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John Linantud

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Cover Page Footnote

John Linantud is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Houston Downtown.

China, Rebalance, and the “Silent War”

Building upon select facets of Victor Corpus' *Silent War*, the goal of this paper is to reintroduce strategic analysis and political geography to the study of nationalist-leftist insurgencies in the Philippines, a field that has been dominated by the developmental paradigm since the 1980s. To reintroduce strategic analysis, this paper assumes that the standard endgame of government counterinsurgency is to eradicate or neutralize guerilla threats to the state, while the endgame of insurgents is regime change, i.e. to seize the capital city and create a new system of government. To advance strategic analysis beyond national-level variables, this paper employs geopolitics, defined as the intersection of political geography and the international balance of power.¹ Geopolitics is normally limited to grand strategies, diplomacy, and other great powers' interactions. However, in small and relatively weak states that are most vulnerable to great power wars, geopolitical conflicts may disrupt territories and capital cities like a storm, leaving behind a trail of destruction, dislocation, and new regimes. This paper therefore tracks how changes in the geopolitical center of gravity, defined as the physical locus of conflict among the great powers in East and Southeast Asia, have impacted Philippine insurgencies.

The impact of geopolitics on guerilla wars depends on two layers of Philippine geography. The first, external, layer is best defined by contrast to the now-defunct state of South Vietnam. Similar to South Vietnam, the Philippines is relatively narrow from east to west, but very long from north to south, which seems to create a comparable national territory to be contested by governments and insurgents. Unlike South Vietnam, however, the Philippines has no land borders (as long as the claim to Malaysian Sabah remains null) that could be exploited by hostile actors at home or abroad. This first layer would be even more robust if allied forces

were to help Manila interdict enemy air and sea-borne incursions, a role that has played to the comparative strengths of the U.S. military since 1945.

The second, internal, layer combines the sheer size and the archipelagic structure of the national territory. The distance between northern Luzon and southern Mindanao, the two largest islands, is tantamount to that between Canada and Georgia in North America, and is fractured by mountains, valleys, lakes, and seas. This dimension has historically degraded the ability of Manila, which is located at the foot of Central Luzon, to govern the entire country. By the same token, it has limited the capacity of insurgents outside Central Luzon to threaten the capital city.²

The primary argument of this paper is that geopolitics has shaped the strategic endgames and options available to Philippine insurgents and counterinsurgents dating back over a century. During the Spanish-American and Second World Wars, the geopolitical center of gravity passed over Central Luzon and resulted in the regime changes in Manila sought by contemporary insurgents. Since 1945, the geopolitical center of gravity has bypassed Luzon, which has created a tremendous advantage for Manila and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and made it easier for counterinsurgents to neutralize the Hukbalahap (Huks) in the 1950s and contain the New People's Army (NPA) to outer provinces since the 1960s. In the present day, the regional focus of geopolitics has shifted to China and the South China Sea; however an analysis of the current situation, again based on political geography, indicates that China has little reason to invade Central Luzon, even in the event of war over disputed islands. Moreover, communist insurgent zones are not close enough to Manila to force the guerillas into the new strategic considerations of China, the United States, or the Philippines. These factors make it unlikely that China will seek to rekindle its Vietnam-era alliance with the NPA in the near future. To explore this idea, this paper shall proceed as follows: the next section provides a review of the

conventional literature on the NPA, followed by a review of the recent history of insurgencies in a geopolitical context. This paper then offers an examination of China and the NPA today, followed by some concluding thoughts.

Literature Review

Victor Corpus' *Silent War* (1989) is a seminal work for several overlapping reasons that, as a whole, provide an alternative to the scholarship that has defined the study of communist insurgency in the Philippines since the late 1980s. The first reason is *Silent War's* intellectual and practical lineage to the Huk Rebellion of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The Huk Rebellion was an early, and influential, case study in Counterinsurgency (COIN), a transnational field of inquiry that originated in the early Cold War. Since then COIN has endeavored to produce both theoretical and applied components for consideration and implementation by scholars, governments, and their allies throughout the world. Since 2001, the study and practice of counterinsurgency have focused on the Middle East.³

The early COIN literature included works by Filipino Napoleon Valeriano, and Americans Charles Bohannon and Edward Lansdale, all of whom participated in counterinsurgency against the Huks.⁴ These authors recognized the legitimacy of insurgent grievances against abuses of power and economic inequities, but opposed the Huk endgame of communist-led revolution organized by a new regime in Manila. The core lesson of the Huk case, which is one that has permeated COIN to the present day, is that counterinsurgents should aim to disconnect vulnerable communities from insurgents politically, without transforming guerilla zones into militarized wastelands or middle-class utopias. In the Philippines, charismatic defense minister and president, Ramon Magsaysay, personified the campaign to produce tangible solutions to local problems, through purges of abusive soldiers and officials, cleaner elections,

amnesties, redistributions of land, and resettlements. Such actions drained popular support for the Huks and legitimized the military option against them. By the early 1950s, counterinsurgents had won their endgame, defined as the defeat of Huk capabilities to invade Manila.⁵

Victor Corpus' blend of practice and scholarship makes *Silent War* the NPA-era counterpart to Valeriano, Bohannon and Lansdale. Corpus began a military career in the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in the mid-1960s, defected to the NPA in 1970, then surrendered to the government in the mid-1970s. After the EDSA I overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986,⁶ Corpus rejoined the AFP and published *Silent War*.⁷

