extended the Arab lands to China.”⁹ Another theory may suggest that due to many similarities in the Indo-Persian language, it could also be possible that Persian vocabularies found in the Philippines today may also be brought to the shores by the Indians traders who were present in the Southeast Asian region at that time.

The evidences through which a hybrid community of southeast Asians, Persian and Arabs was formed were taken out by the advent of European colonization in the region. Spanish colonizers restricted the coming of Middle Easterners to the region citing possible differences of religion and values. The Spanish strongly argued that the presence of Muslims in the area was a threat to the interests. For the Spaniards, the Muslim inhabitants in the southern part of the country were akin to the moors in Morocco. Hence, the Spaniards from the beginning had already developed negative perceptions against the Muslims. These perceptions had been reflected in several socio-political drama organized by Spanish priests such as *the moro moro* in 1637 which depict the hardheadedness of the Muslim Filipinos to disobey the colonizers at the time of Spanish colonization in the Philippines.¹⁰ By demonizing the moros, the colonizers were able to facilitate the spread of Christianity. The legacy of moro moro in the 21st century is still being included in the Catholic church festivals particularly in the villages and provinces in the country.

The Moro wars in which the Spanish colonizers had with the Muslims during their more than three centuries of occupation in the Philippines as observed by Majul had “left deep scars on the Muslims up to the present and constitute part of their problem”¹¹ and the Moros were never Christianized nor Conquered by the Spaniards. The resiliency of the Moros against the foreign forces demonstrated their advance strategic military planning superiority in a most familiar geographical terrain in Mindanao. It also suggested their advance political organization and strong belief to their culture and religion of Islam.

When the American took over the Philippines as the new colonizer in 1898, the Moros in the Southern Philippines was under the American military administration. From 1899 to 1920, the Americans developmental policy *vis-à-vis* the Moroland. Referencing it from message of American President William McKinley to the American Congress in 1899, the American administration in the Moroland was part of

⁹ Majul, 2010b: 35.

¹⁰ Majul, 1988; Hawkey, 2014.

¹¹ Majul, 2010c.

the benevolent mission to “develop, to civilize, to educate, to train in the science of self-government.”¹²

In 1903, a US military created the ‘Moro Province’ as a separate political entity comprising of the Moro Population. The reception was quite mixed as some Moro groups resisted the Americans while other befriended them. New way of life through American style of education was introduced to the country further marginalized Middle Eastern influences. Moreover, in spite of the new practices and values introduced by the American colonization in the country, Filipino Muslims have retained some of their religious and cultural rituals until these days. The same hold true with some of the cultural practices they have borrowed from the early Middle Eastern missionaries in the Philippines.

Whatever the truth behind the influence of Persian in the Philippines, whether it was direct or indirectly introduced to the Filipinos by the Persian themselves, what remains important is that the Philippine-Iran relations did not start from nowhere. It formed part of the significant early encounters that the inhabitants of the country have had with Persian, Arabian traders and missionaries in the early centuries.

The scarcity of materials on Iran in the Philippines academia as well as in the area the country’s foreign policy orientation in the contemporary period can also be attributed to the ‘marginalization of interests’ of the Philippines has have *vis-à-vis* Iran. This means that in the overall academic and policy discourses, Iran like the Middle Eastern countries are allotted limited interests. These interests may be structural in nature such as the dominance of Western oriented literature taught in schools and universities over countries in the global south. The hegemonic dominance of Western literatures over any others have influenced the perceptions and realities of Filipinos *vis-à-vis* the Middle East.¹³

Middle East is portrayed by Western scholarships as the region of savagery, terrorism, with backward and uncivilized peoples as compared to countries in Europe and Americas. In addition, the dominance of western discourses and knowledge production is reinforced by the pro-Western media who cater to the values and interests of the Western civilization. Western film industries such as the Hollywood are producing movies that describe the superiority of the West and inferiority of other non-Western civilizations.

These sad realities are so penetrating to the extent that we look at Iran and the Middle East region not from their internal experiences and realities per se but from the derogatory construction of images these western platforms have created for them. This means that our images and realities of that country and region are not based

¹² Cf. Gowing, 1968: 372; see also Hawkins, 2008.

