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Philippine Foreign Policy and the Complexities of Cross-Strait Relations

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Introduction

As a candidate, U.S. President Joseph R. Biden Jr. promised to “chart a fundamentally different course for American foreign policy.”¹ Following Mr. Donald J. Trump’s loss to Mr. Biden in the 2020 presidential election, there were concerns in Taiwan that the new U.S. government may not continue the outgoing Republican administration’s thrust to strengthen ties with Taiwan.² As soon as President Biden took office, however, the new Democratic administration signaled that it would continue its predecessor’s efforts to forge close U.S.-Taiwan relations. For the first time since Washington ended formal diplomatic relations with Taipei in 1979, a representative from Taiwan was officially invited to a U.S. presidential inauguration.³ Three days after the inauguration, the U.S. State Department expressed “concern [over] the pattern of ongoing PRC attempts to intimidate its neighbors, including Taiwan” and “urge[d] Beijing to cease its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan.”⁴ Following reports that seven Chinese fighter aircraft entered Taiwan’s air defense identification zone at the end of January 2021, the said concerns were later raised by President Biden himself in his first phone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping in February 2021.⁵

As tensions in Cross-Strait relations escalate in the context of major power competition in the Asia-Pacific, it is important to understand how this potential flashpoint in the region would affect the Philippines. Hence, the main question which this policy brief aims to address is: How does the Asia-Pacific geopolitical environment shape Philippine strategic interests in the Cross-Strait relations? In addition, this

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paper seeks to answer the following questions: 1) What is the Philippines’ official policy on Cross-Strait relations?; 2) What are the strategic interests of major powers involved in Cross Strait relations?; and 3) What are the key considerations in advancing Philippine strategic interests?

Examining the geopolitical dynamics of the Asia-Pacific, this paper argues that the main security interest of the Philippines is to ensure that Cross-Strait relations remain peaceful and stable. In particular, this suggests maintaining the status quo on Taiwan’s political status. Changing the status quo, either by Taiwan or China (or by an external power), may lead to armed conflict. A relatively autonomous Taiwan would remain as strategic buffer against Beijing’s intent to dominate the first island chain—thus enabling a balance of power favorable to the Philippines and other like-minded countries in the region.

Philippine Policy on Cross-Strait Relations

Before 1975, the Philippines and Taiwan—which calls itself as the Republic of China (ROC)—had formal diplomatic relations.⁶ When the

communists seized control of mainland China in 1949, the Philippines did not establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Instead, Manila continued to recognize Kuomintang (KMT) as the rulers of the whole of China when it fled to the island of Taiwan where ROC was re-established.⁷ Indeed, a Philippine embassy in Taiwan was opened in 1956.⁸

By the 1970s, with a number of countries establishing formal diplomatic ties with PRC and against the backdrop of the Sino-Soviet split, the Philippines initially espoused a "Two-China" policy at the United Nations (U.N.) in which both PRC and ROC would be represented at the said international body.⁹ Eventually, the U.N. recognized PRC as the government of China and Taiwan was ejected from the organization. In 1975, the Philippines likewise shifted diplomatic recognition from ROC to PRC. Manila adopted a "One-China" policy outlined in the 1975 Joint Communiqué of the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines: "The Philippine Government recognizes the Government of the [PRC] as the sole legal government of China, fully understands and respects the position of the Chinese Government that there is but **one China and that Taiwan is an integral part of Chinese territory.**"¹⁰

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The One-China policy has been institutionalized in subsequent Philippine government issuances. In 1987, President Corazon C. Aquino issued Executive Order (E.O.) No. 313 which prohibited Philippine Government officials from visiting Taiwan or receiving calls by visiting Taiwanese officials. The policy under E.O. 313 was further clarified by President Aquino under Memorandum Circular (M.C.) No. 148 series of 1992 which provided that the said restriction

strictly applies to the President, Vice President, Secretary of Foreign Affairs, and Secretary of National Defense.

The two aforementioned issuances of the first Aquino administration reaffirmed the One-China policy articulated in the 1975 communiqué with cognizance of the "understanding that people-to-people relations between the Philippines and Taiwan may continue, such [as] commercial, economic, cultural and other unofficial contacts."¹¹ Indeed, with the establishment of Philippines-PRC diplomatic relations in 1975, the Philippine embassy in Taiwan was closed soon thereafter. Nonetheless, Philippines-Taiwan unofficial relations continued through their respective economic and cultural offices.