Consistent with COIN and the Huk literature, in *Silent War* Corpus acknowledged the communist movement's grievances, but opposed their endgame of seizing Manila and pursuing a social revolution. What separates Corpus from the Huk literature is timing. The Huk Rebellion became a case study after and because the insurgents were neutralized. By contrast, *Silent War* appeared in 1989, when the communists appeared to be growing stronger, and when the veneer of triumph around the Huk Rebellion could be deemed both outdated and premature. In that new context, Corpus used the adjective "silent" to describe the political and socioeconomic reforms that must again "dig out the root causes" of the rebellion.⁸

The second alternative viewpoint offered by *Silent War*, however, is Corpus' intent to balance the condemnation of "root causes" against the government mandate to neutralize the guerillas. *Silent War* appeared alongside Richard Kessler's *Rebellion and Repression in the Philippines* (1989) and Gregg Jones' *Red Revolution: Inside the Philippine Guerilla Movement* (1989).⁹ These two books promulgated a developmental interpretation of the insurgency that posited a zero-sum game between the advances of nation-building and the political capital of the guerillas.

Like COIN, developmentalism began as an early Cold War approach to understand and solve the problems of newly independent countries considered vulnerable to communism. The basic hypothesis of the developmental perspective regarding insurgency can be summarized as follows: if socioeconomic gains, a middle class, and good governance take hold, then leftist insurgency will wither away. This line of thinking is far more comprehensive and ambitious than COIN. Whereas COIN focuses on defending the capital city, developmentalism focuses on social transformation. The latter's derivative explanation of rebellion as a reaction to corruption and economic disparities continues to have influence. In 2015, a U.S. State Department spokesperson famously linked the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria to "root causes" of economic underdevelopment.¹⁰ In the Philippines case, Francisco Domingo's 2013 review of the literature indicates that the developmental approach has dominated scholarship on the NPA.¹¹

Of course, no one should ignore the correlation between the twin facts of insurgency and subpar nation-building in the Philippines. Presently, the NPA is the sole leftist guerilla army still active in the five states that created the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967. In late 2015, the *Philippine Star* reported a total NPA force of 4,000 guerillas.¹² Likewise, the Philippines trails many other nations in socioeconomic indicators. In the United Nations *Human Development Index*, it ranks 115th of 188 countries, well behind fellow ASEAN co-founders Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, and slightly behind Indonesia.¹³

Developmentalism, nevertheless, has limitations. As early as 1973, Chalmers Johnson argued that scholars had become too complacent with the idea that the presence of revolutionary movements proves the existence of "bad governments." To paraphrase Johnson, this research line could rationalize, but not explain, why so many alienated people in the developing world chose violent over non-violent struggle.¹⁴

After nearly five decades of internal war, this paper takes the Johnson critique of developmentalism in a different direction. Rather than challenge the argument that the Philippines, like any nation, could benefit from cleaner government and higher standards of living, this paper seeks to revisit the rival endgames of Manila and insurgents, and assumes that a final resolution, if it occurs, will not depend solely on socioeconomic progress defined by developmental variables. After all, if abuse of authority and inequalities alone were sufficient to enhance insurgent power, then the NPA should have posed more of a threat to take Manila. This paper instead asks why the NPA has failed to capture Manila, rather than why it originally appeared and continues to exist.

The problem is that the post-EDSA I research on the NPA has tended to ignore or distort this question. In 1989, Jones introduced his otherwise realistic book as a "case study of the inner workings of one of the most *successful* (emphasis added) communist revolutionary movements existing in the world today."¹⁵ Likewise, Kessler began by describing the NPA as the "last great Communist-led peasant rebellion in Asia," and concluded that it posed "the most serious challenge the Filipino elite has ever faced."¹⁶ More recently, Holden wrote "The endurance of this conflict also reveals the continuing existence of an armed communist revolutionary movement in a world that has embraced the hyper-capitalist ideology of neoliberalism and has (supposedly) long since forsaken communism."¹⁷

Using these statements as context, it is easier to understand why Filipino political scientist Alexander Magno noted a "politically correct" bias within the prevailing literature.¹⁸ For the moment, it is suffice to observe that framing of this kind has downgraded the definition of the guerilla endgame from the traditional and oft-stated goal of taking power in Manila, to the less ambitious tasks of political and military resistance against a regime seen to be unjust.

Likewise, the literature has tended to disregard the strategic importance of political geography. Again, *Silent War* is the exception to the rule. Throughout the book, Corpus explains the importance of both terrain and local social relationships to the AFP and the NPA. Recently, Rosalie Hall published a case study of Panay Island.¹⁹ In addition, Holden's study of Samar Island argues that difficult terrain has hampered economic development and facilitated insurgency.²⁰

Whenever *national* geography is discussed in the literature, the gap between *Silent War* and the developmental viewpoints reappears. Corpus takes seriously the intent of the NPA to capture Manila, but he argues that the distance and waters between it and NPA fronts in northern Luzon, the middle islands known as the Visayas, including Iloilo and Samar, and the southern region known as Mindanao, protect the capital from the guerillas. Corpus nonetheless recalls the Cold War victories of guerillas in China and Vietnam, and warns that the safety of Manila provides a false sense of security to the regime and the apparent option to tolerate the insurgents, which permits distant counterinsurgents to engage in lax and abusive practices that sustain the communist movement.²¹ By contrast, Kessler repeats NPA leader Jose Sison's argument that the distance between guerilla fronts and Manila gives insurgents the advantage, because it provides sanctuaries and time to build a Maoist campaign of encirclement against the capital city.²² Until now, the geographical separation of the capital region from insurgent fronts described by both Corpus and Kessler in 1989 remains largely intact (see below).

