

## The Influence of Rational Dimension in the GPH-MILF Peace Process

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### Abstract

Resolution of the so-called “Bangsamoro Question” rests at the heart of the peace process between the Government of the Philippines (GPH) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Southern Philippines, also known as the Bangsamoro homeland. Inspired by Allison and Zelikow’s conceptualization of Rational Actor Model (RAM), this paper analyzed how rational factor contributed to the conclusion of the Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro (CAB) in 2014 and eventually enshrined into the Philippine Constitution through the approval of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) on July 27, 2018. This paper argued that the success of the GPH-MILF peace process does not only depend on the sincerity of the administrations of both then President Aquino III and current President Duterte, international support or commitment, pressure from civil societies and community involvement as what many commentators provided. As shown in this paper, the rational factor and its dimension significantly affected actors’ strategic interactions and the GPH-MILF peace process per se. The findings offered a new perspective for conflict-resolution and shed light on how rational dimension impacted both actors’ strategic interactions, which led to the conclusion of the GPH-MILF peace agreement. This clearly indicated that rational dimension greatly influenced GPH and MILF’s strategic interactions and thereby took flexible attitudes to resolve outstanding issues between them which consequently led to the signing of the CAB and ultimately the ratification of the BOL in 2018.

**Keywords:** Bangsamoro basic law; Bangsamoro government; Comprehensive agreement on bangsamoro; Framework agreement on bangsamoro; Rational actor model; The GPH-MILF peace process.



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### 1. Introduction

For a better understanding of the issues surrounding the peace process between the Government of the Philippines (GPH) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) known as the GPH-MILF peace process, this paper briefly discussed major issues and debates on the GPH-MILF peace process and how these (issues and debates) impacted all aspects of the Filipino people, particularly the Bangsamoro, indigenous and Christian-Filipino settlers who are directly or indirectly affected by the process in one way or another.

For the supporters of the GPH-MILF peace process, in general, and the Bangsamoro Basic Law or BBL (now the signed Bangsamoro Organic Law or BOL) in particular, they believed that their supports have been anchored in the very letter and spirit of the 1987 Philippine Constitution whose primary objective is for the achievement of peace and development for its people including the Bangsamoros. Consequently, they highlighted the primacy of peace and stability in the country as a whole which can only be achieved through the recognition and the entrenchment of the BBL in the 1987 Philippine Constitution through legislative process (Philippine News Agency, 2017); (Arland Abubakkar, 2017).

In contrast to pro-BBL groups, the opponents of the BBL raised issues of legality such as the unconstitutionality of sharing arrangements between the Central government and the envisioned future Bangsamoro regional government. They also raised the status of the Indigenous People (IPs) and the Christian-Filipino settlers within the Bangsamoro territory. In this regard, the opponents of the BBL argued that the Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro (CAB), in general and the passing of the BBL, in particular, would require amending the 1987 Constitution as it plans to create a Bangsamoro sovereign state and its eventual separation from the Philippines which many experts disagreed with.

However, the “Mamasapano incident” gave ammunition for the anti-BBL groups to block the passage of the BBL by the Philippine Congress. It was an incident (the Mamasapano) that happened during a Special Action Force (SAF) of the Philippine National Police (PNP) (allegedly joined by United States Army Special Forces) against the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and the MILF to capture or kill wanted Malaysian terrorist and bomb-

maker Zulkifli Abdhir and other Malaysian terrorists or high-ranking members of the BIFF which took place on January 25, 2015, at Tukanalipao, Mamasapano, Maguindanao, Philippines. Consequently, several legislators pressed for the deletion of any provisions of the proposed law (BBL) which they considered to be unconstitutional, including the establishment of separate constitutional bodies, as well as the establishment of a Bangsamoro police force in the proposed autonomous region which the MILF warned the former not to do. The MILF insisted that any revised BBL version which is not FAB and CAB compliant would not be acceptable to them. In the end, in February 2016, the leadership of both Houses (the House of the Senate and the House of Representative) declared that they can no longer pass the BBL (now Bangsamoro Organic Law or BOL) due to lack of quorum on the House of the Representative which the MILF called as an excuse.

