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TRANSCRIPT

The Asia Chessboard Podcast

“Doubled Rooks? The U.S.-Philippine Alliance in Historical Context”

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Andrew Schwartz: Welcome to the Asia Chessboard, a podcast that examines geopolitical dynamics in Asia and takes an inside look at the making of grand strategy. I'm Andrew Schwartz at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Hannah Fodale: This week, Mike is joined by Chris Capozzola, professor of history at MIT, to discuss his new book on the history of US-Philippines relations, *Bound by War*. The two discuss the importance of history for informing grand strategy and what lessons we can learn from the US-Philippines relationship in peace and war since the 1900s.

Mike Green: Welcome back to the Asia Chessboard. I'm joined today by professor Christopher Capozzola to talk about his new book, *Bound by War*, which is a history of the United States and the Philippines, particularly through the view of our experiences together at war. And it has lessons for strategy in Southeast Asia, in the first island chain and the Western Pacific today, and it's a fascinating read. Welcome, Chris. Thanks for joining us.

Chris Capozzola: Thanks for having me.

Mike Green: We always like to hear at the beginning how you got into this. You're a historian first, and then you turned to Asia and the Philippines second. So why don't you tell us why history, and why did you choose the Philippines for this study?

Chris Capozzola: Well, I've always been interested in history and in American history in particular, and the role of the US military in the history of war and shaping 20th century America. I was always a historian of the United States primarily, but realized that so much of American history happens outside the United States. And this brought me to thinking about World War II in Asia, and I was spending some time in Manila doing some research and visited the Manila American cemetery. And that's how I begin the book. It's also, in some ways, how I begin the project. This is an American military cemetery that honors all fallen soldiers and sailors of the Second World War. And as I was walking around, I was struck by just how many of the names on the walls were Filipinos. This made me realize that this is an unwritten story of American history, the history of these two nations, not really having diplomacy, but having a shared partnership in the Pacific.

Mike Green: The use of history for strategy in programs that teach comprehensive grand strategy courses, Yale, UT Austin, Georgetown, and Johns Hopkins and others, in general history is viewed as the best guide for grand strategy, not political science. Learning to think in time, learning to understand contingency and risk mitigation and how events unfold over a longer period. But not all historians embrace the use of history for policymaking or strategy. Where do you come out on that one? Because your book has some pretty clear implications, I think, for where the US goes with the Philippines.

- Chris Capozzola: I come down pretty firmly on the side of history is good for strategy, and the way I explained it is everyone knows the line that those who don't know history are condemned to repeat it, but the flip side of that is that those who don't know history also don't get the chance to repeat it, things that have gone well in the past and understanding when people made the right choice and learning from that is just as important as figuring out any of the wrong paths along the way.
- Mike Green: So the book has a beautiful symmetry, and cemetery. It opens in the middle of a cemetery and you described that, and it ends with the Balangiga bells, the return of bells taken by the US military during the insurrection and only returned in 2018. So the beginning and the end are nicely paired. But the story in between really is a binational story. It's the description of the impact of this relationship and of war side by side, sometimes with each other, on both countries. And it reminds me in some ways of books like LaFeber's *The Clash*, about US-Japan relations, or John Pomfret's *Beautiful Country* *Middle Kingdom*, Bruce Cummings's *History of US and Asia*, in that kind of interactive back and forth story of how we shaped each other. Did you have a certain model in mind for this, because your previous book was about the US domestic scene during World War One, and this was a binational history and how the two countries' experiences shaped each of us in Asia. Did you have a favorite historian or model in mind when you started building it around that structure?
- Chris Capozzola: I did. I think in some ways I would have to give credit to a whole generation of people, scholars who have tried to refigure US history and US diplomatic history as the history of the US and the world, and have said that this kind of research requires really deep research in the archives of the countries the US deals with. But if I had a single model for it, I think that the best would be my former colleague, retired colleague, professor John Dower, whose books about the US and Japan are so balanced between Japanese and American perspectives in ways that shake up your mindset a little bit and force you to think not only differently about, in his case, Japan, in my case, the Philippines, but also in turn then thinking in new ways about the United States.
- Mike Green: Dower's books, and as a Japan scholar, I think I've read them all, but *War Without Mercy* had such a huge impact on me when it came out. I was just starting grad school. Because it describes, in very stark and uncamouflaged terms, the racism and the racial imagery that drove both countries' propaganda and assumptions about the other. It was criticized at the time by some for having too much moral equivalency, as you may know. So there's a little bit of peril in doing this back and forth, because would it be fair to say that the US impact on the Philippines was probably a lot greater than the Philippines' impact on the US. Or is that not true? How'd you managed that aspect?
- Chris Capozzola: Well, I think I went into this with the assumption that this was an uneven relationship, and certainly by many metrics, it is. In terms of military power, economic power, and so forth. But Philippine history and Filipinos and Filipino Americans are not absent from American history, and they haven't even

