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Strengthening Manila's Maritime Security Posture in the South China Sea: The Role of the Philippines-Japan Strategic Partnership

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Introduction

Last January 2017, Japanese Prime Minister Shizo Abe visited the Philippines. The third summit meeting between the Philippines and Japan in less than a year after the inauguration of President Rodrigo Duterte, the visit was widely seen as a sign of continuing enhancement of Philippines-Japan relations. Enjoying warm ties since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1956, the Philippines and Japan elevated their bilateral relationship to a higher level of cooperation when they issued Philippines-Japan Strategic Partnership Declaration (PJSPD) in 2011.[1] Four years later, Manila and Tokyo announced that their relations have "entered the state of Strengthened Strategic Partnership."[2]

The close ties between the two countries are forged within the milieu of an increasingly complex and uncertain security landscape spawned largely by an emerging power shift in the region, as manifested by the tensions surrounding maritime and territorial disputes in, among others, the South China Sea (SCS). Indeed, China's rise and its assertiveness in the SCS has served as an impetus for an increased cooperation within and among the members of the US-led hub-and-spokes system of alliances. As one scholar noted, the deepening security relations between Manila and Tokyo are signs that the two US allies are "cementing the links between two spokes."[3]

This paper aims to discuss how the Philippines-Japan Strategic Partnership strengthens Manila's maritime security posture in the SCS. In particular, this article seeks to address the following questions: (1) What is a strategic partnership?; (2) Why is there a strategic imperative for the Philippines and Japan to forge such a partnership?; and (3) How does the PJSPD bolster Manila's maritime capabilities?

A strategic partnership has relatively low commitment costs and is therefore a more flexible platform of security cooperation.

Strategic Partnership: A Form of Security Cooperation

The concept of "strategic partnership" is relatively new in the discipline of international relations, having originally come from the field of business and organizational studies.[4] One of the scholars who developed a theory to understand strategic partnership is Thomas Wilkins, who conceptualized "strategic partnership" as a form of security cooperation similar to alliance and coalition.[5] For purposes of discussion, Wilkins' theory shall be called in this paper as the Strategic Partnership Framework (SPF). Strategic partnership is defined as a "structured collaboration between states (or other actors) to take joint advantage or economic opportunities, or to respond to security challenges more effectively than could be achieved in isolation."[6]

SPF is composed of three elements: formation, implementation, and evaluation. States form strategic partnerships largely because of two major imperatives: environmental uncertainty and strategic fit. The uncertainty in the international environment, spawned largely by anarchy in the international system, drives states to form strategic partnership in order to, among others, develop their capabilities and initiate actions aimed at mitigating such uncertainty. Strategic fit pertains to the

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compatibility of interests of the parties.[7] In implementing the strategic partnership, states may use various platforms including executive, ministerial, military, among others. Although it may cover a wide range of issues, the focus of the partnership is mainly on economic and/or politico-security affairs. To ensure its long-term sustainability and effectiveness, the strategic partnership must also be evaluated by states. To note, this paper shall cover only the formation and implementation elements.

In common usage, J. Amador observed that "strategic partnerships are conflated with strategic alliances as if they are one and the same."[8] A major distinction between strategic partnership and alliance, however, is that whereas the latter is a formal type of security cooperation (i.e. enacted through a treaty), the former is usually an informal arrangement (i.e. in the form of declarations, statements, etc.).[9] With this distinction, a strategic partnership has relatively low commitment costs and is therefore a more flexible platform of security cooperation.[10]

Stemming from these theoretical underpinnings, this paper argues that Manila and Tokyo forged a strategic partnership largely because of their shared concern over the uncertainty in the regional security environment caused by China's rise, as manifested by its increasing assertiveness in the SCS. In this context, the Philippines-Japan Strategic Partnership's objective of promoting peace and stability in the SCS is operationalized by strengthening Manila's maritime security posture through: 1) enhancing maritime domain awareness; 2) conducting bilateral capacity-building initiatives; and 3) coordinating measures in managing tensions at the multilateral level.