However, the current administration of Philippine's President Rodrigo Roa Duterte administration was really determined to solve the Bangsamoro problem by addressing what they called historical injustice. In order to accelerate the process, President Duterte certified the bill as urgent bill. As a result, the Philippine Congress was able to prioritize the passage of the bill and ratified it in July 2018. Then, on 27 July 2018 revealed that Philippine President Duterte signed Republic Act No. 11054 or Organic Law for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao into law.

With this development, this paper was conducted to examine the GPH-MILF peace process. This paper is differed compared to other previous studies which claimed that the success of the the GPH-MILF peace process mainly due to the sincerity of the administrations of both then President Aquino III and current President Duterte, international support or commitment, pressure from civil societies and community involvement. This paper, however, argued that the success of the GPH-MILF peace process does not only depend on the sincerity of the administrations of both then President Aquino III and current President Duterte, international support or commitment, pressure from civil societies and community involvement as what many previous studies indicated. As shown in this paper, the rational factor and its dimension significantly affected Manila and MILF's strategic interactions and the peace process per se. Thus, in examining the influence of rational dimension to the GPH-MILF peace process, this paper used qualitative method. It relied on the historical-analytical approach, content analysis of official documents and wide range of secondary scholar material sources. Interviews with respondents in the Bangsamoro homeland were also conducted. This method allowed us to examine and analyze how rational factor played an important role to the conclusion of the GPH-MILF peace process. Thus, this paper mainly highlighted how rational factor contributed significantly to the conclusion of the CAB in 2014, using RAM as its framework of analysis.

## 2. Ram and the CAB/BOL

In analyzing a peace agreement signed between the GPH and MILF acknowledged as the CAB in 2014, this paper utilized RAM. This model examined the actions of state actors (as well armed non-state actors like the MILF) as a whole and the impact of international relations on these actions. The RAM basic unit of analysis is the actions chosen by national governments to maximize their strategic goals and objectives as they pointed out (Graham and Allison, 1999). In fact, this is also applicable to any revolutionary movements as well. Both scholars further argued that nations or governments conceived as rational unitary decision-makers with "one set of preferences, one set of perceived choices, and a single estimate of the consequences that follow from each alternative (Graham and Allison, 1999)." As Graham and Allison (1999) correctly noted on two classical realists' assumptions that unitary states are the main actors in international relations and that states act rationally in choosing course of actions that are value-maximizing, find resonance in the RAM.

In addition to this, RAM also assumed that states' actions are in response to strategic threats and opportunities in the international environment (Graham and Allison, 1999). Such strategic responses were brilliantly illustrated when they further explained that:

In choosing a response, a process of rational choice is employed based on identifying objectives and goals, usually expressed in terms of national security and national interests; proposing options for the attainment of the objectives; evaluating the cost and benefit of each option against the defined objectives; and selecting the option that ranks highest in achieving desired outcomes (Graham and Allison, 1999).

Thus, it is pretty clear that the necessity of strategic policy development and the preclusion of strategic policy options are usually conditioned by shifts in the international setting as Allison and Zelikow demonstrated below that:

Reaching a decision takes into consideration a strategic problem; states' objectives that address the problems and secure the national interests; set of options that could achieve these objectives; cost and benefit analysis for each option that maximizes utility in terms of these objectives; and the strategic interaction between the state and its adversary, which ultimately determines the option chosen by the state (Graham and Allison, 1999).

A comprehensive approach on a state's policy attitude can be seen in his work "*Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*", when he revealed more detailed components of RAM which includes:

(1) That strategic goals and objectives, national security and national interests are the principal categories in which strategic goals are conceived, (2) that options; various courses of actions that are relevant to strategic problems which provide a spectrum of options, (3) that consequences; enactment of each alternative course of action will produce a series of consequences. That the relevant consequences constitute benefits and costs in terms of strategic goals and objectives, and (4) that choice; rational choice is value-maximizing, "rational agents select alternatives whose consequences rank highest in terms of his strategic goals and objectives.