necessarily been erased. They're always hidden in plain sight. Often when I tell people about this book, every once in a while people reveal just how little they were taught about the Philippines in high school, in American high schools. But more often than not I get a story. A story from military service, a story from family history or growing up that shows just how deeply these countries were connected, and bringing that part of the story together with the grand strategy and the high diplomacy is really important for understanding the relationship between these two countries.

Mike Green: One area, and it comes out in your book, where the experience in the Philippines had such a profound shape on American strategy is how we think about counterinsurgency. After 1898, with the defeat of the Spanish fleet at the battle of Manila Bay, the US wanted a base, a Navy base. To have a Navy base, they had to control the archipelago and got sucked into these conflicts. And then World War II. And then the Hukbalahap insurgency, which shaped thinking about Vietnam. And then only a few years ago, Marawi in Mindanao, this brutal, brutal urban warfare. So there's a long evolution of American counterinsurgency strategy that was built around what we experienced in the Philippines, I think. I mean, did you find some commonality from one to the next, from 1898 to 1917 and Marawi is a long time, but did you find some common themes in how we dealt with the Philippines, how we dealt with counterinsurgency?

Chris Capozzola: I did. And I would say I would point to two. The first would be that basically from 1898 to the present, the United States has conducted counterinsurgency in the Philippines in close partnership with the Filipino military forces, and in ways that made it more effective and more successful. And I think that that's a crucial distinction from some of the other instances in US history. The second connection is that these are all instances in which the US military understood the counterinsurgency to have been successful and to have been successful because of things that they did, rather than for example, the collapse of any insurgent movement. So that lesson learning has been important and tended to lead to the application of the Philippine example to another scenario or another country.

Mike Green: If you look at the history of US counterinsurgency in the Philippines, in comparative terms, when you look at Vietnam, when you look at Iraq and Afghanistan, it's a success story. And yet at the same time, it was a brutal... This is where American forces pioneered waterboarding and applied the sweeping violence used against the Plains Indians overseas. So it's both a success story, but it's also where some of our worst instances of abuses take place. And they came up again during the whole debate about waterboarding in the US just a little over a decade ago. Philippines came up, people realized that. John McCain, among others, realized this is in our counterinsurgency DNA and it started in the Philippines.

Chris Capozzola: Yeah. And I think that some of that was made possible by US colonial control, which gave them more control over the territory and also over Philippines forces, which were partners in counterinsurgency. And some of that is also a

relationship between the United States and its own memories of this period, to this or that. Although the debate over the conduct of the war in the Philippines from 1898 to 1902 was headline news during that time period. Led to congressional investigations. Huge controversies. And very quickly fades from the scene. And I think that its disappearance is as important as anything else because when it re-emerges 50 years later, 100 years later, as a memory, it has to get worked out as for what does this mean for America and our values as we practice them with military force abroad.