Strategic Context

Taiwan is considered to be among the potential major flashpoints in East Asia, alongside the Korean Peninsula, the South China Sea (SCS), and the East China Sea (ECS). The 2018 Philippine National Security Strategy (NSS) identified Cross-Strait relations as among the potential "flashpoints of immediate concern to the Philippines."¹² The 2018 Philippine National Defense Strategy (NDS) further underscored that Beijing insistence on the One-China policy, "conduct of live fire drills and the call for reunification, as well as the rise of nationalist tones in Taiwan's international and domestic policies are all significant concerns to their precarious relationship. These developments might lead to miscalculations and further escalation of military conflict."¹³

Indeed, the potential for armed confrontation in Taiwan is a concern for the governments in the region and elsewhere. After all, Taiwan is an issue in which nationalist sentiments converge with geopolitical considerations, as well as the interests of major powers and other states in the region. For Beijing, the primary interest is the reunification of Taiwan—considered as a "renegade province"—with mainland China. The preamble of the PRC constitution in part provides that "Taiwan is part of the sacred territory of the [PRC]. It is the

lofty duty of the entire Chinese people, including our compatriots in Taiwan, to accomplish the great task of reunifying the motherland.”¹⁴ In accomplishing this objective, China has not ruled out the use of force. Under the 2005 Anti-Secession Law, China stressed that: “In the event that the ‘Taiwan independence’ secessionist forces should act under any name or by any means to cause the fact of Taiwan’s secession from China, or that major incidents entailing Taiwan’s secession from China should occur, or that possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted, **the state shall employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.**”¹⁵ The 2005 law further underscores Beijing’s view that the issue of Taiwan is China’s “internal affair” subject to “no interference by any outside forces.”¹⁶

For China, Taiwan evokes nationalist sentiments. In many ways, Taiwan is the last major issue to overcome the “Century of Humiliation”—the period from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s during which China experienced immense external and internal turmoil leading to the country’s rapid decline and loss of territories to other major powers.¹⁷ In 1895, the island of Taiwan was ceded by Beijing to Tokyo in the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese war.¹⁸ Following the victory of Mao Zedong’s communist party in the Chinese civil war, Chiang Kai-Shek’s nationalist KMT retreated to Taiwan in 1949 and re-established the ROC on the island. With the restoration of Hong Kong and Macao in the late 1990s to Chinese sovereignty, Taiwan remains as the last major piece of territory that has yet to reunified with the mainland. In line with his vision of a “Chinese dream of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,”¹⁹ PRC President Xi Jinping underscored in 2019 that “[t]he country is growing strong, the nation is rejuvenating and unification between the two sides of the strait is the great trend of history.”²⁰ Reaffirming long-held policy, President Xi

emphasized that Beijing “make[s] no promise to abandon the use of force, and retain the option of taking all necessary measures.”²¹ In other words, armed aggression against Taiwan is always an option for Beijing.

Beyond nationalistic motivations, China’s unambiguous interest to reunify Taiwan with the mainland has strategic dimensions. The geopolitical environment of the Asia-Pacific region is now largely defined by the strategic competition among the major powers, principally between the U.S. and China. Beijing’s apparent objective to displace Washington at the apex of the Asia-Pacific regional order in part rests on achieving and exercising pre-eminence in the first and second island chains. However, since the end of World War II (WWII), Washington has

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effectively dominated the said island chains with forward operating bases in its own territories, and that of its allies and partners. In its eastern front, China is surrounded by U.S. allies—South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines. Further south of the first island chain is Australia,

another U.S. ally, as well as New Zealand, a former U.S. ally but a current security partner. In this regard, an autonomous Taiwan is a major stumbling block to China’s geopolitical ambitions in the Pacific.

For Washington, Taiwan plays a crucial role in maintaining U.S. preeminence in the region. Indeed, for much of the Cold War, Taipei was a formal U.S. ally alongside Seoul, Manila, Tokyo, Bangkok, Canberra, and Wellington. These U.S. allies played crucial roles in containing communist expansion in the region. Cognizant of Taiwan’s strategic geographic location, the U.S. continues to have strong defense and security relations with Taiwan even after normalizing relations with PRC. Prior to the formal termination of the U.S.-ROC Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) in 1980 following the establishment of U.S.-PRC diplomatic relations, the American Congress passed the 1979

Taiwan's Relations Act (TRA) which underscored that "peace and stability in the [Western Pacific] area are in the political, security, and economic interests of the United States, and are matters of international concern," and that "**any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States.**"²² The TRA provided the U.S. "will make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability."²³ The American arm sales to Taiwan continues to be a cause for friction in the Sino-U.S. relationship.

For its part, Taiwan still appears to consider mainland China as part of the ROC, at least officially. Under the "Act Governing Relations between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area," Taipei defines the "Mainland Area" as the "the territory of the Republic of China outside the Taiwan Area."²⁴ The "Taipei Area," on the other hand, refers to "Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, Matsu, and any other area under the effective control of the Government."²⁵ With an apparent reference to the "Taipei Area," a similar implication is made under the ROC constitution which calls Taiwan as the "free area of the Republic of China." Re-taking control of mainland China was, after all, the goal of the KMT government in the aftermath of the Chinese civil war. Although open to various interpretations on both sides, Beijing and Taipei reached a consensus in 1992—popularly known as the "1992 consensus"—in which both sides recognized that there is only one China, with an implicit understanding that Taiwan will not seek independence.²⁶ However, given the vast political, economic, and military disparity that now exists between China and Taiwan, it is now highly unlikely, if not impossible, for Taipei to recapture the mainland. Moreover, there now appears growing support for independence in Taiwan. Unlike her predecessors, incumbent Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen has explicitly stated that her administration "never accepted the '1992 Consensus,'" adding that "Taiwan absolutely will not accept 'one country, two systems.'"²⁷

It is not in the Philippines' interest for Taiwan to be peacefully reunified with mainland China. Otherwise, this would allow Beijing to further expand its influence in the first island chain.