In addition to the above, to examine how RAM can explain the decision-making process of the GPH-MILF's peace negotiators and their respective principals that led to the conclusion of the CAB, this paper would have to find evidence in the data articulating the followings: (1) strategic problems, (2) national interests of the actors in terms of strategic goals and objectives, (3) options of the actors to achieve its strategic goals, (4) the costs and benefits associated with each option, and (5) strategic interaction

### 3. Strategic Problems

The RAM indicates that states have strategic goals and objectives derived from their understanding of their national interests, and thereby attainment of which are supposed to eliminate a problem that poses a threat to these national core interests (Graham and Allison, 1999). While this assumption clearly refers to the state actors, it is also applicable to armed non-state actors like liberation movements as pointed out earlier. Thus, using RAM as a framework of analysis, this section seeks to demonstrate that since its independence in 1946 up to the present, the so-called "Bangsamoro problem" has continued to be a thorn for successive Philippine regimes due to an increasing threat of the Bangsamoro quest for self-determination against the Philippine national interests (Taya, 2009).

To address the strategic problems (Bangsamoro independence movements) faced by the GPH, Manila believed in the necessity of absorbing the cultures, religion and languages of the Bangsamoro into the dominant Christian-Filipinos' culture, using government establishments such as schools, universities, mass media and so forth to achieve this assimilation policy (Taya, 2010). This assimilation policy was not always peaceful. In some cases, it was reinforced by naked use of military force so as to ensure its obedience and success. Unfortunately, such hard-handed approach naturally breeds resentments and resistance instead. In this connection, the late MILF Chieftain Sheik Salamat Hashim strongly justified that:

The Bangsamoro resistance against the GPH is legitimate because the former is only resisting against the injustice and oppression perpetrated by the latter against the Bangsamoro. Hashim revealed these injustices and oppression which include: the continued GPH's occupation of the vast portion of the Bangsamoro ancestral lands, continued government's sponsored resettlement program for Christian-Filipino settlers from Luzon and Visayas into the Bangsamoro's ancestral lands, amassing enormous portion of their wealth and natural resources and massive displacement of the Bangsamoro from their own homeland (Salamat Hashim, 1999).

Thus, the MILF leadership has forcefully argued that without giving justice to the Bangsamoro in the Southern Philippines, there will be no end to the bloody mess in the region (Luwaran.com, 2016). Worse, as they (MILF) further argued that new armed radical groups, such as the Maute Group, ASG, Bangsamoro Justice Movement, Khilafah Islamiya Mindanao, Dawla Islamiyyah Cotabato and others, who are more radicals than the MNLF and MILF, will continue to appear on the horizon and challenge the government through violent means similar to Marawi debacle (Luwaran.com, 2016). This is exactly what the GPH struggled to prevent by offering genuine autonomy for the Bangsamoro through Bangsamoro government. Perhaps, the then President Benigno S. Aquino III and the current President Rodrigo R. Duterte realized that Philippine integration has been rejected by the Bangsamoro because they perceived it as a threat to their identity as Bangsamoro. Indeed, many of the Bangsamoro people have resisted the Philippine's government assimilation policy, such as the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) because it caused many Bangsamoro lives in desolation and squalor, beset by every known kind of social pathology as Taya pointed out (Taya, 2007).

Also, GPH's prescription for the Bangsamoro problem fell short and thereby failed to adequately address the aspirations of the Bangsamoro since it only granted bogus autonomy, which did not address the so-called historical injustice committed by the GPH against the Bangsamoro and other Indigenous People in the Bangsamoro homeland and beyond. Subsequently, the MILF considered ARMM as a failed experiment which many observers agreed to including former President Benigno S. Aquino III and the current Philippine President Rodrigo Roa Duterte.