Mike Green: One of the other aspects of the Philippines for the United States is its importance in terms of geopolitics and location. You argue in the book, *The Pacific Century*, that Obama announced actually being a century earlier, when we annexed the Philippines, and I think that's right. But the vision of a forward operating base, of coaling stations, of our own version of what the British had with Hong Kong, as I wrote in my book, that goes back at least to the middle of the 19th century, if not earlier. And the Philippines were an accident. I mean the early statesmen in the Pacific and in China in the 1850s were arguing that we'd be much better off using a smaller island, more easily defended like Okinawa, the Ryukyus, the Bonin islands, maybe Formosa. One diplomat, Peter Parker, sent back a note to Washington saying, "Let's let the French have Korea and we'll go for Formosa." We kind of ended up with the Philippines as our forward line of defense by accident because of a war that started, of course in Cuba against Spain.

Mike Green: But then once we had it, it became an integral part of our defense concept. And you mentioned this in *War Plan Orange*, our plan after 1907 to defend against an attack on Japan, the navy did what Roosevelt called it our "heel of Achilles" so far forward, so close to Japan, so far away from us. And then in 1947/48 MacArthur and Kennan wrote that our forward defensive line against communism after the fall of China to Mao should be the first island chain, so Japan, the Philippines. And here we are again with the South China Sea. The Philippines are increasingly being identified as our forward operating line to deal with Chinese expansion in the South China Sea.

Mike Green: But again, a heel of Achilles. Can't have bases. Their own military capability is limited. The archipelago that the Philippine navy tries to control, they have basically two old Hamilton class US Coast Guard cutters to control. So once again, it's our heel of Achilles and yet it's part of our front line. That's my take on the Philippines in geopolitical terms. You went into it with a lot more detail, but how would you characterize why the Philippines mattered to us strategically? And are they reliable ally? Is it still an Achilles heel for us?

Chris Capozzola: Yeah, I have to say I was struck by just how soon after 1898 the United States came to realize that the Philippines was, from a strategic perspective, in some ways more troubled than it might be worth, and the Achilles heel quote from Theodore Roosevelt comes right after Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War, which changes the dynamic in the Pacific drastically. And what a geographer will tell you is this is a very valuable asset or ally for the United

States that just happens to be in the wrong place, in terms of for most of the 20th century US concerns in Northern and Northeast Asia, that really make a Philippines location not quite propitious for trade, not quite valuable for basing. But the United States has, over the 20th century, made sure that the Philippines remains a valued military and also economic partner.

Chris Capozzola: And that has also mattered because they're also a familiar cultural partner. So although the United States might have a bigger military presence in Japan or Korea, bigger trade relationships with Japan, that the Philippines is in some ways... I like to think of it as a home base, and I think many people in the US armed forces think of it that way as well. It's a place that American soldiers and sailors and airmen have been for decades, and it will continue to be a place from which to view continental Asia. And I think that regardless of whether the rival is Japan or the Soviet Union or China, I think that that will absolutely continue to be the case.

Mike Green: Yeah, I think the Philippines are probably increasing again in strategic importance because of location, because of the first island chain, stretching from Japan to Taiwan, the Philippines and south. Two decades ago I worked in the Pentagon and the thinking about a Taiwan contingency was it would be a fairly narrow fight. But now I think both the PLA and the US assume that any crisis in the island chain, whether it's Japan and the Senkakus, Taiwan, South China Sea, it's going to be the whole island chain. So in that, the Philippines right now are the porous weak spot for us and for the Japanese, because undersea warfare, the Chinese submarines can, if they have control of the seas and the air above the Philippine sea, they can hide their submarines and then pop out into the Pacific to flank Japan.

Mike Green: There's all kinds of geopolitical and geographic importance, which is why the US now is trying to build what's called maritime domain awareness. Why the Japanese are leasing patrol boats and things to help the Philippines get some more control. I think it still is a heel, an Achilles heel. You have a section of the book where you look at the withdrawal from Subic and Clark in the 90s, and just looking at history and Philippine political culture, can you see a future where the US actually has reliable access, let alone bases? It seems to me that history matters a lot and the Philippine experience matters a lot. That would be pretty hard to do.

