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Reflections on the 2013 Chinese Defense White Paper *and Implications on Philippine Interests**

Introduction

In the midst of tension brewing in contested islands in the West Philippine Sea, the People's Republic of China (PRC) released on 16 April 2013 a Defense White Paper demonstrating the PRC's staunch employment of military forces in the Asia Pacific. The Defense White Paper outlines the general structure and strength of the Chinese armed forces, comprising the People's Liberation Army (PLA), People's Armed Police Force (PAPF), and the militia.

The Defense White Paper reveals the PRC's perceptions and attitude towards security concerns in the Asian region, such as the United States (US) pivot in the East, the behaviour of East Asian neighbors, and the territorial claims over the West Philippine Sea. The PRC's sensitivity to perceived threats and changes in the regional security landscape is evident from a refocusing of its role and strategic interests as a maritime country and economic leader in the globalized world.

Notably, there are tints of realism in the Chinese defense document which paint a picture of a volatile security environment in which states build up their defenses and expand their territorial rule in efforts to be secure. The PRC's reading of the current power play in Northeast Asia, as

impressed in the Defense White Paper, seems to unravel a theory of conspiracy between the US and its allies in the Asia Pacific to contain China's "peaceful" rise. Such perception of an alleged cunning ploy behind military alliances as well as regional coalitions drives the Chinese to beef up their defense posture, an act that in turn harbours insecurities among neighboring countries. The counter moves of the PRC, which it claims as "defensive" in nature, is nonetheless seen in the region as overly assertive and hegemonic. This condition only creates a security dilemma as countries mutually employ traditional military logic of strengthening their defense capabilities in a move to protect themselves against each other.

This policy study looks into four elements in the Chinese document which are of significant interest to the Philippines. Specifically, the elements are as follows: (1) discomfort towards the US military presence in Asia; (2) desire for maritime power; (3) expansive global reach; and, (4) "informationization" of defense capabilities.

It must be noted that despite impressions of a seemingly alarming position taken by the PRC, the Defense White Paper does not seem to indicate a revolutionary shift of the PRC's known stance and strategies on key security issues, such as its historic claims over the South China sea.

Nonetheless, a closer look into the contents of the Chinese document is warranted in order for the Philippines, as one of the claimant countries in

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the disputed islands in the West Philippine Sea, to introspect on the courses of action it might take to secure its strategic interests. A re-examination of the Philippine defense policies as well as capabilities is needed not only in line with its national interests but also in accord with the emerging security dynamics in the Asia Pacific region.

Discomfort towards US Presence and Influence in the Asian Region

The Defense White Paper of the PRC wrote that there has been a strengthening of defense alliances in the Asia Pacific region, which the Chinese saw as a sign of *“increasing hegemonism, power politics, and neo-interventionism.”* In the same line, the Defense White Paper openly noted a *“rebalancing”* of the US military, which spells *“profound changes”* in the Asia Pacific.

The US presence in the region can also be read as intricately linked, among others, to the strengthening of Philippine-US defense relations. The US-led war on terror, after the September 11, 2001 or “9/11” terror attacks in the US, has dramatically reinvigorated security cooperation between the two countries. In retrospect, their relations had undergone a lukewarm phase following the controversial withdrawal of the US military bases in the Philippines in 1991. The latter had been under the US until its grant of Philippine independence in 1946. The establishment of an independent Philippine republic, however, had

provided for the continued presence of US military bases for defense and security of its former colony as well as US interests in the region.

As a partner in counterterrorism, the Philippines has vigorously led diplomatic campaigns in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for support of counterterrorism efforts in the region. The US, meanwhile, has been providing much needed military assistance and other development aid to the Philippines as a result of their renewed defense and security ties. The US has also enhanced its defense relations with Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand since the post-9/11 period.

Aside from the war on terror, the US engagements in the region came during the height of China’s actuations to claim and control disputed islands in the West Philippine Sea. The security atmosphere in the Philippines, engendered by the perceived over-aggressiveness of the Chinese, invites opportunity for greater US involvement in the easement of conflict in Asia’s strategic maritime zone. With this, the notion that the US presence can be a deterrent and counterweight against the PRC’s brazen assertion of sovereignty over the West Philippine Sea has gained currency in some quarters in the Philippines.

The increased US presence in the Southeast Asian region has caused some measure of discomfort for the PRC. In particular, it was reported that the dominant perception in the Chinese polity thought of the US as conspiring with some Southeast Asian states to “contain” China’s legitimate rise. From this viewpoint, the US was seen by the PRC as using counterterrorism and defense alliances as platforms from which the US can counterbalance the rise of China as a rival power in the Asia Pacific.

China’s threat perception of the US strategy in the West Philippine Sea must be given due consideration in Philippine defense policy. The perceived conspiracy between the US and the Philippines against China may hamper constructive initiatives to promote a *détente* or diplomatic solution in the West Philippine Sea.

Desire to become a Maritime Power

Chinese leaders, in several occasions, openly expressed their vision for China to become a maritime power, a desideratum echoed in the Defense White Paper. The desire for dominance of the erstwhile imperial nation is impressed on the PRC's perception of the Asian Region as a center for "world economic development and strategic intersection between major powers."