This long conflict between Manila and the NPA has therefore produced twin stalemates. One involves the impasse on the ground: Manila has not eradicated the insurgency, and insurgents have not taken Manila. The second concerns the analytical separation between COIN and the developmental paradigm. The latter, in particular, has essentially redefined the

insurgency as a social and political movement rather than a military confrontation that could, in theory, drive the country toward civil war and perhaps regime change.

These stalemates lead to the third way in which *Silent War* provides an alternative to conventional wisdom. In his discussion of geography, Corpus writes:

Another disadvantage...from the rebels' viewpoint, is the vast ocean separating the Philippines from other countries where they can possibly obtain material and arms support, such as China or Vietnam. The situation would have been a lot different if the Philippines had common borders with other countries with different social systems.²³

In 2012, Corpus returned to the subject of decisive external intervention as he recalled the notorious interception by the AFP of an NPA ship carrying Chinese arms off northeast Luzon in 1972. Corpus himself reportedly led the guerilla unit that was supposed to meet the boat returning from China. Had the NPA offloaded the full cache of weapons, speculated Corpus, “We would have a different form of government by now.”²⁴ Corpus' assertion suggests the importance of geopolitics to the insurgent endgame. Likewise, Mark Moyer's 2013 review of COIN identifies foreign sanctuaries and support for guerillas a two of several key variables that must be taken into account to understand and practice counterinsurgency.²⁵ Yet the Philippines literature has not consistently accounted for geopolitics in a consistent fashion. Even *Silent War* abandons the issue after the above quote.

The neglect of geopolitics thus creates a long overdue opportunity to build new knowledge about the NPA and the AFP. To begin, the utility of geopolitics as an analytical tool for the study of guerilla wars is more consistent with the history of victorious insurgents in Cold War Asia, including those cited by Corpus, than the choice to study insurgencies as solely national or social events. Leftist guerillas in China and Vietnam seized power in the context of wrenching changes in international relations and interventions by foreign governments.

Moreover, as implied by Corpus, the new regimes founded by guerillas in China and Vietnam intervened in other wars in support of allies, including in Korea and Indochina.

Geopolitics is also necessary to comprehend present-day Afghanistan, the Arab world, and Ukraine. In these cases, interventions by the United States, Russia, and others have again belied the analytical separation of international and national conflicts. American actions in the Muslim world since 2001, for example, have produced regime changes in capital cities (but not optimal levels of political stability) that pre-existing insurgents and separatists had proved unable to attain by themselves. Finally, geopolitics fits the preoccupation with China as a rising power in Southeast Asia. During the Cold War, Mao Zedong's revolutionary government supported People's Wars across the developing world, and the NPA. Would China intervene again?

Geopolitics and Central Luzon, 1898-1991

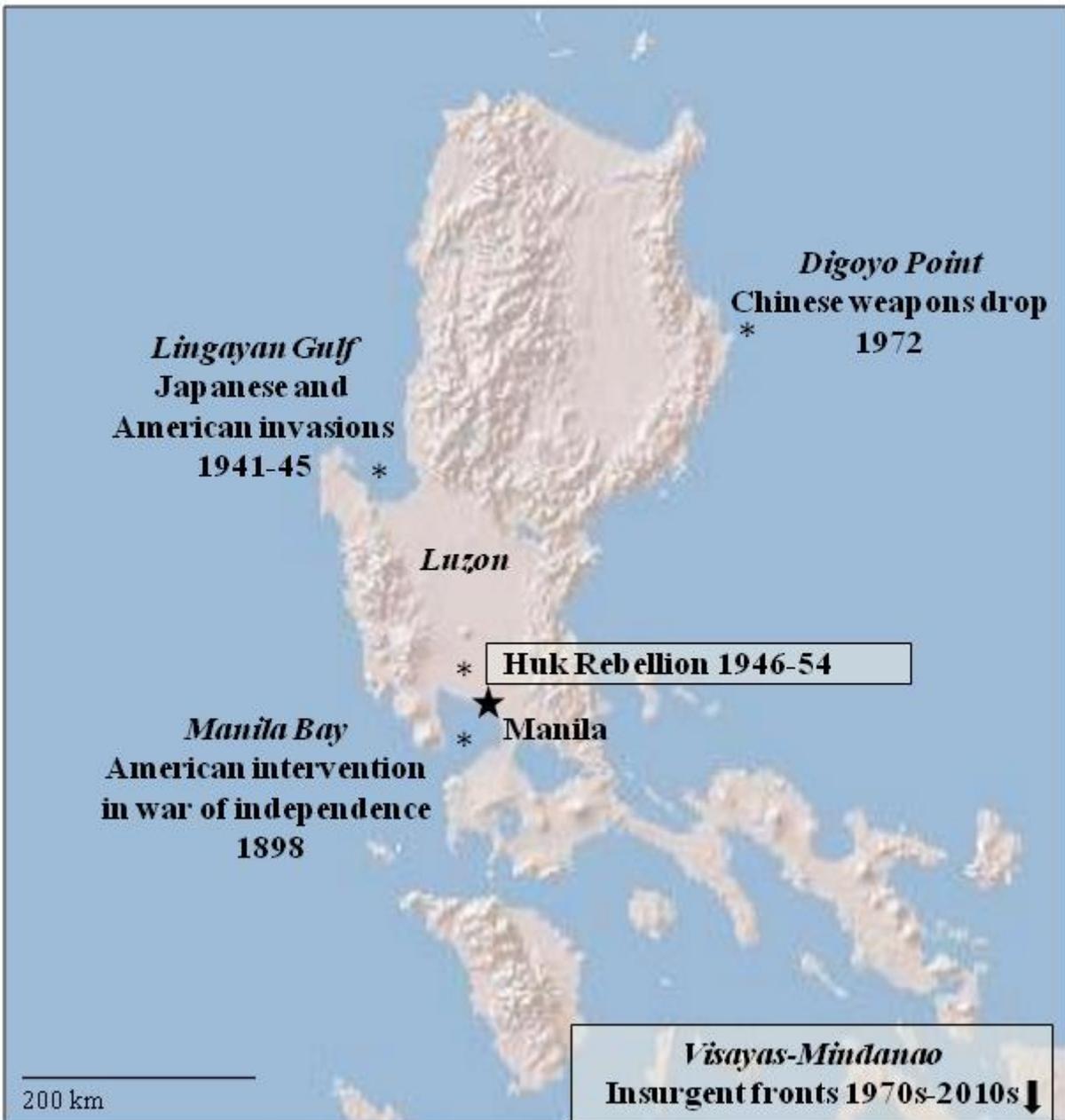
To put this question in perspective, it is necessary to review the recent history of Philippine insurgencies and their relationships with geopolitical events. The bulk of nationalist and leftist guerillas since the 1890s share several important characteristics that make them appropriate to this method of analysis. One factor that links the armies that fought against Spain, the United States, and Japan during the years of 1898 to 1945, to the Huks of the 1940s and 1950s and the NPA since the 1960s, is their geographic origins on Central Luzon. Second, each aimed to defeat Manila and create a new regime. Third, all fought against imperialism or perceived foreign domination. The initial two factors in particular distinguish them from Muslim separatism, which originated in Mindanao in the late 1960s, and seeks autonomy or outright independence. Separatism has also exacted a toll on the country, but this paper concentrates on nationalist-leftist guerillas for analytical clarity.