Forming the Philippines-Japan Strategic Partnership: The Imperatives

In the immediate years before 2011, the strategic imperative that brought Manila and Tokyo closer together was China's increasing assertiveness in the maritime domain. Various incidents in the SCS and the East China Sea (ECS)—where Beijing and Tokyo have overlapping claims—were the immediate preceding events before the PJSPD was issued.[11] From a broader perspective, however, the uncertainty in the SCS arises from a larger strategic development—the emerging power shift in the Asia-Pacific region. It is important to note that the seas play vital role in international affairs. Geopolitical strategist A.T. Mahan argued that the effective control of the seas was a key to achieving the status of a world power.[12] It is therefore not surprising why China, now the second largest economy in the world[13], seeks to dominate the SCS possible as a precursor to its possible grand design of dominating the Asia Pacific—a region in which the US, since the Second World War, has enjoyed pre-eminence. The rise of a state that challenges the status quo will ultimately aim for a change in leadership in the international order. The US, under President Barack Obama, responded by countering China through its "Rebalance/Pivot" strategy.[14] In other words, the objective of Beijing is to replace Washington at the apex of regional hierarchy—thus spawning greater uncertainty in the regional security environment which, as the SPF suggests, drives states to forge a strategic partnership.[15]

It is interesting to note that China has a plan to achieve such objective of displacing the US from its dominant position in the region. In 1982, China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) developed a grand strategy which called for a Chinese dominance of the First-Island Chain and the Second-Island Chain, both of which includes the Philippines and Japan, as well as the SCS and ECS.[16] This Island-Chain Strategy (ICS) is largely similar to the 19th century Monroe Doctrine of the US, which declared that "The American continents … are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers."[17]

As the main feature of the ICS, the "Anti-Access/Area-Denial" (A2/AD) concept appears to be the guiding principle of China's SCS statecraft.[18] Whereas A2 is "intended to slow deployment of friendly forces *into* a theater or cause forces to operate from distances farther from the locus of conflict than they would otherwise prefer," AD is "intended to impede friendly operations *within* areas where an adversary cannot or will not prevent access."[19] Although these are not necessarily new concepts in warfare, A2/AD becomes threatening given the technological advancement that will translate strategies into actions in the operational theater. Indeed, aside from initiating a reorganization within the PLA, Beijing is also acquiring new surface combatants, developing stealth strike fighters, as well as an expansion of air, naval and land-based missile

forces.[20] More importantly, China's land reclamations activities indicate the militarization of the dispute. From Tokyo;s perspective, the SCS is inextricably linked with its own dispute with Beijing over the ECS.

Clearly, by virtue of their geography, the Philippines and Japan are at the forefront of the high stake geopolitical chessboard game between the two great powers in the region. As the SPF suggests, Manila and Tokyo have shared interests—called as strategic fit—in this regard. The 2015 PJSPD defined such interests unambiguously: 1) "maintaining peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region at a time when the security environment in the region is faced with many challenges;"[21] and 2) mindful of the threats to freedom of navigation and over flight by China's assertiveness, "[m]aintaining open and stable seas is essential in ensuring regional stability and is an imperative issue [for both countries] as maritime nations"[22] not only for security reasons but also for economic considerations. These objectives reinforced the 2011 PJSPD which noted that "the [SCS] is vital, as it connects the world and the Asia Pacific region, and that *peace and stability* therein is of common interest to the international community."[23] In other words, as one scholar argued, Manila and Tokyo have a "converging strategic priorit[y]" of "constraining China's maritime expansion."[24] To fulfill the goals of the PJSPD, the Philippines and Japan must raise the costs for China's maritime expansion and this can be done by strengthening Manila's maritime security posture.

