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Philippine Lawmakers Question China Sister-City Ties Amid Rising Geopolitical Tensions ^[1]

On July 9th, House Resolution No. 39, proposed by lawmakers from the Akbayan party-list, Mamamayang Liberal, and the Liberal Party in the Philippines, called for the Department of the Interior and Local Government to investigate the sister city agreements with China. Against the background of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries and the 9th anniversary of the 2016 Arbitral Award on the South China Sea, the proposal of this resolution was unexpected but understandable.

Concerns about China's influence on other countries through local government infiltration are not limited to interactions with the Philippines. This year, U.S. state lawmakers have introduced at least 240 proposals to counter China's influence, including one to end sister-city ties in Arkansas. A recent example is that U.S. Congresswoman Elise Stefanik introduced critical legislation to terminate Washington, D.C.'s "sister city" relationship with Beijing on July 18th due to the alleged threat to U.S. national security.


These negative cases make it easy for people to dismiss or underestimate the potential of these subnational channels. The concept of sister/brother cities dates back over a millennium, with the earliest recorded partnership in 836 between Paderborn, Germany, and Le Mans, France. Formal sister city partnerships became more common after World War II to heal war wounds and promote peace. In the modern era, it was U.S. President Eisenhower who emphasized the significance of people-to-people exchanges as essential to achieving a peaceful world order, which led to the growth of sister city and sister province relationships.

It is reassuring that the past practice by the local governments in the Philippines and China showcased the resilience and potential amid the long-standing tensions. According to the Social Weather Stations, Filipinos' net trust in China hit rock bottom in 2015 and 2016 due to disputes over the South China Sea. However, interactions under the sister-city framework were not significantly affected. Youth delegations of Imus and Huanggang conducted mutual exchanges from February to April of 2015. As Liuzhou's sister city, Muntinlupa joined the China-ASEAN Automotive Industry EXPO at the invitation in September 2015. In 2016, Palawan and Ningxia Autonomous Region, Zamboanga and Guigang, even established sister ties respectively during the period of conflicts.

One unique aspect of the sister city relationships between the Philippines and China is the empowerment of the Tsinoy communities. Shishi and Naga officially established sister cities in 2000, for example, facilitated by the overseas Chinese in the Philippines. For the Chinese side, the proverb "the government sets the stage, and businesses put on the show" illustrates the dynamics between the subnational entities of the two countries, such as the aforementioned regular fairs and Expos.

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These positive cases are not a defense of any potential suspicious behavior by Chinese cities. On the contrary, any government has a responsibility to investigate acts and agreements that may harm national interests. In the case of the Philippines, this is particularly relevant given the Alice Go issue and the recent arrests in Palawan and Hainan. Meanwhile, local governments from both sides could settle down and consider whether they should fan or cool the flame of conflicts. Nations talk, cities act – it would be admittedly a bit big talk for local governments in both the unitary Philippines and China. However, twinning cities should not be praised during the peaceful time, then used as scapegoats during times of conflict.

There is still a significant gap between the scholarship on subnational relations and frontline practitioners. The role of sister cities today, particularly regarding China, often raises concerns about national security. Therefore, a paradox weighs on policymakers: how to balance the benefits of engaging in subnational diplomacy with the potential threat of malign interferences. A recent report by Meridian International Center asserts that "the question for local leaders is not whether they should engage globally – it is how to make this engagement strategic, purposeful, risk-aware, and outcome-oriented". 

Sub-national relationships that connect citizens and governments can serve as one of multiple channels for fostering meaningful cooperation. Meanwhile, they also have the potential to be used as tools for malicious interference or to benefit specific interests in contemporary international politics. For China, the lack of transparency results in the continuous mistrust over its twinning ties. The co-opted sister dyads, with few shared interests but more for political implications, hardly empower substantial and sustainable interactions. For the Philippines, engaging with China through leveraging subnational channels can undoubtedly unlock significant benefits. Instead of appealing to the sentiments among the population to fan the flames of conflicts, it would be more productive and wiser for policymakers to further establish specific institutions or offices at the local levels for going global, as well as to set clear targets when dealing with their counterparts in China and beyond.

After all, if risk management and control mechanisms are not established during relatively peaceful times, both sides cannot expect them to be effective during periods of conflict.