Luzon inside the Geopolitical Center of Gravity: 1898-1945

The geopolitical center of gravity passed over Central Luzon during the Spanish-American War and the Second World War. In both conflicts, political authorities in Manila were forced to fight two-front wars, and eventually lost power to foreign invaders that forced the regime changes desired by contemporary insurgents or anti-regime factions. Before the American intervention in 1898, Spanish forces had pushed insurgents northward from Manila, from where Emilio Aguinaldo left for exile in Hong Kong. The U.S. then transported Aguinaldo back to the country, and armed the nationalists to continue the fight against Spain. After Spanish Manila surrendered to the U.S., Americans and Nationalists fought each other. Interestingly, the subsequent Philippine-American War reversed the trajectory of a People's War. Nationalists initially fought the U.S. Army around the capital, and then reformed into smaller units farther afield. As the fighting became less conventional, the insurgent threat receded and collaborative leaders emerged in Manila.²⁶

Japan had already seized Formosa (Taiwan) in 1895, but did not intervene on behalf of the Nationalists in the Philippine-American War. After the establishment of the Commonwealth, capital factions generally engaged in politics rather than insurgency, under the shadow of future independence negotiated for 1946. Some political movements however, including the Sakdals of Luzon in the 1930s, did communicate with Japan. Only at the start of the Second World War did the Japanese invasion replace the Commonwealth with a new regime that empowered leaders known for opposition to American rule. That new government held power only until the U.S. and anti-Japanese guerillas recaptured Manila in 1945.²⁷

Figure 1 - Luzon Island and Manila



Map adapted from National Geographic’s MapMaker Interactive-Terrain Map. 10 November 2015 <<http://mapmaker.education.nationalgeographic.com/>>

It is instructive to observe that the new regimes described above struggled to govern the national territory, a geography-based problem that has remained a consistent problem until today.

After the pacification of Central Luzon during the Philippine-American War, complicated armed struggles continued across the archipelago.²⁸ During the Second World War, Japanese forces failed to eradicate legions of guerillas which fought in Luzon, the Visayas, and Mindanao.²⁹ Likewise, returning allied forces strained to account for recalcitrant Japanese. Again foreshadowing the NPA, armed struggle or resistance alone did not necessarily pose a threat to the capital city. For example, the last known Japanese combatant surrendered in the 1970s. While this might be a dramatic story, it is hardly the strategic equivalent of the 1940s defeat of Japan.³⁰

Luzon outside the Geopolitical Center of Gravity, 1946-1991

After the Second World War, the geopolitical center of gravity did not remain in the same place, but rather lurched between China, Korea, and Indochina (Figure 2). The newfound isolation of the Philippines had three general effects on nationalist-insurgent conflicts. First, it deprived insurgents of the opportunity to ally with or benefit from decisive foreign interventions against Manila. Second, it granted Manila the time and space to wage one-front rather than two-front wars against communist insurgents and foreign allies. Third, it afforded Filipinos from all sides the opportunity to address relevant problems relatively free from “great power” interventions. All of these factors have made it easier for counterinsurgents to defeat the Huks and contain the NPA.

Huk Rebellion

The Huk Rebellion originated among communist-led guerillas in wartime Luzon who again rebelled after national independence in 1946. As described above, savvy counterinsurgents, personified by Ramon Magsaysay, eventually defeated the Huk endgame via reforms and military actions during the by-election of 1951, the presidential election of 1953 (won by

Magsaysay), and the surrender of Huk commander Luis Taruc in 1954. Some guerillas remained in the field until the 1960s, when they were usurped by the NPA (see below).

American intervention against the Huks was minimal and foreign intervention for the Huks virtually non-existent. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Marshall Plan diverted U.S. resources from Asia; within the ranks of American allies in Asia, the primary role of the Philippines was to support the projection of U.S. hard power from west Luzon. This capability remained intact provided the Subic Bay naval base in Olongapo, and Clark airbase in Angeles, remained secure. Furthermore, at the peak of the Huk insurgency, the U.S. was too preoccupied with the occupation of Japan and the Korean War to provide more than advisers and relatively minor aid to Manila.³¹ This may explain why the guerillas did not target American military despite the proximity of Clark and Subic to Huk strongholds in Central Luzon.