¹³ Sevilla, 2020.

on experiences we encountered with the Arabs and Persians but are pre-conditioned by the dominating forces that fit into the standard of the western culture and way of life.

We did not see the region from the cultural diversities and relativity but by the universal standard set forth by western instrumentalities and institutions.

Secondly and as mentioned above, the political component of marginalizing Philippine interest's *vis-à-vis* Iran and the region are a product of political clashes between the West and the East, between the Global North and Global South. The conflict of sovereign interests in this case, the United States and Iran determined Philippine ability to deliver an independent foreign policy option. As a staunch allied of the United States since the Cold War until today, Philippine look and asses yours interests along with the interests of global partners and not necessarily from theirs unique sense of history and independence. Hence, even in the period of decolonization the late 1950 towards 1960s and 1970s, countries in the global south including the Philippines remained the political prisoner of the West.

The decade of 1960s and toward the 1970s was not only important for many countries in the global south [that were formerly occupied by western colonizers] in terms of achieving sovereign independence but also for these countries to start determining their own flight by reducing western political influences in their institutions and social system.

This decade was much more about the breaking and challenging the existing colonial knowledge through decolonization and replaced it with more nationalistic tone-something that has to be embodied in their policy and articulated in the practice of their foreign relations. Moreover, in the presence of a deep rooted western inspired world system, these countries were confronted with constrains especially when they continued to rely economically from their colonial patrons. Although some countries have been successful in their nation building projects and have advanced much in terms of economic, trade, security and political independence, many countries in the global south remained reliant to the west. Thus, reliant had made them vulnerable in terms of their policy options and are always succumbed under the influence of their former colonizers.

The pre-revolution bilateral relations were anchored not just in the determination for the Philippines to gain access to the Iranian labor market but of strategic value to align the Philippine policy *vis-a-vis* the Middle East along with the global interests of the United States. These was materialized in terms of connecting and maintaining good political relations with Arab and non-Arab countries that were parts of the Western alliance system against the southward expansion of the Communist bloc. Since Iran and the Philippines were two allies of the United States, it was but practical part of their diplomatic approach to ties up with similar minded countries.

Revolutions and the Philippine-Iran Relations

Iran's nationalism emerged in 1951 due to the unequal sharing of revenue from the Iranian sovereign resources namely the crude oil. The uneven sharing of this revenue in favor of the foreign entity had made Prime Minister Mosaddegh to declare the nationalization of the country's oil industry, namely, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (AIOC). Since he became the Iranian Prime Minister in 1951, Mosaddegh worked on the nationalization of this important industry, a move which forced the benefactor of this industry, the Great Britain to impose economic sanction on Iran.¹⁴ Under the sanctions, Britain prohibited the export of key commodities to Iran such as sugar and steel.¹⁵

Although it was not 'successful', the desire to control the oil national industry which was formerly controlled by a foreign entity demonstrated the country's drive to self-determination and to manage its own resources through the exercise of its sovereign rights. Perhaps Prime Minister Mossadegh never expected that the dream to nationalize the country strategic company and liberate Iran from poverty 'at one stroke', was more complicated. The move to nationalize resulted into the suspension of operations in Abadan refineries as well as the withdrawal of foreign workers in the Abadan oil sectors. In addition, the British and the American refused to purchase oil from Iran anymore, further deepening the economic crisis in the country. Following a coup d'état orchestrated by the United Kingdom and the United States, Prime Minister Mossadegh was ousted from power and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was restored to power with the help of M16 and CIA.¹⁶

Hence, from the experiences above, one may understand where the current Islamic republic of Iran drew its distrust *vis-à-vis* these powers. Moreover, the 1979 Islamic Revolutionary event in Tehran and the eventual took over of the American Embassy in Tehran by the Iranian students who are pro-revolutionary was seen by the world as a violation of the Iran obligation to protect foreign diplomats under diplomatic conventions. The took over of the U.S. embassy in Tehran, the hostage of the American diplomats for 444 days and the succeeding anti-American slogan and policy adopted by the Islamic Iran during and after the height of the Islamic revolution created diplomatic and political tug -of -war between the United States and Iran throughout the decades.¹⁷

Unlike Iran, the Philippines was colonized by Spain for 333 years and was succeeded by the United States. The official Philippine-Relations with the United States started during the defeat of the Spaniards in the Battle of the Manila Bay in 1898.