Implementing the PJSPD: Strengthening Manila's Maritime Security Posture

As noted earlier, strategic partnership, as a form of security cooperation, is less formal compared to an alliance. As such, strategic partnership has low commitment costs compared to a formal treaty alliance. This distinction is significant because a strategic partnership, when compared to an alliance, offers the Philippines and Japan at least two diplomatic advantages. First, a strategic partnership does not bind states in a military commitment to defend one another in the event of an armed aggression. As result, Manila and Tokyo will not experience the anxiety over abandonment and/or entrapment which parties to an alliance sometimes come across. In turn, strategic partners can have clear expectations of the objectives of areas of bilateral cooperation and focus their attention on specific collaborative initiatives.

Second, a strategic partnership offers the two countries flexibility in their respective foreign policy while pursuing their mutual goals. A strategic partnership offers flexibility in two ways. First, unlike an alliance, a strategic partnership does not create a formal alignment with one power and therefore, does not create a perception that two states are ganging up on a third state. In turn, while the partners pursue their *strategic* objectives, they can have *tactical* shifts in their respective foreign policy without causing major diplomatic friction. For example, the Philippines[25] and Australia[26] would have found it rather difficult to have closer diplomatic ties with China had they forged a treaty alliance—instead of a strategic partnership—with Japan. Second, a strategic partnership is more flexible in the sense that the terms of the partnership are relatively easy to amend compared to the commitments in a formal treaty alliance. This allows the strategic partners to easily adjust their agreement should circumstances warrant doing so. Indeed, changes in the terms of the strategic partnership could be revised through politico-diplomatic channels alone and would no longer require the concurrence of respective legislatures.

Clearly, by virtue of their geography, the Philippines and Japan are at the forefront of the high stake geopolitical chessboard game between the two great powers in the region.

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Manila and Tokyo forged a strategic partnership largely because of their shared concern over the uncertainty in the regional security environment caused by China's rise, as manifested with its increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea.

It must be emphasized that in the context of the SCS, China's assertiveness does not strictly follow the balance-of-power stratagem in the sense that it relies solely on its military forces. To the contrary, Beijing also employs civilian forces (e.g. coast guard) to promote its claim—as China did during the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff with Manila.[27] Indeed, China is employing what has been termed as "grey-zone coercion" which refers to "activity that is coercive and aggressive in nature, but that is deliberately designed to remain below the threshold of conventional military conflict and open interstate war."[28]

Mindful of these considerations, the PJSPD's objective of promoting peace and stability in the SCS can be operationalized by supporting Manila's efforts in strengthening its maritime security posture in the SCS. Specifically, the PJSPD can strengthen Philippine maritime security posture in the SCS through cooperation on the following areas.

First, Manila and Tokyo can enhance maritime domain awareness (MDA). Also known as maritime situational awareness, MDA "refers to the 24/7 knowledge obtained from the integrated collection, analysis and exchange of information that relates to the maritime environment which are all used to support decision-making for governance, development, and security undertakings."[29] Efforts toward building an effective MSA architecture require, among others, the collection of data, as well as establishing and maintaining a common maritime operating picture.[30]

MDA is a very significant aspect of the Philippines-Japan strategic partnership and has become increasingly more relevant to both countries since the inception of physical changes in the security environment as a result of "unilateral actions to change the status quo in the [SCS] including large-scale land reclamation and building of outposts."[31] Hence, under the "Action Plan" annexed to the 2015 PJSPD, Manila and Tokyo agreed to cooperate in "information sharing on security environment and challenges in regional and global context, and enhancement of information security in relation to information sharing."[32]

It is the mutual strategic interest of the Philippines and Japan to monitor Chinese activities in the SCS because Beijing may eventually control the area through a "Strategic Triangle." An observation first made by retired Vice Admiral Yoji Koda of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF), the Strategic Triangle pertains to the militarization of Woody Island, Fiery Cross Reef, and Scarborough Shoal.[33] The first two aforementioned features would connect Scarborough Shoal with the two major group of islands in the SCS—Paracels and Spratlys. If China indeed gains effective control of the SCS through the Strategic Triangle, Beijing would have the ability to consolidate its 9-dash line claim and, eventually, enforce its ICS—which, as noted earlier, includes domination of the ECS—through the A2/AD.