For the Soviet Union, the burgeoning U.S. sphere of influence in Northeast Asia and the French regime in Indochina posed far more immediate problems than the Philippines. Had the Soviets intended to prioritize the Huks, they did not possess the hard power capabilities to challenge U.S. and Filipino forces in Central Luzon. The Soviets had executed amphibious operations against Japan at the close of the Second World War, but a new maritime campaign on behalf of the Huks would needlessly play into U.S. strengths as an air and sea power, at a time when Korea was exposing U.S. limitations as a land power in Asia.³² In that context Thomas Dewey, the Republican governor of New York, visited the Philippines in 1951. Dewey noted only "strange" submarines and underground "Stalin Universities" in Manila – a relatively weak Soviet profile.³³

President Elpidio Quirino also told Governor Dewey:

Before his death our great President Manuel Quezon, looking into the future, prophesied that our next menace was from the Chinese. Of course, he was thinking of our underdeveloped islands and the Chinese hunger for land. He didn't foresee the tragedy of a Communist China, but his prophecy has been borne out all too soon. Our country is on the *perimeter* (emphasis added) of the Pacific and we see the danger face to face.³⁴

President Quirino's concern over China is clear. At the time, Chinese infantry were establishing China as an Asian land power, fighting to liberate North Korea from foreign occupation and threaten South Korea. In Indochina, Dien Bien Phu and the Ho Chi Minh Trail would later prove China's abilities regarding overland supply. However, at the time China's limited air and sea capabilities created hard power deficits regarding the Philippines even more pronounced than Russia's.

Despite this geopolitical isolation, the Huks mounted a greater threat to the capital than ever existed from the NPA. The first precipitant factor, one virtually impossible for the NPA to duplicate, was historical timing. Similar to revolutionaries in Russia and China, the Huks targeted a state that had been weakened by wars and invasions, and had just become independent. These problems created an opportunity for guerillas to simultaneously exploit post-war recovery and the political transition to full sovereignty.³⁵

The second factor was political geography. In terms of location, Huklandia centered on Taruc's home province of Pampanga on Manila Bay, which in the late 1940s and early 1950s hovered over Manila, full of armed supporters poised to march on the capital. In terms of topography, Central Luzon also consists of narrow flatlands – a natural invasion route – connecting Lingayan Gulf to the capital. In the prior war, Japanese and U.S. invaders had themselves marched to the capital from Lingayan. Huklandia thus controlled a proven gateway to

Manila. In the worst-case, two-front scenario for the regime, the Huks would join forces with a foreign invader like guerillas had joined the U.S. against the Japanese just several years earlier. As a result, Manila had no option but to address and eventually resolve the turmoil in Central Luzon.

The last years of the Huk Rebellion also demonstrate the difference between insurgent survival and strategic power that would later characterize the NPA. It is often said that mountains provide the advantage to guerillas. In the Huk case, the ranges of Luzon provided sanctuary, but only in the context of strategic defeat in the plains outside Manila. Consider the experiences of American Huk William Pomeroy. When Pomeroy joined the Huks in 1950, they had begun to relocate from Central Luzon to the Sierra Madre of Rizal province east of Manila.³⁶ As counterinsurgency succeeded, the Huks regrouped along provincial boundaries subject to divided government authority over militia, like Mount Arayat along the Pampanga-Nueva Ecija provincial border. The Huks would have possessed stronger options for sanctuary and foreign aid had Arayat straddled interstate borders similar to those between China and Korea, China and Indochina, and the Indochinese states.

New People's Army

The NPA originated in Central Luzon and declared itself active in early 1969, a week after Mao Zedong's birthday.³⁷ It debuted in the interval between two geopolitical landmarks – the Tet Offensive of 1968 and the enunciation of the Nixon Doctrine or "Guam Declaration" in 1969 – that augured well for insurgents across the region. Communist parties already ruled mainland China, Mongolia, North Korea, North Vietnam, and the Soviet Union. It felt as if the U.S. was falling, hence China and the Soviet Union must be rising, so Philippine revolutionaries

seemed to possess a legitimate opportunity to achieve what the Huks could not, especially if the United States withdrew ground forces from the region.

Figure 2

Major Conflicts Since 1945



Map adapted from National Geographic's MapMaker Interactive-Terrain Map. 23 November 2015 <<http://mapmaker.education.nationalgeographic.com/>>

The confidence of the NPA was matched by fear of China in Manila. Echoing Quirino in 1951, President Ferdinand Marcos stated in 1969:

There is not a single country in Asia – whether Japan, India, Indonesia, or any other – capable of balancing the military power of Communist China, either alone or together. There is still a need for a U.S. defense umbrella over all of Asia.³⁸

In response to President Richard Nixon's intent to withdraw American ground forces, Marcos declared, "If there should ever be any attempt to subvert our free institutions and our republic...the Philippines can stand alone, can fight alone and win alone."³⁹ The leader of the opposition to Marcos, Senator Benigno Aquino, also regarded China as important. In 1970 he predicted:

The next step in the Philippines is going to be open guerilla warfare, along the Algerian pattern. The only thing holding this back has been China's failure to take more interest in this country; the Chinese apparently calculate that involvement in countries like Vietnam, Thailand and Burma is more rewarding at present. The moment they decide the Philippines is strategically very important, the situation will be very different.⁴⁰

Like Marcos, Aquino anticipated the escalation of internal war:

But the local boys here are not going to wait till the Chinese change their attitude. There will be no national upheaval; there is no need for any; the revolution in the Philippines will begin and end in Manila; whoever rules Manila rules the Philippines.⁴¹