¹⁴ Ghasimi, 2011; Brew, 2022: 86-117.

¹⁵ Kinzer, 2003: 90.

¹⁶ Takeyh, 2014.

¹⁷ Rubin, 1980; Wolf, 2006; Seeberg, 2014.

The U.S. came out as the victorious power and eventually extended its management in the Philippine islands which lasted for 48 years. Under the phrase of ‘benevolent assimilation’ the United States instituted the American education in the country and send some Filipino scholars to the United States to learn the art of American education and governance. This has significantly altered the Filipino perception *vis-à-vis* the world specially towards the United States.¹⁸

Under the benevolent assimilation which was declared on December 21, 1898, President McKinley stated that the United States “come, not as invaders or conquerors, but as friends, to protect the natives and their homes, in their employment, and in their personal and religious rights.”¹⁹ Since then, the Philippines and the United States experienced an ups and down in their bilateral relations, yet, both sides considered their strategic alliance as strong specially also during the Cold War era.

The experience of the Philippines and Iran prior to the 1979 Islamic revolution can be said to had been extremely positive. In international relations, the Cold War era and the alliance of Iran and the Philippines to the capitalist system made these two countries strategically closed from each other. As they were important allies of the United States in the Middle East and the Pacific, Iran and the Philippines did not only maintain strong political and security cooperation with the United States, they also served as the strategic ‘watchdog’ of the United States in protecting its regional security interests in the Asia-Pacific region.

Iran-Philippine relations during the Cold War was strategic as both countries are strategic allies with the United States. Both countries are recipients of overseas aid specifically from the United States and “both countries used foreign aid to support their regimes.”²⁰ Both countries were catapulted by popular revolution, but unlike in Iran where after 1979 disconnected relations with the U.S., the Philippine revolution in 1986 has maintained the countries cordial relations with the United States. Under certain security and military agreements Iran and the Philippines tailored their pre-revolution relations with the United States mainly under these terms.

It is therefore surprising that although the United States championed the protection of human rights and claimed to be the most advance democracy in the word, its foreign policy *vis-à-vis* other autocratic countries is not solely defined on the core values and principles that the United States wanted to propagate.

In similar manner the United States maintained strategic relations with the Philippines under its former president Ferdinand Marcos, this is in spite that fact that the Marcos regime committed human right violation and authoritarianism that were considered to be affront to democratic values and principles. In the visit made by the U.S. President Jimmy Carter in the Christmas of 1977, he mentioned that Iran is

¹⁸ Rafael, 2010.

¹⁹ Cf. Blount, 1913: 149; see also Kapur, 2011.

²⁰ Blumel, 1991: 2.

in the “islands of stability in of the most troubled region in the world”,²¹ when the peoples really suffered economically and had their values corrupted by the West-the process of ‘westoxification’ by corrupting the values of the Iranian people and replacing it with the westernized values.

Like Iran, the United States continue to tolerate systemic corruption in the Philippines under Marcos and not until 1986. The support of the U.S. government should not be seen from its shared values and principle components but more on the pragmatically notion of the US global political agenda. It has to be maintained that Iran and the Philippines were situated in the most crucial routes where communism started to the Asia and the Pacific region. In this situation, Iran and the Philippines simply served as strategic buffer of the United States against the spread of the communist ideology. Strategically speaking, Iran-Philippines relations formed part of the imaginary line which protect US interests from Greece, Turkey, Iran to the Persian and Indian Ocean from the Southern communist movement of the former Soviet Union. On addition, the Philippines was also part of the US alliance system in the Southeast Asia and the Pacific flank. The relevance of the Philippines as part of the US strategic network of allies was demonstrated in the US intervention in Vietnam during the War period and in the Korean Peninsula during in 1950 in which the country sent five battalions of 4,420 men under the United Nations during the Korean War.²²

