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November 29, 2011

The Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
2000 Navy Pentagon
Washington, DC 20350-2000

Dear Secretary Mabus:

I am writing in support of increased U.S.-Filipino maritime security cooperation.

As you know, China has been aggressively asserting “indisputable” sovereignty over as much as 90 percent of the South China Sea, one of the world’s most important trade routes. The United States has rightfully called for the peaceful resolution of these disputes, and has stood by its allies in the region to uphold a commitment to the freedom of navigation in these waters.

Chinese aggression has resulted in frequent maritime clashes between fishing and other vessels. On at least nine separate occasions this year alone, Chinese ships have fired live rounds at Filipino fishermen, severed Philippine oil survey cables, or harassed Philippine ships, sometimes merely miles from their coastline. Growing Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea has led Manila to seek Washington’s assistance in bolstering its maritime capabilities, including in training and combined exercises.

The transfer of U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Hamilton* (WHEC-715) to the Philippines earlier this year has been the most tangible aspect of U.S.-Filipino maritime security cooperation. One of the largest Excess Defense Article transfers ever, the U.S. government saved approximately \$10 million in disposal costs for this ship, originally commissioned in 1967. This transfer represents the U.S. commitment to stability in the waters surrounding the Philippines.

Now renamed the *Gregorio del Pilar*, the ship immediately became the Philippine Navy’s flagship vessel, replacing another former U.S. vessel, which was commissioned in 1943 and used during World War II. Even at over four decades old, the *Gregorio del Pilar* is now the most modern ship in the Filipino Navy. With an aging and badly-equipped fleet, this changeover in flagships illustrates the Philippines’ urgent need for maritime defense capability. Meanwhile, as you know, China continues to aggressively modernize its naval forces.

Page 2.

U.S. officials have indicated that the transfer of the *Hamilton* represents a shift from U.S. security assistance that was singularly focused on counterterrorism, to assistance that should increasingly bolster Filipino maritime security capability. Indeed, on a recent trip to the Philippines to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty, Secretary of State Clinton said that the U.S. was focused on strengthening the Philippines' defense "to have a credible deterrent, to be able to protect what is ours and to be able to pursue lawful activities, whether it's for fishing or exploration for gas and oil."

As U.S. military vessels are decommissioned, I ask that you give the utmost consideration to transferring them to the Philippines, which has expressed strong interest in acquiring additional surplus vessels. While I am aware that there is high demand for these excess defense articles, I believe that the Philippines, through virtue of its treaty alliance with the U.S. and its major non-NATO ally status - as well as the U.S. interest in seeing the freedom of navigation upheld in the South China Sea - should be given top priority as material becomes available.

As a member of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, I look forward to working with you to ensure that the Filipino Navy's capabilities are bolstered.

Sincerely,



EDWARD R. ROYCE