Manila, however, had several advantages over the NPA. The nation had been sovereign for a generation, and the AFP had gained experience in Central Luzon, Korea and Vietnam. Nor would a withdrawal of American troops reduce Manila's strategic options, because counterinsurgency did not rely on American infantry. Within a few years after Nixon's declaration, the AFP actually pushed the NPA from Huk legacies in Central Luzon towards north Luzon, the Visayas, and Mindanao.⁴²

Nonetheless, the 1971 by-elections acquired a crisis tone similar to the 1951 polls of the Huk era. Two main differences between the elections are notable. First, whereas 1951 had taken place in geopolitical isolation, in 1971 China had promised to deliver arms to the NPA. There are

several reasons for the China-NPA military alliance at this time. The demonstration effects of the Chinese Civil War, Korea, and Indochina, and the soft power appeal of Mao Zedong, inspired Maoist revolutionaries across the developing world. In addition, the Sino-Soviet conflict generated competition among the two states for influence in third countries. As long as Mao ruled (he died in 1976), Beijing would sponsor People's Wars as much as practicable, especially in regions like Southeast Asia that to Beijing lay within China's rightful sphere of influence. In 1971, Sison therefore reassured a cadre ordered to train in China: "Don't worry... We will see each other in five years' time. It will be very easy to make the crossings."⁴³ With the options related to Chinese assistance multiplying, Sison also judged that the insurgency required a provocation to destabilize the campaign season, and recruit fighters to use the weapons expected from overseas. The guerillas thus executed a bombing in August 1971 against an opposition rally in Manila.⁴⁴ Other insurgent and partisan incidents claimed 905 deaths nationwide before the November elections, by far the highest reported total between 1965 and 1998.⁴⁵

The second difference with 1951 was that geopolitical uncertainties sustained the crisis atmosphere after the elections. The scholarship on Marcos often attributes martial law to his self-interest. Yet in February 1972, President Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong shook hands in Beijing. Perhaps the U.S. really would sacrifice Manila? In March, Marcos ordered the constabulary to seize control of Cavite from provincial authorities. The move helped a local ally of Marcos, but it also brought a modicum of order to a strategic province on Manila Bay that was enduring a wave of partisan and criminal violence.⁴⁶ In July, the NPA tried to offload the aforementioned Chinese-supplied weapons at Digoyo Point. All these events pointed to a possible two-front war. Marcos' proclamation of martial law in September 1972 indeed stated that the NPA had been receiving supplies from China through the summer.⁴⁷ In January 1974,

the second known NPA boat planning to collect Chinese weapons ran aground off northwest Luzon.⁴⁸

As described by Jones, the NPA of the early 1970s planned to cultivate the rugged mountains of Luzon north of Manila as their equivalent of Mao Zedong's liberated zone in Yan'an, which became a staging point for insurgent victory over the Nationalists on the Chinese mainland.⁴⁹ Indeed, the locations of the two known Chinese weapons-ship incidents off north Luzon indicate quite clearly that China intended to fortify NPA units in the Sierra Madre and Central Cordillera for a campaign against Central Luzon that would advance, kilometer-by-kilometer, towards Manila.

Rather than staging areas for victory, these mountains became places of refuge. Since the 1960s, Manila had enhanced its strategic defenses by investing in roads that dissected Huk legacies like Pampanga, and facilitated government maneuverability between Manila and Lingayan. North of Central Luzon, the marquee Pan-Philippine Highway separated the Central Cordillera from the Sierra Madre, and then turned west and south to encircle the tip of northwest Luzon. The NPA, even with Chinese weapons, was therefore vulnerable to Luzon's newly interconnected roads and the mechanized capabilities of the AFP.

Recall, moreover, that during the Philippine-American War Emilio Aguinaldo was captured in the northern Sierra Madre *after the retreat* from Manila. Likewise, in the early Cold War, Huk remnants regrouped atop Mount Arayat as they were defeated in the Central Luzon plains. A similar fate befell Jose Sison, who was captured in northwest Luzon in 1977.⁵⁰

The geopolitical center of gravity shifted even farther away from Central Luzon during the Third Indochina War in the 1970s and 1980s. That war commenced after Soviet ally Vietnam invaded Cambodia in late 1978, replaced the Khmer Rouge regime allied with China, and fought

a long counterinsurgent war against the again-insurgent Khmer Rouge and its allies. On the map of Southeast Asia, Thailand thus became the new front-line state against Vietnam. In response, China realigned its foreign policy to support the Khmer Rouge and ASEAN against Vietnam, Laos, and the Soviet Union. In its new role, China essentially abandoned the NPA, but continued the old practice of supply to allies in regional wars. Similar to the Sihanouk Trail of the Vietnam War, China had offloaded material for the Khmer Rouge on the Gulf of Thailand in the 1970s, the same decade as its known military shipments to the NPA. But China avoided conventional battles against the Soviet navy and Vietnamese air force as that war unfolded, which again suggests how difficult it would have been for it to sustain decisive weapons deliveries for the NPA against allied protection of the Philippines.⁵¹

The NPA delegation to China atrophied after the 1974 weapons failure.⁵² With the China option exhausted, the NPA had no choice but to exploit the internal deterioration of the Marcos regime as much as possible. Between 1984 and 1985, overall guerilla forces may have doubled from ten to twenty thousand, but insurgents could not rebuild Huk strongholds in Central Luzon.⁵³ Even worse, EDSA I rebooted the country's democratic identity and institutions at the expense of violent revolution, and deprived the communists of the (albeit) slim chance to join an unelected, post-Marcos coalition government (since the 1990s, they have participated in party-list elections). Freed by President Corazon Aquino, Jose Sison moved to Holland. Since then, the movement has proved able to extract funds from international sources, including Europe and relief agencies.⁵⁴