In recent years in Middle East, the Philippines also contributed troops to the United States led Multi-National Force in Iraq in 2003. However, due to the kidnapping of a certain Filipino Worker, Angelo dela Cruz by the militants, the Philippine government withdrawn its troops from the Iraqi territory. The Philippine decision had faced ‘disapproval’ from the US and the Iraqi government arguing that, the withdrawal was a gesture of weakness since it is ‘giving in to terrorist demands’ despite respecting the Philippines decision on the matter. It has to be noted that during the Persian Gulf War, Iran had provided the Philippines a safe transit for its Filipino workers who were affected during the war.²³

Bilaterally speaking, the government of Shah Pahlavi of Iran and Marcos in the Philippines established a closed bilateral relation. These bilateral relations was demonstrated in the area labor cooperation as thousands of Filipino professional, skilled and semi-skilled workers migrated to Iran for work. It has to be recalled that as the result of the 1973 oil crisis, members of the Organization of the Petroleum Oil Companies (OPEC) including Iran was able to take advantage of the massive petrodollar wealth. As revenues grew in that decade, Iran Shah government increased the external sources of workers to work in the Iranian oil refineries, hospitals, airports, etc. Among these foreign workers, Filipinos in the second half of the 1970s were

²¹ Hiro, 2013: 311.

²² Gates, 2001.

²³ Rodriguez, 2011.

deployed to Iran taking advantage of the Iranian labor market needs as well as its good strategic political relations. Filipino formed part as one pillars of Iran's industrialization and modernization and more and more Filipinos were deployed in various areas in the country.

Perhaps the global oil crisis in the 1973 that resulted into massive petro-dollar revenue of the Iranian monarch was a pull factors towards the employment of Filipino overseas workers in Iran. Iran needed to meet social and economic expectations from its own society as it continued to gain petro wealth. In the same manner that the Philippines under the Marcos regime had experienced problem facing unemployment at home along with the increasing number of Filipino graduates. Given the opportunity in Iran as a pull factor of labor migration for Filipino workers, Filipino engineers, teachers, doctors and semi and non-skilled workers were deployed in Iran, hence the need to formalize diplomatic relations at the higher level was a necessity. It is therefore safe to conclude that the pillar in which the official bilateral relations between the Philippines and Iran formed was due to the people to people exchanges.

According to Mariano Dumia, a seasoned Filipino diplomat who wrote about Philippine-Iran relations argued that although traces of Philippine-Iran relations can be scanty found in the present time, the contemporary diplomatic relations between these two countries begun in the 1960s, specifically on January 22 1964 where the "secular and pro-western Shah Mohammad Pahlavi become the fist country in the Middle East's oil-rich Persian Gulf region to forge diplomatic relations with the Republic of the Philippines."²⁴

At the beginning, the Philippine interests in Iran was handled by the Philippine Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan, where Ambassador Romeo S. Busuego served as the first non-resident ambassador from the period of 1964 to 1966. After a decade, on August 16, 1974, a Filipino diplomat whose named was Secretary and Consul General Juan A. Ona, arrived to Tehran from London to opened the Philippine embassy in Tehran.²⁵ In similar manner, The Iranian government opened Iranian embassy in Manila in 1977. The opening of the two countries embassies since their respective capital precipitated the warmed relations of the Philippine-Iran diplomatic ties.²⁶

This relationship was however tested at the height of the Iranian Islamic revolution. The Iranian Islamic revolution was believed to have been a 'peaceful revolution' given that the oppositions did not really relied on weapons and arms to challenge the ruling monarch but Imam Khomeini – the founder of the Islamic revolution, used ideas and soft power approaches to stir a kind of national awareness on social, political, economic and security challenges facing Iran prior to the 1979 revolution.

²⁴ Dumia, 2017: 25-6.

²⁵ Dumia, 2017: 28-9.

²⁶ Dumia, 2017: 29.