Going to Manila's strategic problem, perhaps, for GPH, secession is the most single issue in Philippine domestic policy towards the Southern Philippines, more specifically, the Bangsamoro homeland. This has been considered to be the primary threat to Philippine's national security, and has resulted in several major military conflicts or wars in the region such as the 2000 war, 2003 war, 2008 war and Marawi debacle as pointed out earlier. Revolutionary armed groups have met with combined harsh rhetoric followed by strong punitive actions by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), more specifically, the then Marcos and Estrada regimes in their wars against secessionist groups. In this regard, Clapano quoted the then President Estrada, now Manila City Mayor, as saying that only an all-out war against the Muslim rebels could solve the secessionist problem in Mindanao (Clapano, 2015); (Rambo Talabong, 2017). He (Estrada) also argued that peace negotiations with MILF are doomed to fail because the government cannot trust the rebels and the only solution is an all-out war (Clapano, 2015). However, supporters of the peace process strongly rebutted Estrada by quickly pointing out his failure to resolve the Bangsamoro issue during his presidency. Despite of these differences, many still strongly believed in the primacy of diplomacy as the most civilized way of reaching not just and lasting peace, but practical and acceptable political settlement in the region. This belief is one of the most important factors that led to the conclusion of the Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro (CAB) and finally a granting of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao through Republic Act No. 11054 also known as the Organic Law for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao into law signed on 27 July 2018 by Philippine President Duterte at the time of writing this paper.

## 4. Strategic Goals

States- including non-state actors have goals and objectives that are considered to be their primary concerns. These strategic objectives are threatened by the strategic problems as RAM pointed out earlier (Graham and Allison, 1999). Thus, in situating the GPH-MILF peace process, it clearly indicates that the then Aquino III administration differed with its predecessors in addressing the so-called “Bangsamoro problem” of course not to mention the current Duterte administration. The strategic objective of the GPH under his (Aquino III) watch was a political accommodation compared to his predecessors’ political integration. The then President Aquino III’s policies can be seen when he offered political accommodation with the Bangsamoro as agreed in the CAB and later in BBL (now BOL). Though the proposed law (BBL) was rejected by the Philippine Congress due to its so-called unconstitutionality, it indeed signaled a paradigm shift of GPH’s handling of the Bangsamoro question, that is from the assimilation policy standpoint to accommodation point. With regards to this, we strongly believe that without Aquino III’s contribution, the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) would not have been possible.

In the past (previous administrations), the major strategic goals of the GPH with respect to the Bangsamoro were the latter political integration and cultural assimilation into the Philippine mainstream body-politics as pointed out earlier. Thus, previous GPH negotiated with the Bangsamoro leadership were mainly to grant them with some sort of bogus autonomy as what the then Presidents Ferdinand E. Marcos, Corazon C. Aquino and Fidel V. Ramos did. Expectedly, many Bangsamoro were not happy because ARMM mainly did serve only the interests of those few weak, divided and corrupted Bangsamoro leaders. Many people have no education, as well as decent jobs. Angers against corrupt GPH and their corrupt traditional Bangsamoro leaders have been mounting. In addition to this, criminalities and drugs are also rampant and the culture of impunity has become a norm. All these endemic problems brought instability in the region. This can be seen when it said that:

Investors have avoided the Bangsamoro homeland for decades, despite its abundant natural resources and available manpower, because of the troubled peace, particularly in the region. The ARMM, which will be replaced by the Bangsamoro, accounts for 27 percent of Mindanao’s land area, which, in turn, is about the size of Luzon. However, the ARMM is the poorest of the regions, contributing less than 1 percent to the Philippines’ gross domestic product. The National Capital Region has the biggest share of the country’s GDP (35.7 percent in 2012), followed by Calabarzon (17.4 percent), and Central Luzon (9.2 percent) (Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2014).