Chris Capozzola: I have to say I'm maybe more hopeful than that, and I think there is a path forward, although things look tough right now. And just to walk through your listeners through it, at the end of the Cold War, the Philippines voted to eject US bases in 1991 and they closed soon thereafter. Clark's closure was accelerated by the explosion of Mount Pinatubo. But by 1992, Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Station had largely closed. But very soon thereafter, new kinds of military joint exercises, and after 1998, a Visiting Forces Agreement, which didn't immediately go into practice, nevertheless made it possible for substantial numbers of US troops to visit for some periods of time.

Chris Capozzola: And that coincided also with an increasing awareness within the Defense Department that large scale presence of tens of thousands of US troops could prove an insurmountable irritant in bilateral relations because of the economic impact, criminal jurisdiction controversies, other things that have made headlines on and off over the years. So having a smaller footprint with visitations and rotations was on the table anyway. Right now in 2020, there are tensions about the Visiting Forces Agreement. I think there's no reason to think that those couldn't be hammered out and negotiated, maybe not right now, but in the foreseeable future, in ways that really make it possible for the two countries to move forward pretty confidently together. But maybe I'm too much of an optimist here.

Mike Green: No, I mean, this is a good segue opportunity to talk about how the Philippines look at the US as a strategic partner. And there are obviously many different views. Public opinion polling in the Philippines is consistently high about the United States, even though elites debate about us more, and pretty negative about China on the whole. But you look at history and the detailed studies you did, particularly diving into the archives in the Philippines. What gives you the confidence? Is there a certain sentimentality about the US? Is it a strategic dependence on the US? What would open up opportunities in the way the Philippines look at us?

Chris Capozzola: One of the things I wanted to do for the book was not only to look at how American strategists thought about the Philippines, but about how Philippine strategists thought about Asia and the United States as well. And digging this up from as early as the 1890s and then into the 1920s, the independence movement advocating independence from the United States always had to answer the question of, "Well, what then? What next? And what would a truly independent or sovereign Philippines actually look like?" And the way I distill this is that I think the central question in Philippine foreign policy, especially since independence in 1946, is are we better off with the Americans or without them? Does the presence of US troops invite Japanese invasion? Does the presence of US troops invite a nuclear attack by the Soviets? Does the presence of the United States invite conflict with China?

Chris Capozzola: And that is an enduring and fundamental question that Filipinos need to answer for themselves, but it doesn't always have to have the same answer. And I think that when it came to Japan, when it came to the Soviets, there were reasons for Filipinos to believe that the presence of US forces brought them into conflicts that might in some other instances have spared them. But I think if you look at the way that question is asked and answered today, it's very difficult to imagine a meaningful sovereign Philippines in the 21st century without some continued connection to the United States.

Mike Green: So what you're describing is what political scientists who are all closeted historians call the Thucydides dilemma, that smaller states and alliances always risk being entrapped or targeted because they're allies, but because they're small, if they push too much autonomy, they risk being abandoned. And Japan

has to face this, Korea. All the allies in the frontline have to face this. So the Philippines really are no different. But it is interesting because you see this much more clearly in the Japanese literature or the Korean literature.

Mike Green: The Philippine strategic writing and strategic leadership is much muddier. It's almost that we're so intimately intertwined historically, and in particular, our militaries have so much experience together that the Philippine strategic view doesn't always come out. It was just not a strategic discourse between Washington and Manila. And I guess what you're saying is it's there. Those strategic choices, those strategic discussions happen in Manila just the way they do in every other frontline US ally. It sounds like we just have to pull them out. We have to build that platform for a more strategic dialogue with the Philippines. Is that right? I mean, it sounds like there's something there we need to work with and it's on us to pull that out of our ally.

Chris Capozzola: Yeah, I think it is. And I think that... On the one hand, I think both Americans and Filipinos, when they think about strategy in Asia, often take this relationship for granted and figure out what kinds of smoothing needs to happen at the margins for particular controversies over law or particular tensions over military equipment and hardware, these kinds of things, rather than opening up a broader space. And at the same time, the critics of the US presence, particularly on the Philippine left, have often been marginal to this conversation, and often their advocacy of a complete withdrawal of the United States in some ways doesn't open up the space for hearing and incorporating the criticisms and imagining a path forward that would address some of the concerns that are being raised on the left as well.