In retrospect, at no phase of the Marcos or Aquino Eras – from the elected regime of the 1960s, to martial law of the 1970s, or the authoritarian decay, democratic restoration, and military unrest of the 1980s – did insurgents pressure Manila like the Huks. To celebrate its

twentieth anniversary in 1989, the communist party nonetheless predicted victory "within the next ten years," and claimed an army of thirty thousand insurgents."⁵⁵ At first glance an NPA force of that size would indeed trump the high estimate of twenty thousand Huks of the early 1950s.⁵⁶ In statistical terms, however, a Huk force of that size created a ratio of 1.0 guerillas for every 1,000 Filipinos in 1950, while an NPA force of thirty thousand in 1989 created a ratio of just 0.5 guerillas for every 1,000 Filipinos.⁵⁷

The containment of post-EDSA I guerillas outside Central Luzon further belies the impression of such statistics, and points to a real irony in the communist endgame. The NPA has formally stayed true to the original goals of regime change and national revolution, but its most tangible achievements concern de facto political and geographic separatism wherein guerillas levy taxes and dispense their own justice. Even if the communist movement were to establish a hypothetical, sovereign People's Republic of Negros, only institutions with a national mandate – like the AFP and Catholic Church – would be obligated to take notice. Authorities and activists from Manila and other provinces, from congress people, governors, mayors, and police chiefs to non-government organizations, could carry on more or less as usual in their respective bailiwicks. When geography is taken into account, the NPA therefore appears to be the *other* separatist army in the Philippines along with Muslim guerillas.

The only sustained attempt by the NPA to seek new options and overcome geographic containment occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The goal was to stoke unrest in Manila via assassinations of counterinsurgents and police that would trigger urban revolution.⁵⁸ The timing of the campaign coincided with the military unrest against the Aquino government, and the tumultuous national elections that followed EDSA I. Interestingly, urban warfare and several killings of American personnel, coincided with a brief alliance with the Soviet Union.⁵⁹

According to Quimpo, Jose Sison visited Moscow in 1987.⁶⁰ Based on news reports, it appears that the alliance yielded a few notable incidents: Soviet warplanes based in Vietnam simulated attacking the Philippines;⁶¹ Soviet operatives were said to build tunnels in Manila near an AFP base, and provide arms to the NPA in the Visayas.⁶² In addition, the NPA assassinated several U.S. military personnel, including an adviser.⁶³ Communist operatives also tried to buy weapons from Soviet allies in Europe, Cuba, North Africa, and the Middle East, as well as North America and India.⁶⁴ At the same time, however, the post-EDSA I and now pro-Soviet NPA hierarchy began to succumb to internal disputes over ideology, leadership, and tactics that left it vulnerable then, and now, to government penetrations and internal purges.⁶⁵

Finally, the closure of American bases at Angeles and Olongapo in West Luzon in the early 1990s yielded no benefit to the guerillas. If the Soviet Union had not dissolved in 1991, of course, it is possible that Washington and Manila would have agreed to keep the bases open. Since the Huk era, however, the communist movement had contended that American bases posed an obstacle to their endgame. It was thought that if the Philippines lost American protection, then foreign allies could more easily intimidate Manila or assist the guerillas, and that American troops would not be available to defend the capital in an emergency. Against these assumptions, the disintegration of the Soviet Union nullified the strategic value of the American withdraw.

Luzon and China in the 21st Century

Were the geopolitical center of gravity to pass over Central Luzon in the twenty-first century, any national insurgency would be a liability to Manila, especially if guerillas possessed or created strongholds in Central Luzon. Manila would expect some measure of protection from allies, but it would again face a potential two-front war against insurgents and a foreign adversary(ies).

At present, however, the most active insurgent fronts are still concentrated in the Visayas and Mindanao. As evidence, consider a sample of reports that coincided with the state visit of President Barack Obama to the Philippines in April 2014. Between January and April, the Philippine Army published over 120 online news reports. Of the reports about the insurgency, the overwhelming majority took place in the Visayas and Mindanao.⁶⁶ In March, the AFP announced the capture in the Visayas of the Tiamzons, a senior leadership couple that had been profiled by the International Crisis Group.⁶⁷ In April, the online posts by a communist-affiliated website concentrated on the Visayas and Mindanao under the tabs "What's new @PRWC," "Latest postings," "CPP statements," "On Oplan Bayanihan," and "Children's Rights."⁶⁸ Shortly after the President Obama trip, the Army did report several incidents on Luzon, but they occurred at the extremities of the island, namely Sorsogon in the far south and several provinces in the far north.⁶⁹

In terms of the regional balance of power, the geographic containment of the NPA to fronts outside Central Luzon continues to provide relative security for Manila, which deprives the communist movement of strategic import to the region. For example, the 2014 summary assessment of the Philippines from Britain's International Institute for Strategic Studies, published the February before the President Obama trip, named the South China Sea and Muslim separatism as issues of concern, but not the NPA.⁷⁰ Likewise, the President Obama event did not yield specific mention of the NPA by Malacanang,⁷¹ the White House,⁷² or *Xinhua*.⁷³