All those so-called autonomous governments failed to address the concerns of the Bangsamoro. Despite of the failure of their prescriptions (bogus autonomy) to address the Bangsamoro question, the Manila-based political establishment has kept on insisting on the same failed political formula in resolving the conflict in the region. For instance, former Senator Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and some political establishments rejected BBL and replaced with their version, the so-called Basic Law for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region (BLBAR) which many observers said was weaker than the current ARMM (Luwaran.com, 2016). In some instances, many of these political establishments showed hatred, bias and prejudice against the Bangsamoro. For instance, Cagayan de Oro Archbishop Antonio publicly lamented that biases and prejudices by some Christians were hampering peace efforts in Mindanao (Diplomat, 2010). Recalling back to GPH’s integration policy, perhaps, what are really frightening are the consequences of Manila government’s narratives as a basis or justification for its strong desire and readiness to use force so as to preserve Philippine national unity and integration, but which the Bangsamoro perceived it as an attempt to wider socioeconomic and political control over them and their homeland.

## 5. Strategic Options

In the previous part of this paper, it was demonstrated that the GPH has pursued its several goals. These include: settlement of disputes with the MILF that is short of independence, renunciation of terrorism by the MILF and demobilization of organization’s weaponries. To achieve these intertwining goals the GPH has pursued several strategic options: (a) Continuing an all-out-peace policy (b) all out-war policy with the MILF.

When the then President Estrada was ousted from office in 2000 through the *People’s Power II*, his Vice President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo assumed the presidency. Immediately after she assumed power, she reversed her predecessor’s policy, from an *all out- war* policy to an *all-out peace* policy and immediately invited the MILF leadership to settle their differences with the GPH once more through peaceful means (Taya, 2009). Former President Arroyo championed the first option of continuing to negotiate with MILF and on July 27, 2008 her administration offered a meaningful autonomous government, Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE) contained in the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD). However, the MOA – AD signing in Malaysia slated on August 5, 2008 was aborted when the Philippine Supreme Court issued a temporary restraining order (TRO) on the last hour of August 4, 2008 due to the petitions filed by several opposition leaders led by former North Cotabato Governor Emmanuel Pinöl (now President’s Duterte’s Secretary of Agriculture), former Zamboanga City Mayor Lobregat, former Senate President Franklin Drilon and many others. The failure of the Arroyo regime to stand on its commitment gave a serious blow to the peace process and consequently led to the 2008 renewed conflict in the region when disgruntled then the late MILF commanders (Ustadz Umra Kato, Bravo, etc.), allegedly without the sanction of the MILF Central Committee, attacked some government’s positions and occupied several Christians’villages in North Cotabato, Lanao and Sarangani provinces (Taya, 2009). MILF accused former President Arroyo of using the MOA-AD for her stay in power beyond 2010. Since then, there was a little progress and finally, the hope to reach a peace agreement dashed away.



This repeated government's neglect and ignorance on dealing with the Bangsamoro question, disgruntled the MILF and its supporters and raised some concerns to some stakeholders such as the civil societies who argued that the protracted conflict between the GPH and MILF forces may resume anytime.

However, when Aquino assumed the presidency, hope was revived due to his so-called "Daang Matuwid" policy. Like his predecessor, President Aquino III pursued negotiation with the MILF and other rebel groups. He instructed his administration to make the GPH-MILF peace process as one of their urgent policy agenda that must be accomplished. Consequently, President Aquino III immediately formed his own negotiating team to negotiate with the MILF and asked them to study thoroughly the issue and come up with a GPH's position paper that will be a basis of their negotiating policy in relation to the MILF.