Second, the more significant area of cooperation under the PJSPD is the bilateral capacity-building initiatives. As noted in both the 2011 and 2015 PJSPD, capacity-building is an important pillar of the Manila-Tokyo strategic partnership. Mindful of the limited capacity of Philippine maritime agencies in addressing security challenges in the SCS, the PJSPD focuses capacity-building on three fronts: 1) defense equipment and technology transfer;[34] 2) joint training activities and exercises;[35] and 3) education and research exchanges.[36]

The transfer of defense equipment and technology appears to be a top priority for the Philippines and Japan. Indeed, in 2016, the two countries signed an Agreement on the "Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology" (ATDET) to formalize this initiative.[37] In 2013, under the

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Benigno Aquino III presidency, it was announced that the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) would acquire 10 multi-role response vessels (MRRVs) from Tokyo through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), with the aim of enhancing Manila's capability to patrol its large coasts and further strengthening maritime law enforcement functions.[38] To date, since 2016, six out of the ten MRRVs have been turned over to the Philippines: *Barko ng Republika ng Pilipinas (BRP) Tubbataha*, *BRP Malabrigo*, *BRP Malapascua, BRP Capones*, *BRP Suluan*, and *BRP Sindangan*.[39] It is expected that the other four MRRVs will be delivered to the Philippines within the term of President Duterte.[40] In addition, during President Duterte's state visit to Japan in 2016, the two countries signaled their intention to further deepen their cooperation on enhancing the maritime capabilities of the Philippines with the issuance of the "Exchange of notes on loan from Japan on Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project for the Philippine Coast Guard (Phase II)."[41] The heavy investment on coast guard capabilities is important in the context of China's grey zone coercion. Also, in the past administration, the Philippines and Japan negotiated an agreement under which the latter agreed to lease to the former five Beechcraft TC-90 King Air advance trainer aircraft, two of which were turned over to the Philippines in March 2017.[42]

The Philippines-Japan Strategic Partnership Declaration's objective of promoting peace and stability in the South China Sea can be operationalized by supporting Manila's efforts in strengthening its maritime security posture.

Beyond the transfer of defense equipment and technology, joint training activities and exercises are other areas by which the PJSPD can promote capacity building. The 2015 PJSPD noted that the memorandum of understanding on "Defense Cooperation" (MOUDC), signed in January 2015, provided a framework by which the two countries can conduct training activities and exercises. In June of that year, the navies and air forces of the strategic partners conducted their first joint search and rescue training and exercise off the coast of Palawan, which is near the disputed area in the SCS.[43] In January 2017, pursuant to the PJSPD, the navies of both countries conducted a joint exercise on the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES).[44] With regard to the TC-90 aircrafts, Japan not only allowed the lease of the same but also agreed to train the Philippine Navy (PN) pilots who would use them.[45]

It is also interesting that the 2011 PJSPD noted the "training [activities]" of the PCG.[46] In 2006, five years before Manila and Tokyo declared their strategic partnership, the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) and the PCG, along with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), conducted the first seminar and exercise on maritime search and rescue.[47]With the PJSPD, this training and exercise continued and was institutionalized. Indeed, in January 2017, PCG, JCG, and JICA held the 11th iteration of their annual activity, with a particular focus on maritime law enforcement.[48] Overall, the key objective of such joint training and exercise is to promote interoperability between the maritime forces of the strategic partners.

Education and research exchanges, cooperative initiatives outlined in the MOUDC, are other platforms by which Manila and Tokyo could enhance their capabilities.[49] This area of cooperation is important in order to broaden the knowledge and skills of both military and civilian officers in both countries' defense establishments.