Imam's recorded preaching might be underestimated by the ruling establishment. Moreover, the tape-recording speeches had spread like a wild fire reaching every corner of the Iranian society. Contrary to revolutions being experienced by other countries in which the antagonist was armed and grounded their struggle using certain ideology, Iran revolution was coined by an Iranian political scientist, Homa Katouzian as "a revolt of the society against the state in which various ideologies were represented, the most dominant being those with Islamic tendencies (Islamist, Marxist-Islamic and democratic-Islamic) and Marxists-Leninist tendencies (Fada'i, Tudeh, Maoisy, Trotskyist, and others)."²⁷

At the height of the 1979 Islamic revolution, the group of Filipino cessions group into the Southern Philippines, – the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) headed by its chair prof. Nur Mesuari took advantage by appealing to the Islamic regime in Iran to stop crude oil supply to the Philippines because the Marcos regime was discriminating and treating badly the Muslim Filipinos.²⁸

In response of this, the Iranian Islamic regime has discreetly offered the MNLF an office in Tehran. Philippine embassy could describe this treatment as a 'semi-diplomatic' recognition to MNLF. Having said this, it is notable to say that such treatment if seriously taken should be treated as an insult to the sovereignty of the Republic of the Philippines. The 1996 OIC chairmanship of Tehran however and its eventual support to the peace negotiation between MNLF and Government of the Republic of the Philippines has not only erased this suspicion but also reconstructed trust of the Philippine government on Iran. To reciprocate this effort of the Iranian government, the Philippine government has supported Iran in its peaceful nuclear program. The Philippine government like many others believed that Iran as a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the mere fact that it continues to be part of this relevant regime, only means that it is serious in abiding in good faith onto the said regime.

As the signatory of the NPT, Iran like other would have rights to access or harness a peaceful nuclear technology necessary to the country drive in achieving progress and development. In addition, it has to be noted that Iranian nuclear program is not something that existed in isolation. Iran nuclear project started as part of the Eisenhower administration's 'atomic for peace' program with the Iranian nuclear and physics scientists.

In spite of this positive development in their bilateral relations, the event of 1979 created a little disturbance from the Iranian students in Manila. During that time in the Philippines, Iranian students were divided into two major groups those that

²⁷ Katouzian, 2009; see also Ritter (2010: IX), who wrote: "the Iranian Revolution turned out to be successfully nonviolent because, unlike previous revolutions, it was a global affair in which the revolutionaries intentionally and strategically sought to bring the world into their struggle against the state."

²⁸ Iacovou, 2000: 5.

were pro-Islamist and anti-monarchy, and pro-monarch and anti-Islamic. They have staged protest in front of the Iranian embassy in Manila, thereby, disturbing the surrounding. The protest may have been the reason for the Philippine Department of Education to limit the acceptance of the Middle Eastern students particularly Iranians into the Philippine higher institutions of learning.²⁹

The Philippines in 1986 also experience an anti-regime and anti-colonial revolution against the regime of former President Ferdinand Marcos. It was labelled as the 1986 EDSA the People's Power Revolution. It was a revolution in which millions of Filipinos from all walks in the longest road in Metro Manila calling for the end of Marcos dictatorship and restoration of freedom and democracy.³⁰

Potrer Diampuan writes cited convergence and divergence of these two revolutions, she observes, Iran's revolution has constantly and consistently claimed that it is Islamic or religious in nature. On the other hand, Philippine People Power Revolution was a struggle to bring back democracy to the country. Islam and democracy are two ideologies that are certainly two differing systems of government and perspectives. The strength of religious leaders and church people become the powerful tools to call out to the people.³¹

Humanizing Bilateral Relations, Harnessing Human Potentials

After dissecting the early state of Philippine-Iran relations, it is then necessary to go further and look upon the current state of the two countries relations. In so doing and as mentioned several times in the early part of this article, Philippines and Iran need to look at the human side of the relationship rather than from the geostrategic and political side of their relations which, as mentioned above subjected to external interference. The non-official variable or the so-called track two diplomacy and so on and so forth, away from the radar of the state, may be more effective and may create more functional favor that will aid in the strengthening of relations in two countries.

Along with this, the paper proposes therefore to look at the following items below and work for their expansion to help enhance the bilateral relations of the Philippines and Iran, these items have already been initiated before and could be potentially expanded.