With a start, bargaining was hard at the negotiation table which in many occasions led to deadlock. There was back and forth of the peace process, but both parties (the GPH and MILF) more specifically, the GPH and the MILF negotiating teams and their respective principals seemed determined to close the chapter of Bangsamoro conflict once and for all. Despite of the enormous challenges faced by both parties during their diplomatic engagements, Aquino III administration managed to reach an agreement with the MILF by giving them a meaningful autonomous Bangsamoro government. Bangsamoro government was given a wide range of power- including fiscal authority. The then President Aquino III also reassured his commitment by allocating more budgets or resources for the South which previous regimes never did. In this situation, Aquino III made history, indeed. This can be seen when Antonio L. Colina IV, quoted the then Liberal Party's Presidential candidate for 2016 Mar Roxas as saying that the Aquino administration allotted P260 billion for Mindanao in five years, twice the P130 billion combined allocation by former Presidents Estrada and (Colina, 2015).

The second option or strategy discussed was an all-out war policy against the MILF. It was evident that the then President Estrada's declaration of an all-out war policy against the MILF throughout the Southern Philippines on 27 April July 2000 was an attempt to completely annihilate the movement since almost all MILF's positions or camps throughout the region- including its main camp, Camp Abu Bakre As-Siddique was targeted (Taya, 2009); (Rizal and Buendia, 2004). Then President Estrada's warmongering attitude reappeared when he once argued that President Aquino III's peace negotiations with MILF are doomed to fail and continued to that the only solution is an all-out war, as pointed earlier.

In the light of the above analysis, it is pretty clear that each strategic option of both the GPH and MILF listed above have costs and benefits that were given recognition by both disputing parties.

## 6. Cost and Benefit Analysis

The GPH under President Aquino III declared that the benefit of continuing to tighten military attacks against the MILF is counterproductive because it would not completely destroy the latter. As a result, protracted conflict will continue because the MILF will continue to struggle against the GPH for its quest for self-determination. In this juncture, the MILF leadership insisted that:

Without giving justice to the Bangsamoro in the Southern Philippines, there will be no end to the bloody mess in this region. It is further stated that the new armed groups, more radicals than the MNLF and MILF, will continue to appear on the horizon and challenge the GPH through violent means. Perhaps, more importantly, the MNLF and its factions and the MILF will continue to have legitimate axes to grind against the government and the Bangsamoro will continue to support them. It is the legitimacy of their cause that sustains the relevance of their struggles (Luwaran.com, 2016).

GPH under President Aquino III watch believed that continuing of military options in the region would be costly if not a grave mistake. It has been very costly war and worse, and there is no assurance that the MILF would be defeated decisively by the AFP through military approach. So, given room to the rise of some fundamental question such as: Why did stalemate occurred despite AFP's military superiority? The obvious answer or reason is that the rebel group has always resulted in guerrilla warfare strategies through hit-and-run tactics and avoids conventional confrontation with the AFP as seen in many previous military confrontations between the AFP and the BIAF. Indeed, this situation was indicated by the predecessors of former President Aquino III.

Coincidentally, the MILF was ready to accept a solution to the Bangsamoro problem short of independence, but it demanded an autonomy that is meaningful and genuine; with real power, especially on fiscal authority. The Aquino III administration seized this opportunity by offering the MILF a new regional political entity, the Bangsamoro government as agreed in the CAB and later translated into BBL and now BOL which was hotly debated and ultimately ratified by the Philippine Congress (after Aquino III's presidency) and signed by President Duterte into law.

The benefit of diplomatic approach in relation to military option was that relative between ends and means. Not only just and lasting peace, but acceptable and practical political settlement would be possible without war is a crucial point. The case of GPH-MILF peace process showed what can be achieved when both the GPH and MILF seriously and sincerely address their differences through dialogue. In contrast to the military approach, the costs of pursuing military actions could be counterproductive. Instead of actually achieving and maintaining national integration, it is just a waste of time in preparation, planning, and the search for a third party to ensure the MILF be neutralized and ultimately be no longer considered as a country's security threat. Therefore, any military solution to the conflict required massive military operations as indicated in the past that resulted in a very high price for the purse of the Manila government. This can be seen when Custodio observed thus:

In 2000, when Abubakar Campaign concluded, it was proclaimed by the Estrada administration that it was a great victory. The AFP was in possession of former MILF territories, but it came at a price. With the AFP heavily concentrated in Mindanao and haven stripped Luzon and the Visayas for deployment to Southern Command, the NPA took advantage of the situation by undertaking ambushes and operations, furthermore-stretching the military. On Rizal Day of the year 2000, Al Qaeda-linked operatives carried out multiple bomb attacks against targets in Metro Manila causing numerous civilian casualties. The operational levels of aircraft, vehicles, and equipment of the AFP plummeted to alarmingly low levels and the AFP Modernization Plan was eventually adjusted to internal security operations just to rebuild the numbers of the depleted and worn out equipment of the military. This would eventually lead to the total abandonment of external security in the years to come to the delight of the Chinese who were increasing their operations in the West Philippine Sea (Custodio, 2015).

As for the benefits of the accommodation with the MILF options, there exists a common stance that achieving a just and lasting peace, but practical and acceptable political settlement with the MILF would be considered one of President Aquino III administration's most important legacies and achievements and successes of the administration's policies in the Southern Philippines. In addition, the GPH's efforts to understand and roll-up peace and stability in the region would benefit enormously not only the region, but the country as a whole. This was echoed by Mohammad Taha when he said that it is in the Manila government's best interest to bring MILF back in the Philippine fold (Mohamad Taha, 2016). This was also echoed by Morzad Baguilan, Brigade Commander of the 105<sup>th</sup> of the MILF, when he insisted that rather assimilation, political accommodation is the best possible solution to the Bangsamoro conflict because it will send a clear message not only to the MILF, but also to other Moro insurgents that the Manila has more than one way to manage insurgents and will reward positive behavioral changes (Morzad Baguilan, 2016).

## 7. Strategic Interactions

This class of the RAM contains the concept of strategic interaction as first laid out and then put into practice by Yetiv (2004). To elaborate on this concept, (Graham and Allison, 1999) forcefully argued that every nation's best choice depends on what it expects from others to do. Strategic behavior seeks to influence other actor's choices by working on his expectations of how his behavior is related to one's own (Graham and Allison, 1999). The expected reactions of the MILF leadership and its military-wing, the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF), played a vital role in making decisions, which the movement perceived would maximize utility in terms of its objectives.

With regard to the BIAF at that time, it was perceived that the military-wing of the MILF was relatively strong and united despite successive attempts by the AFP to at least neutralize if not totally destroy them. Thus the morale of the BIAF was not diminished or shaken by protracted attacks by the AFP. Despite of their hostile relations, it signaled clearly that the BIAF leadership has welcomed the CAB. Therefore, because of the anticipated condition and behavior of the BIAF, it was expected that the CAB will be of great benefit, and thereby the opposition to it within the BIAF was to be very little. Thus, its expected usefulness would expand.

With respect to the Bangsamoro population, the people of the region are tired of conflicts and wars and thus, it was expected that they would confirm the existence of good faith and a strong will on the MILF side to sign an agreement with the GPH. Furthermore, the GPH presumed at that time that the Bangsamoro population would be in favor of and would be non-hesitant to welcome the CAB (which was agreed later). Judging by the belief of how the Bangsamoro population would respond, the GPH was aware that the opposition to the CAB was very little. Thus, the cost of peace agreement would diminish and the perceived utility would become greater.

With regards to the MILF leadership's response, the Aquino's administration anticipated that Murad Ebrahim would be with extreme caution, because he did not trust the previous administrations especially the Estrada administration. He was always afraid and hesitant and very cautious, especially with regard to agreeing or signing an agreement that would not address the Bangsamoro problem. Indeed, MILF chieftain's uneasiness in dealing with the GPH can be seen in his interview when he insisted that the MILF under his watch would not sign any agreement that would not address the so-called Bangsamoro problem (Taya, 2009). This was echoed by the MILF Chief negotiator Iqbal, when Labonera quoted him as saying that "it is better to have no BBL than have a bad version of it Joshua and Labnera (2015).