When the Defense White Paper asserted that "*China is a major maritime as well as land country,*" the PRC was sending a message to the world that it places a vital premium on its far-reaching maritime domains. Such statement corroborates China's elevation of the maritime disputes in the South China Sea or West Philippine Sea as a matter of "core interest," alongside hard-line sovereignty issues with Tibet, Taiwan, and Xinjiang. The PRC's declaration of its vital interests only reaffirms what security analysts believe as an issue on which China might not be very willing to negotiate.

The PRC's reactive assertiveness in the West Philippine Sea casts doubt on the prospect of asserting Philippine sovereignty over the Spratly or *Kalayaan* Islands in the disputed area. Moreover, with China becoming a major maritime power in the region, the chances for multilateral cooperation and mutual exploration of resources by other claimant countries in the South China Sea or West Philippine Sea pose a great challenge for the international community to forge for regional security.

Aside from the PRC and the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, and Malaysia also have territorial claims over the islands in the contested sea. Eight (8) of these islands are presently occupied by the Philippines, nine (9) by the PRC, sixteen (16) by Vietnam, and at least one by Malaysia. Taiwan, which maintains independence from the PRC, occupies the biggest island in the West Philippine Sea. Another claimant is Brunei, although it does not presently hold occupation in the contested islands.

Expansive Global Reach of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA)

The Defense White Paper of the PRC devotes ample discussions on the physical presence of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in many parts of the globe. The PLA is described as being involved in various security cooperation initiatives with the United Nations (UN) and other international bodies in the promotion of peace and stability in many troubled parts of the world.

The increased global presence of the PLA shows China's break from its old penchant for maintaining a low-key presence in international affairs before the turn of the Century. China's current and well-publicized international engagements could not have been expected a few decades ago when China had been regarded more as an inward-looking, developing country.

The PLA's international presence also indicates a growing confidence in China's potential to project hard physical power beyond its shores and into the far-flung regions of the world. This newfound confidence accentuates the capacity and mobility of the Chinese armed forces to significantly contribute to peace and stability of other critical regions such as the Middle East. With the phenomenal role of the PRC in international economic and politico-military affairs, its growing strategic influence should not be underestimated. If the Philippines were to muster global support for the promotion of a rules-based management of disputes in the West Philippine Sea, for instance, the PRC's increasingly global reach would loom behind and turn the tide to its call. The Philippines, nonetheless, is determined to pursue legitimate and peaceful policies along the lines of international law and diplomacy with regard to issues involving the PRC.

"Informationization" of the Chinese Armed Forces

The term "informationization" is mentioned several times in the Defense White Paper of the PRC, especially with regard to efforts of upgrading the technological capabilities of the Chinese armed

forces. The Defense White Paper notes that there is an increased competition for “strategic superiorities” in the arenas of outer space and cyber space. Along this line, the PRC intends to intensify its military readiness to win “local wars under the conditions of ‘informationization.’” Chinese defense and security leaders seriously recognize that future conflicts will involve technological instruments and methods that do not fall strictly within traditional or conventional methods of warfare. This is clearly emphasized in the Defense White Paper that plans to improve military capabilities in an “informationized” environment, and even cyber war.

“Informationization” connotes highly technical principles, processes, and methods of employing information and communications for defense and security. The high premium given by the PRC to informationization and cyber technology has critical implications to Philippine defense. It must be recalled that the latter experienced “cyber attacks” during the thick of its standoff against China in the disputed Panatag Shoal in the West Philippine Sea in May 2012.

To note, China denied having a hand in the cyberattacks, but this did not discount the fact that the Chinese military was capable of using cyber technology to pursue its national interests. Although the alleged attacks had not impaired the cyber infrastructure in the Philippines, these nevertheless have exposed its vulnerability to cyber warfare by a powerful nation that is into informationization.

Given this condition, the Philippine defense force is, therefore, behooved to enhance its capabilities to secure the country against cyber threats. It is imperative for the Philippines to identify vital installations, industries, and organizations, which need to be protected by efficient and reliable information and communications system. Contingency plans, standard operating procedures (SOPs), and scenario-based training are needed in order to protect the Philippine government and societal institutions in this epoch of “informationized” warfare. China has already contemplated

modernizing its capabilities against threats in an informationized environment. It is time that the Philippines should do the same.

Conclusion

The contents of the Defense White Paper of the PRC should not anymore come as a surprise to the Philippines as well as to the Asia Pacific region. Taken from a realist lens, the Chinese threat perception emanates from a security environment of economic competition and military modernization in which the PRC wants to make headway. The Defense White Paper provides clues about China’s discomfort with the increasing US presence and alliances in the region. The document also signals China’s widening international and global engagements in its desire to become a maritime power and informationized defense force in this new century.

As the Philippines grapples with the reality of a looming power, China seizes the opportunity to turn this realism to its advantage when it bolsters historic claims with a formidable military force over the disputed maritime area. What this holds for the Philippines, as one of the major stakeholders in the sea dispute, is a critical scenario that defense leaders and policy makers must contemplate on if they really want to assert sovereignty over the islands which the Philippines has effective occupation.

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