Mike Green: As a matter of policy, you could not get to the more optimistic scenario, I think it's a convincing one, that we can have more access for forces, more cooperation, more joint exercises. We can do that, but it has to be built on this strategic dialogue and listening to the Philippines's specific concerns about China, about sovereignty. And if we do that, we have a better chance. And you're not talking about going back to reopening Clark and Subic and bases as we knew them. I think you'd have a hard time convincing the Pentagon or the Navy to ever completely rely on the Philippines again. You're talking about more access, more cooperation, more joint operations, basically, right?

Chris Capozzola: Yes. And in some ways I think no one really in the Philippines or in the Pentagon wants to reopen the bases as they were in the 1950s and 60s. But I think that there are opportunities for collaboration and also maybe even for regional collaboration that can be strengthened.

Mike Green: The regional point's interesting, because there is some interest in Japan, for example, in spreading out the American footprint a bit. We're doing it already in Northern Australia for the Marines, with the Japanese providing some infrastructure support, maybe some participation by self-defense forces or coast guard from Japan. That's a lighter footprint and a multilateralized footprint that probably would be easier for the Philippines financially and politically to accept

those things. So there's a real opportunity there. As long as we're humbled by history and cognizant of the history that's in your book. You talked quite a-

Chris Capozzola: One more thing, which is, I think, the other thing that has changed over the 20th century are the cultural and familial and immigration ties that have made Filipino Americans, about four million of them now, an important part of American culture. And I think that those connections are so tightly woven that those are also not going anywhere. And I think that as strategists think about the map of Asia, they also need to think about these non-state relations that are really important for tying the two countries together.

Mike Green: You write about that in the book, and I experienced it in the White House, the way that the Philippines and their friends in the US Congress successfully lobbied to get payment for veterans of World War Two. I watched that happen, I was in the White House. And I can tell you, there were parts of the US government that said no way. And the advocates prevailed. I was not one who said no way, for the record, but the advocates prevailed. And I'll tell, you the history to be written that I did not do in my book, you touch on it quite a bit with respect to US Philippines in your book. I think the history that's got to be written is the role of not just Filipino Americans, but Korean Americans, Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, Pacific Islanders, in shaping American policy and strategy and locking us into that region. That's a very important part of American foreign policy making right now that was not really there 30 or 40 years ago, let alone 100 years ago.

Mike Green: And it's an increasingly important voting block too in a lot of key swing states and congressional districts. A good segue to democracy. So although this is a mostly book about how we were a relationship forged in war, you talked quite a bit about democracy, democratization, the ouster of Ferdinand Marcos. I came away a little uncertain about where you are on this question, about how much the US should be pushing our friend and ally to democratize. We have less leverage now than we did in the 80 with Marcos, but we do have our friend president Duterte, who is... I don't know where he is for you on the Marco scale, but he's not as democratic a leader as his predecessor, that's for sure.

Mike Green: Where do you come out on this, looking at the historical pattern. Should we be pressing Duterte to end extrajudicial killings, to improve democracy and governance? Or do we risk pushing the Philippines into China's camp? Should we be humbled by our history, encouraged by it? Personally I think the Marcos story should encourage us, but where do you come out on how we handle democracy in the Philippines and Duterte specifically?

Chris Capozzola: I think a lot of Americans misunderstand president Rodrigo Duterte because they only get snapshots of him that appear in the US press. And usually when he's saying something either strenuously anti-American or just outrageous, or even sometimes false. And they also sometimes think that Duterte is a divisive figure in the Philippines in the way that American politics tends to divide 50/50 in its current moment, overlooking the fact that despite his policies or perhaps

even because of them, Duterte is in fact a very popular president in the Philippines. I do think that the United States needs to call out the human rights abuses more clearly, to document them, to ask the Philippine government to be accountable for them, and also in particular to support and defend investigative journalists, opposition politicians, and others who are doing that work on the ground in the Philippines. I write in the book about steps that the US government made between 1983 and 1986 that led to Marcos's overthrow. I still give the credit for that overthrow to the Filipino people.