MILF Chieftain Murad Ebrahim also repeatedly said that he wanted the Bangsamoro problem to be solved so as peace may reign in the region (Taya, 2009). Peace that many people are longing for a long period of time. The Bangsamoro and other residents of the region and their generation to come would enjoy. So Murad Ebrahim desires for peace is just like normal people who wanted their children and the generation to come to play in their playgrounds, to go school without fear of being hit by stray of the bullet or barrel bomb hit their houses, schools or even their refugee camps as usually occur during protracted conflict between the AFP and the BIAF.

## 8. Choosing the Options

Due to this reasoning, the GPH was convinced that the usefulness of the peace agreement with the MILF exceeded the costs and the usefulness of other alternative choices. This is because based on past military options by AFP pursued against the BIAF, the latter was not able to cripple the military capabilities of the former. In the face of this stalemate, Abu Jalil Aiman quoted Fr. Bert Layson as forcefully urging all Filipinos to stand firm for peace because war is not a viable solution to the "Bangsamoro problem"; instead we are all losers (Abu Jalil and Aiman, 2016).

Thus, if the paper benchmarks its concluding observations from the above-mentioned statements, perhaps, it can safely claim that GPH's all-out war against the MILF was pointless judging on the latter's continuing military build-up, massive support and tight grip over the organization and above all disciplines of its members. With this, a fundamental question would arise such as: If the use of force was ineffective, then what was GPH strategic option? It was seemed that the Aquino III administration utilized rational choice by identifying GPH strategic goal (preservation of Philippine sovereignty and territorial integrity) and chose peace settlement as an option so as to achieve peace and stability in the region. The GPH's strategic response on the "Bangsamoro" problem found resonance in RAM when Allison and Zelikow stated earlier that:

In choosing a response, a process of rational choice is employed based on identifying objectives and goals, usually expressed in terms of national security and national interests; proposing options for the attainment of the objectives; evaluating the cost and benefit of each option against the defined objectives; and selecting the option that ranks highest in achieving desired outcomes (Graham and Allison, 1999).

In the light of this situation, the Aquino III administration seemed convinced that the best option is to settle its differences with the MILF through peace settlement. Thus, a significant role of rational dimension pushed the GPH and the MILF to conclude that diplomacy was the only viable and lasting option in addressing the conflict in the region. In fact, the GPH and the MILF beliefs shared by many political practitioners, pundits and activists who considered the CAB and finally BOL option was the most rational choice for the GPH in addressing the "Bangsamoro question" while preserving Philippine sovereignty and its territorial integrity.

## 9. Conclusion

In the light of the above analysis, the has demonstrated empirical evidence of how rational factor contributed to the signing of the CAB in 2014 and ultimately treasured into the Philippine Constitution through the ratification of the BOL in 2018 that granted Bangsamoro self-rule in the Southern Philippines. By analyzing the role of this rational element, the paper has re-evaluate the long-held, but poorly examined, accounts with a range of explanations given for the success of the GPH-MILF peace process such as sincerity of the administrations of both then President Aquino III and current President Duterte, international support, pressure from civil societies and stakeholders' involvement. However, missing from these suites of explanations is the rational factor and how this dimension affects actors' strategic interactions and the GPH-MILF peace process per se. Indeed, findings shown in this paper indicated that, in addition to those long-held accounts as contributing factor which consequently led to the signing of the CAB in 2014 and finally enshrined into the Philippine Constitution through the passage of the BOL, rational dimension was another important contributing factor that significantly played important role in influencing the GPH and MILF's policy-makers to take flexible attitudes to resolve outstanding issues between them as clearly demonstrated in this paper. It is, therefore, safe to claim that without this rational perspective any explanation for the success of the GPH-MILF peace process would be incomplete. So, this paper offered a new perspective for conflict-resolution and it sheds light on how rational dimension affected both GPH and MILF's strategic interactions, which led to the conclusion of a peace agreement between the GPH and MILF in 2014 and its ratification in 2018.

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