Academic Partnership with Universities

Academic partnership with universities in both countries would be the most effective channel in which bilateral relations between the Philippines and Iran can

²⁹ Sevilla, 2017: 12.

³⁰ Timberman, 1989; Mendoza, 2009.

³¹ Diampuan, 2017: 50.

be strengthened. The crucial role of the universities to provide an environment of knowledge suggests that University environment is the most neutral ground to foster these relationships. It is considered to be apolitical in nature and students are taught to have been truth seekers rather than being influence by their countries' political system. Unlike the official embassy to embassy ties which practice formalities and guard much of the state secrets, the university environment exposes the nakedness of engagements based on facts and research.

Having said these, the university to university relation since the late 1960s until today, remains to be the most neutral ground for the students of both countries to engage. Since the second half of the 1960 and towards the decade of 70 and up until present, the universities in the Philippines continue to accommodate Iranian students who are mostly enrolled in dentistry and engineering courses. In the same manner, few Filipinos have graduated in Iranian universities, making these Filipino graduates as critical element in promoting and strengthening bilateral relations. Among the Universities in the Philippine that cater to Iranian students, Centro Escolar University, University of the East, Mapua, University, Emilio Aguinaldo College, University of the Philippines, Manila Central University among others provided opportunity to Iranian students to study, whereas, Tehran University, Shahid Behesti University and some other theological schools in Qum, Iran accommodate Filipino students.

Share Values

It has been observed that in between the Filipino and Iranian culture, there are similarities that these two nations shared among themselves. One of them is being closed to the families and being religious. Although Iran is one of the cradles of civilizations and the Philippines is a product of western colonization, there are certainly common aspects of their culture that is share. Iran give high regards to the important role of women in their own society. Despite Western media and western governments accusation that Iranian women do not have rights in their own country, Iranian women enjoyed a relative degree of freedom as compared to other Arab countries in the greater Middle East and North African region. Iranian women are found in the local and national politics, in judiciary, in civil society, education, in media and other platforms and have exercises their legitimate rights to the highest level as compared to the Arab societies. The fact that Iranian women are seen in the street of Tehran and other cities in the country participating in various protests and other socio-civic and political relies is a good indicator that Iranian version of democracy recognizes Iranian women's participation in the nation-building. In the case of the Philippines, Filipino women are also strong and have demonstrated leadership role in various sectors of the Philippine society. The role that Filipino women played in the revolution of the past and during the People's power revolution in 1986 cannot be underestimated. Like Iranian women,

they are also seen actively playing in nation-building and their contribution their country is without doubt unprecedented.

One however, should understand how culture and religion made this two group of women differ from each other. Although each country recognizes the critical role of women in societal progress, women's groups in two countries shall not be analyzed using a western standard of values and preference in order to measure how efficient they perform in their own country.

Another shared values the two countries can compared from each other is probably the love of freedom they have for themselves. Despite different social and cultural context, the people of both countries are seen to have resisted Western colonialism and imperialism in the past. Many Filipino revolutionaries opposed colonization of Spain including that of the United States. These colonization had eroded to a greater degree the achievements of the pre-colonial Philippines. Iranian political thinkers and nationalist including the theological personalities in the current Islamic government have also resisted the western imperialism in their own land. Iran believes that the presence of the West in the Middle East region has contributed to the insecurity and political instability between and among regional powers as the West including the United States are believed to be employing the 'divide and rule' tactics to create misunderstanding between the Iranian and the Arab Middle East. The interference by the West particularly the United States is seen in Tehran as the act of the 'great Satan' that further divided the region.

Communities in Diaspora

As an expression of their love to their country, culture and fellowmen, the Iranians and Filipinos in diaspora seemed to organized themselves into an effective civil society groups or communities from time to time. Depending on the issues arise and immediate concerns, Filipinos in Iran particularly can flexibly regroup themselves to addressed immediate concerns.

This organization varies in forms and could be general and or specialized in nature. In both the Philippines and Iran, the Filipinos and Iranians have manifested their love to community in different ways. Their love to their country of origin, their culture and tradition, their concern towards their fellow nationals in the host countries, their love to serve marginalized communities, and their love to form a specialized association of professionals have all been manifested in the creation of various groupings. Some of these groups are formal groups while others are informal ones.