Mike Green: Absolutely right. Yeah, I agree with that. Absolutely right. But don't you think that if George Schultz had not prevailed on Ronald Reagan to send his friend from the Senate to talk to Marcos, there might not have been a People's Power Revolution?

Chris Capozzola: Absolutely. So the United States intervened in an ongoing debate in particular ways that really sent a message to Marcos from Reagan that he was not going to hear from the streets in Manila. And as you said, the United States had more leverage then than it does in the Philippines today. And Marcos, despite some of his own erratic behavior, was nowhere near as erratic as president Duterte now. So I think for the United States to push could yield a very unpredictable result, and our efforts are probably better made at figuring out who on the ground in the Philippines needs more voice and needs to be defended in order both for our national interest to be protected, and also our shared interest in democracy.

Mike Green: Last question, and it's always unfair to ask historians, which is why I like asking. If you could have one mulligan, if you could turn back the clock and have perhaps the US take a different approach at some point in this history of US-Philippine relations, what would it be? Would it be 1898? 1899? The way we approached Aguinaldo? Would it be the way we approached Subic Bay? What do over would you give the US? By the way, in answering that, I came away from the book feeling on the whole pretty good about US-Philippine relations, but understanding better some of the real tragedies, miscommunications, but on the whole feeling pretty good about the US. I mean, certainly reflected in the high polls of support for the US in the Philippines. With that as context, though, we had some blunders, as we always do. So is there anyone you'd like to get a... If you could go back in time, invent that time machine they're working on at MIT right now, is there a point at which you would have recommended to somebody Taft, McKinley, Roosevelt, whoever, try this a little differently?

Chris Capozzola: That's a great opportunity. Let me take two, I'll be quick. The first, I do think that there was an opportunity in 1898 to recognize that Emilio Aguinaldo and the advocates of the Philippine Revolution, had in fact more in common with our founding fathers than we realized. And that there would have been a way to support, and in fact nourish what was the first declared independent republic in Asia, and could have given the United States a role in the 20th century in democracy and decolonization that it talked the talk, but this would have been a chance from the very beginning to walk the walk. But the real Mulligan that I would like to redo is whoever wrote the first US history book that put the

Philippines in just one chapter, right around 1898, and then immediately moved on to other topics. I would like to stop that when it first happened. And in some ways the project of this book is to write the Philippines, Filipinos and Filipino Americans into the whole 20th century. And only once you do that do you really start to understand the stakes for both countries in the Pacific.

Mike Green: So the strategic takeaways would be when the United States is on the side of patriots who want to make their country stronger, we win, we do better. And we're in an era now where to maintain a favorable balance of power in Asia, we need allies and partners, and you want to learn how to work allies and partners, study their history with us. I think that's a really important takeaway, and *Bound by War*, your book, really does that for the Philippines in a way that I haven't seen.

Mike Green: I mean, I've seen some good books on the history of counterinsurgency in the Philippines, for example, but this is the kind of book that informs strategy in the present by giving us that tailwind of history that got us where we are. And it doesn't point necessarily to the exact way forward, but it certainly shows us where the shoals are, where the winds are, and to continue the sailing metaphor, helps us make a better chart. So, Chris, congratulations, it's a great book, great read, really, really fun read, in addition to being fantastic scholarship. And thanks for joining us. Last question. What's the next book, or the next project?

Chris Capozzola: Well, I'm not quite sure, but the next project that I'm working on right now is with the group called the Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project, FilVetRep, which has a website where on November 6th, the digital exhibition will launch that focuses on the history of Philippines in World War II, and the efforts of Filipino veterans to obtain naturalization and veterans benefits over the 20th century. So I think it's a different way for people who maybe don't like to read big fat books like you write and I write, a different way for people to interact with this history.

Mike Green: Great. Well Chris Capozzola, MIT historian. Thank you for joining us.

Chris Capozzola: Thank you.

Andrew Schwartz: Thanks for listening. For more on strategy and the Asia Program's work, visit the CSIS website at csis.org and click on the Asia Program page.