Policy Considerations

Cognizant of the geopolitical dynamics of the Taiwan issue, **it is important to underscore that the main Philippine national security interest is peace and stability in Cross-Strait relations.** Specifically, this means maintaining the status-quo which must not be changed either by Beijing or Taipei (or other players like the U.S.). It is not in the Philippines' interest for Taiwan to be peacefully reunified with mainland China. Otherwise, this would allow Beijing to further expand its influence in the first island chain. This will further solidify China's 10-dashed (previously 9-dashed) line claim. In this context, China will have control of Itu Aba, the largest natural feature in the Spratlys and is presently occupied by Taiwan. Moreover, Beijing's control of Taiwan could potentially constrain the movement of U.S. forces in allied countries—including the Philippines—during times of contingencies given the island's strategic location.

An independent Taiwan is also not in the Philippines' interest. In an ideal scenario, the peaceful independence of Taiwan that is recognized by Beijing, and the international community at large would serve Manila's strategic interests. An independent Taiwan that has robust security partnership with Washington and its allies—including Tokyo, Manila, and Canberra—could further constrain Beijing's efforts to dominate the first island chain. However, such a scenario is only ideal. The reunification of Taiwan with mainland China is a core interest of Beijing. As noted earlier, China has vowed to use force if necessary to prevent the independence of Taiwan. As such, the road to a Taiwanese independence will likely not be

peaceful one. The Philippines, being geographically close to Taiwan and a formal U.S. ally, would likely be involved in a war on the status of Taiwan. In addition, evacuating Filipino citizens from Taiwan should armed confrontation breakout is another major concern for Manila.

As pointed out earlier, the Taiwan issue is related to the more immediate external security concern of the Philippines—the South China Sea (SCS) dispute. Taiwan is one of claimants in the SCS. Like China, Taiwan also has an expansive 9-dashed line SCS claim, albeit with an apparent different interpretation with that of the PRC.²⁸ After all, the author of the said claim, first announced in 1947, was the KMT regime of the ROC which was then based in mainland China. Although Taipei has taken some recent steps to change some of the aspects of its SCS policy under the Tsai Ing-wen administration through the “Four Principles and Five Actions” initiative,²⁹ it is nevertheless noteworthy that Taiwan has rejected the SCS arbitration case initiated by Manila, calling the 2016 award as “completely unacceptable to the government of the [ROC].”³⁰ In this strategic milieu, the SCS issue complicates Manila’s foreign policy on Cross-Strait relations in two ways. On the one hand, both Manila and Taiwan have a shared interest in constraining an expansionist China. But on the other hand, Philippine and Taiwanese strategic interests diverge in the SCS. It is therefore important to underscore that commonalities in political systems and values do not always mean similarity in interests.

Cognizant of the aforementioned geopolitical considerations, it can be argued that maintaining the status quo would mean that Taiwan would remain as a strategic buffer against Beijing’s intent to dominate the first island chain—thus enabling a balance of power favorable to the Philippines and like-minded countries. Otherwise, a reunified China could potentially achieve preeminence in the first island chain and eventually tip the balance of power in favor of Beijing.

In advancing the interest to maintain the status-quo, the Philippines must continue in its implementation of the One-China policy outlined in the 1975 communique. **While officially**

recognizing Beijing as the ruler of the whole China, Manila should continue and enhance its unofficial relations with Taipei. Indeed, despite the absence of formal diplomatic ties, the Philippines and Taiwan have managed to work through their differences, particularly during a crisis. In the aftermath of a 2013 fatal shooting incident in their overlapping exclusive economic zones (EEZs),³¹ Manila and Taiwan negotiated and signed a cooperation agreement on law enforcement in fisheries matters.³² The Tsai administration’s “New Southbound Policy” may serve as a platform for Manila and Taiwan to enhance relations.

While maintaining unofficial ties with Taipei, Manila should protest any reference that the former may make regarding expansive SCS claims. Preparation for various contingencies on Taiwan including, but not limited to, all out invasion of Taiwan, Crimea-style annexation of parts of Taiwan-controlled areas (e.g. Itu Aba), etc. must likewise be made. In addition, how the Philippines would adjust to a possible situation in which Taiwan is reunified with mainland China (peaceful or otherwise) is another important consideration.

Conclusion

This paper examined the current Philippine policy on Cross-Strait relations, as well as the geopolitical context which underpin Philippine national security interests on the issue. Against the backdrop of the current strategic milieu, it can be argued that the main interest of the Philippines is to maintain the status-quo in Cross-Strait relations. Despite its challenges, the status-quo nevertheless provides the

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Philippines and like-minded countries a favorable balance of power by presenting a significant stumbling block to Beijing's maritime expansionist designs in the region.

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