Below are the following groups that are present in both countries³²: Filipino-Irano Community, Pinay-Irano Family Community; Philippine- Iran Women's Group; Irano-Filipino Group; Philippine-Iran Cultural and Scientific Society, Inc. (PICSS), Manila; Philippine-Iran Friendship (Manila); Global Half Filipino-Iranian Association, Inc., Manila; Filipino-Persian Friends, Manila; UN Futsal, Manila; Iranian Calligrapher in the Philippines; and the Iranian-Filipino Friendship Ladies Group.

Iranian and Filipino students present in both countries

Another important non-political pillar of the Philippine-Iran bilateral relations are the Iranian and Filipino students. The mere fact that the Philippines is a major destination for the Iranian students who are either studying dentistry, engineering courses, among others since the past decades is a good indication that the two countries can harness these soft assets to promote bilateral ties.

It can be assumed that almost coincided with the sending of the Filipino Overseas Workers to Iran in the mid-1970s, the Philippine universities particularly in Metro Manila have already received Iranians to study specifically in the above-mentioned courses. The significance of these human resources cannot be underestimated as many of these students in the 1970s and 1980s have married Filipinas, hence creating a dynamic of hybrid family of Iranian-Filipinos that may have tremendous contribution in the coming years to strengthen relations.

In fact, if one would think of how to improve bilateral ties between these two countries, the governments must really need to invest on these human potentials. The Filipino-Irano families have also served as the countries cultural ambassadors and it can also be utilized as an important sector to advance trade and even political relations between the two countries. Given that many of them are professionals and have achieved their higher education in Philippine universities, the Philippine and Iranian governments must have double its effort to tap them to help improved relations.

Exhibition and language classes/Conferences

As part of wider dissemination of cultural and scientific knowledge of Iran in the Asia and the Pacific region including the Philippines, the Cultural Section of the Iranian Embassy in Manila has been actively organizing cultural and academic forums and conferences and exhibits in several places in the country especially in Metro Manila.

³² Please note that due to limited access of information, some groups that exist between in two countries may have not been included in the listing.

The purpose of these activities is dissemination of relevant knowledge, culture and arts of the Iranian nation to the wider audiences particularly to the University students who they believed to have been having a greater role to play in the promotion of relations between the two countries.

Iranian embassy tapped Iranian students to help them put up exhibits in their respective universities in Metro Manila. In addition, Iranian cultural section is also supporting conferences, for a or symposia to promote Iran to the Filipino audiences. Cultural exhibitions were spearheaded at the Asian Center University of the Philippines Diliman, Manila Central University, University of the East, Centro Scholar University, Luneta Park, University of Santo Tomas, among others. The Cultural Section of the Iranian Embassy in Manila has also supported the Persian Language classes at the University of the Philippines through the provision of a Persian lecturer to teach the course.

In several occasions, the Iranian embassy would invite Iranian artists from Iran to come to the Philippines and exhibits their works. Some Iranian musicians were also invited to perform in the capital's public places, therefore attracting Filipino audiences. The combination of cultural exhibit, language classes for free and organizing conferences about Iran in the other hand made Iran's public diplomacy successful albeit in limited extend. Although these activities encouraged some Filipino audiences to learn about Iranian people, culture, etc, the US negative propaganda about the Islamic Iran still greatly influence the general imagination of the Filipino audience about Iran. Hence, many things can still be done to eradicate this negative perception. As many Filipinos heard negative news and reports from BBC and CNN about Iran, the exhibits, language and conferences somehow change their imagery about that country. Moreover, the embassy and the host institutions are encouraged to engage public media in the Philippine to reach our wider Filipino public.

Medical missions and civic activities

Another area in which both governments can take advantage of is the Iranian students studying in the country. As mentioned through out the paper, Majority of the Iranian students are enrolled in dentistry and other medical related courses hence the knowledge they can learn from classrooms can be operationalized in terms of conducting outreach medical or dental program to marginalized members of the Philippine society. Many of these medical missions in the past are supported by the Philippine-Iran Scientific and Cultural Society as well as the Iranian embassy in Manila through its cultural section in partnership with the local government units, universities and non-governmental organizations.