Third, coordination of measures in managing maritime tensions at the multilateral level. As a founding member, the Philippines has underscored the importance of ASEAN, especially in the context of the broader Asia-Pacific regional security architecture.[50] Japan, a dialogue partner of the organization, has likewise noted the importance of ASEAN. In its 2013 NSS, Tokyo emphasized the "the influence ASEAN has on peace, stability and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region as a whole."[51]

The strategic partners agreed in the 2015 PJSPD—noting the necessity for "close coordination in the international arena"[52]—to "strengthen the

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role of regional frameworks such as ASEAN, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), and the [ADMM]-Plus, and the East Asia Summit (EAS), as well as of relevant international organizations and thereby to utilize them more effectively."[53]

It must be noted, however, that the SCS dispute has exposed some of the divisions among ASEAN member-states (AMS).[54] Nevertheless, there is still a possibility for ASEAN to initiate measures that will not further undermine unity among its members. With diplomatic support from Japan, Manila, as the 2017 ASEAN chair, may propose the inclusion of the Plus-countries in the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting's (ADMM) Direct Communication Link (DCL) initiative, which aims to provide direct hotline among the AMS defense ministers.[55] The Philippines would have this opportunity when it hosts the biennial ADMM-Plus. In addition, Japan can likewise offer diplomatic support to the Philippine defense and security initiatives relating to the maritime security during the latter's chairmanship of ASEAN, including, but not limited to, the Concept Paper on Guidelines of Maritime Interaction, Concept Paper on the Principles for ADMM-Wide Education and Training Exchanges, and the Concept Paper on Establishment of Ad-Hoc Working Group to Develop Guidelines on Air Encounters between Military Aircraft.[56]

Beyond these ASEAN-related platforms, the Philippines and Japan also participate in the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), which is a "forum designed to promote mutual understanding among navies of the region and increase naval cooperation in the western Pacific by providing a forum to discuss maritime issues."[57]

Policy Considerations

To further strengthen Philippines-Japan strategic partnership, the countries may consider the following initiatives.

First, continue of the negotiation of a Status of Visiting Forces Agreement (SOVFA). During his 2015 state visit to Japan, then-Philippines President Benigno Aquino III announced that Manila "will be initiating all the diplomatic requirements to come up with a Visiting Forces Agreement."[58] Indeed, a SOVFA will enhance the interoperability between the military of both countries by providing the legal basis for field exercises and enhanced training activities.[59] Otherwise, as Aquino emphasized, "An agreement even for humanitarian concerns that exists only in paper will not be effective when there comes the time that you would need to be in coordination and in corporation or in joint operation with your strategic partner."[60] Under the Duterte administration, the talks on the proposed SOVFA appear to be still on track. During the 5th Vice Defense Ministerial Meeting held in Tokyo last February 2017, it was announced that Manila "stressed the need for the two countries to conclude a [SOVFA]."[61]

Second, conduct joint maritime patrols in the SCS. During his visit to Japan in 2016, President Duterte announced that Manila is open to the possibility of joint maritime patrols in the SCS.[62] Joint maritime patrols will further strengthen the commitment of the strategic partners not only in the overall goal of promoting peace and stability in the region, but also to the freedom of navigation and over flight—principles reaffirmed by the two countries during the aforementioned Tokyo visit of President Duterte.[63]

Third, increase service to service, and education and research exchanges. Greater exchanges among military officials, as well as defense education and research officers and the conduct of joint publications/conferences, will provide further avenues for exchange of views on issues of mutual concerns, in particular the SCS, as well as to build trust and confidence.

Conclusion

As the SPF suggests, the Philippines-Japan Strategic Partnership was formed largely because of the uncertainty caused by the rise of China and its implications for the security situation of the Asia-Pacific, in particular in the SCS. This strategic partnership offers not only flexibility but also the diplomatic advantage of avoiding abandonment/entrapment risks that is inherent in an alliance which, in turn, allows countries to focus their attention on joint initiatives. Like the Philippines, Japan has an interest in countering China's maritime expansionism in the SCS. As such, the objective of Philippines-Japan strategic partnership of promoting peace and stability in the SCS can be achieved by raising the costs of Beijing's

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maritime assertiveness. Specifically, this goal can be operationalized by strengthening Manila's maritime security posture in the SCS through the enhancement of maritime domain awareness, bilateral capacity building initiatives, and the coordination of measures in managing tensions at the multilateral level.

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Notes

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