The presidential trip was seen as part of the American rebalance or pivot to Asia. Today's wariness of China, however, originates from three events of the early 1990s: the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the abandonment by the U.S. military of Angeles and Olongapo, and the advent of China's maritime claims as a focus of regional geopolitics. Since then, the perceived

change in the balance of power in favor of China is based on its rhetoric, economic growth, and investments in power projection over air and sea, and intermittent, small-scale confrontations over disputed islands in the East and South China Seas. For skeptics, the perceived bellicosity of China belies its post-Cold War commitments to "peaceful rise" and non-interference in Southeast Asia. Of the territories disputed by China and the Philippines, Scarborough Shoal is located several hundred kilometers west of Luzon, and claims in the Spratlys cluster off Palawan to the far southwest.⁷⁴

Once again, international geography provides a caveat to alarmist thinking. Despite the changes described above, there remain not only significant distances between China and the Philippines, but also water. These two factors – distance and the sea –amplify what Charles Glaser has termed the "stopping power of water."⁷⁵ Granted, the Philippines does not possess a nuclear deterrent. However, since marine barriers reduce threats from conventional military capabilities, governments separated by oceans should be less paranoid and antagonistic toward each other. If bilateral China-Philippines relations develop in a rational manner, the waters of the South China Sea should continue to reduce the likelihood of hostile interventions by either state into the *undisputed territory* of the other, just as they stymied Mao Zedong's efforts to help the NPA in the early 1970s. It is also difficult to imagine any scenario in which China must fear or respond to a Philippine threat to the Chinese homeland. Of course, if Beijing does embark on further territorial expansion, which is by no means guaranteed, then the annexations of Scarborough Shoal or Taiwan would close the distance and water between Chinese territory and Luzon.

Nor has the South China Sea become the undisputed center of geopolitical gravity in the region at large. That distinction arguably still belongs to Northeast rather than Southeast Asia, in

particular the problems between and among China and Taiwan, Japan, and the two Koreas. Compared to Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia's flashpoints involve not only islands, sea lanes, and resources, but emotive disputes over national unifications and historical grievances. Depending on if and how certain of these disputes are resolved, several regimes in place today could disappear.

The communist endgame needs this scenario to apply to Manila, but the strategic weakness of the NPA, the stopping power of water, and the complex geopolitics of the region limit the chances that the South China Sea will escalate to the point where the insurgency becomes part of a broader conflict whose scope and destruction rivals 1941-1945, the last time the Philippines experienced wartime regime changes. True, China possesses the military capabilities to challenge AFP defense of Luzon, and to once again deliver light weapons and equipment to guerillas. But larger circumstances make a Chinese land invasion of Luzon, or even a resumption of its covert alliance with the NPA, unnecessary and unlikely.

First, in the best-case scenario, the maritime problems between the two governments would be resolved, or remain unresolved, without resort to open war. The disputes would unfold as they have to date, moving from one small-scale confrontation to the next, with minimal connection to Philippine insurgency or counterinsurgency. Second, in the worst-case scenario a full-blown international shooting war over Scarborough Shoal or the Spratlys would primarily test China's air and sea power (and perhaps cyber) against the United States and its local allies, including the Philippines. In the event of actual China-U.S. confrontation, however, the geopolitical center of gravity would probably not pass over Central Luzon like it did in the Second World War, but over the South China Sea. The same probability applies to a purely bilateral scenario that did not involve the United States. In either case, whether against an allied

coalition or the Philippines alone, China would not need the NPA to help it annex disputed islands, nor is the NPA currently in a position to invade the capital on behalf of China, sail into battle against the Philippine navy, or otherwise exert leverage over Manila to moderate or abandon its claims to Scarborough and the Spratlys.

The NPA may also be disinclined to strike a new, public alliance with China. Consider again the President Obama state visit of 2014. During the event, the communist party posted an article entitled, "US and China are both bullies seeking control of the South China Sea."⁷⁶ In addition, Philippine hacktivists associated with the Occupy movement broke into Chinese websites after a Chinese infiltration of the University of the Philippines that posted comments about a disputed island.⁷⁷

A third scenario must also be accounted for, even though it seems remote. At some future point, a hegemonic China might seek to become not only the guarantor of regional stability, but also the arbiter of internal conflicts. If so, then it might offer to help Manila *against* the NPA, perhaps the eliminate guerilla disruptions of economic activities in resource-rich regions like Mindanao. Manila, however, would not require Chinese aid if the NPA remains contained outside Central Luzon. Even if the NPA builds a stronghold outside the capital, direct Chinese intervention would not only expose Manila to charges of "lackeyism," but jeopardize the post-1945 tradition wherein the AFP conducts internal ground operations largely without external assistance.

Conclusion

This paper has reintroduced strategic analysis and political geography to the study of insurgencies in the Philippines. The primary argument of the paper is that national geography, and changes in the geopolitics of Southeast Asia, have and will continue to create the strategic

context for guerilla wars. On several occasions between 1898 and 1945, the geopolitical center of gravity passed over Central Luzon and caused the regime changes desired by contemporary insurgents. By contrast, after 1945 Central Luzon has stood along the perimeter rather than the center of regional conflicts, which has provided an advantage to Manila against the Huks and NPA. Since the late 1960s, the AFP has protected Central Luzon and contained NPA guerillas to outer regions. In the early twenty-first century, insurgent zones are therefore not close enough to Manila to force the NPA into the strategic equations of Philippine-China relations. Moreover, an international war in the South China Sea should not cause China to invade Luzon. These factors make it unlikely that China will intervene on behalf of the NPA in the foreseeable future.

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shielded mutinous soldiers from military units ordered by Marcos to put down the rebellion. Instead, many loyalists joined the mutiny, Marcos left for exile, and Aquino became president. EDSA I has been followed by other protests that occupied the same section of highway to force the removal of sitting presidents, including the successful EDSA II against Joseph Estrada, and the unsuccessful EDSA III against Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, both in 2001. The current president, Benigno Aquino III, was elected in 2010.

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