Sports, Media and Entertainment diplomacy

Equally important area in which the two sides can benefit from each other is through media cooperation. It is very important that both sides should strive to work on improving their images through their respective media outlets. It may be through television, radio or new form of communication, media is without doubt create multiple opportunities for both countries. The ability of this technological platform to reach the northern and southern portion of their territories meant that media can help improve the images of both countries and peoples. Moreover, it is important that a good documentary films which carries positive narratives should be promoted in each other platforms. In addition, the Philippine and Iran can also take advantage of the second generation of Filipino-Iranian who are actively working in sports, journalism and entertainment industries.

Boasting Tourism Activities

The Philippines can also utilize its tourism industry to encourage Iranian tourists to come, visit and enjoy the Philippine archipelago. Thailand has so far been successful in terms of tourism business and if the Philippines is really serious about promoting the country to foreigners including people from the greater Middle East and North African region (MENA), tourism industry is one relevant area of cooperation.

Philippine government could encourage Filipinos to visit Iran and enjoy Iranian culture, people's hospitality as well as many of its civilizational remnants which are still visible until today. Iran's long history of civilization and its contribution to the world in the field of science, philosophy, arts, archeology, architecture, medicine, among others should be introduced to the Filipino people.

Through this, the experiences the Filipinos and Iranians can gain from each other though tourism activities are promisingly helpful in future cooperation. Moreover, tourism activities between two sides can also help minimize the political hindrances resulting from the US sanctions and media propaganda against the Islamic republic of Iran.

Conclusions

There is not denying that official bilateral relations between the Philippine and Iran in the post-Islamic revolution in 1970s has seen to be stagnant as the two countries are unable to seize the opportunities they could have offered towards each other. Even though both countries recognized their strategic values during the Cold War period as well as in the geopolitical transformation of Asian region in the post-Cold War time, they are simply unable to seize these opportunities. One may simply cite the political

forces structured in the international politics that driven them away from each other after their strategic bilateral relations in the pre-Iranian revolution. The structural forces of Cold War as well as the political development in Iran in the late 1970s were two determinant factors that defined the change in these relationships.

In the pre-Islamic Iran, the bilateral relation between these two countries was somewhat based on their complementary national necessities. Iran's liberalization couple with improving revenue from Petro-oil led the Shah's government to import foreign workers particularly the Filipinos to work in the medical, engineering and petroleum sectors. The improving economic life in Iran at that time complemented the call for improving quality services in which Filipino workers took advantage of.

From the Philippines side, Iran is an important supplier of crude oil and a relevant player in the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) apart from among the first country to receive Overseas Filipino Workers in the Middle East and North African region.

The fact that Iran is placed among in the first three biggest suppliers of oil and gas in the OIC is crucial indication that the Philippine government could not ignore at that time. Moreover, Iran's positive reception of Filipino workers in the pre-1979 Islamic revolution had created an opportunity for the Philippine government to export its workers to Iran. In short both countries complementarily took advantage of what they could offer to one another.

The strength of their pre-Islamic revolution bilateral relations was mainly cemented by their alliance with the United States. Both countries were important allies of the US in their respective regional corridors and both countries formed part of the imaginary wall that was created during the Cold War to prevent the southward advancement of the Soviet Union. The alliance with the United States during the Cold War period allowed Iran monarchy and the Philippine government to also make strong security and intelligence cooperation with each other.

This article however is based on the argument that despite the existence of a realistic structure that defines the behavior and level of engagement between state actors in international politics especially during the Cold War and beyond, the two countries are unable to maximally utilize their respective soft power elements to improve these relations. The soft power element namely, human potentials, share history, among others did not came out as important variables in mending bilateral relations in Iran post-Islamic years.

Although recently, both countries recognized these soft power elements, there have been simply lack of initiatives from both sides on how to utilize them and make them into a transformative force to improve their bilateral relations. The marginalization of such interests is somewhat attributed to the lack of knowledge from each other's history and peoples as well as the political pressure of the United States.

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