

**The Philippines-Japan security partnership in a changing regional security environment** by Lucio Blanco Pitlo III and Mico A. Galang

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In the wake of US President Donald Trump's calls for allies to contribute more to shoulder the regional security burden, the spotlight has fallen on Japan, the key US ally in the Asia-Pacific. The world's third largest economy possesses the most capable defense force within the US-led regional security umbrella. As such, there is an expectation that, with US encouragement, Japan can play a greater role as security partner for less militarily capable countries in Southeast Asia. This expectation assumes new weight as Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, a champion of Japan's security "normalization" and a higher regional and global security profile, was given a new mandate in last month's elections. Japan has expressed keen interest in partnering with the Philippines on security issues. Both the Philippines and Japan are archipelagic coastal states with longstanding security ties to the US and shared maritime interests and issues. Should the US regional security commitment wither or become hostage to Trump's transactional approach (particularly in regard to China), Japan may fill the gap, although that prospect is not without challenges. There are many opportunities for enhanced Philippine-Japan security cooperation.

Philippine-Japan security ties are relatively limited and largely focused on nontraditional security, although recent developments show increasing expansion into the traditional security domain (e.g., Japan's leasing of maritime reconnaissance aircraft to the Philippine Navy). Japan's assistance is largely oriented toward capacity building, in both soft (education/training) and hard (asset sale/transfer) aspects and channeled toward civilian agencies, notably the Philippine police and Coast Guard. Japan is also an observer of Philippine-US military drills. The 2011 and 2015 Philippine-Japan Strategic Partnership Declarations, the 2015 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Defense Cooperation, and the 2016 MOU on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology, provide the means to improve bilateral security ties. President Rodrigo Duterte paid a state visit to Tokyo in October 2016 and Abe returned the favor by visiting Manila and the president's hometown, Davao. Duterte visited Japan for a second time earlier this week won additional pledges of help with fighting terrorism and infrastructure development.

Japan seeks to bolster regional security involvement, including with the Philippines, but this is hampered by several factors. The first is constitutional constraints and domestic opposition to expanded military activities overseas. Although efforts were made to reinterpret relevant provisions of the constitution, reinterpretation is less enduring than amending the pertinent clauses and may not provide a solid foundation for Japan's greater international security footprint.

Second, further institutionalizing Philippine-Japan security cooperation may face considerable hurdles on the Philippine side. Manila, to date, has inked Visiting Forces Agreements (VFA) with only two countries, the US (1999) and Australia (2007), but only after intense internal debates and local protests.

Third, concern over Beijing's reaction resonates in a region where China's economic role looms increasingly large. Last year, China passed Japan to become the Philippines' biggest trade partner and is increasingly a major source of tourists and infrastructure investment. This may account for Manila's decision not to engage the US, Japan, and other major powers for joint patrols in its exclusive economic zone in the West Philippine Sea (WPS) given competing maritime claims, although Duterte did welcome the idea of joint exercises with Japan within the country's territorial waters. An intention to stay away from great power rivalry is integral to Duterte's foreign policy, which appears to be anchored in a hedging approach. This decision is likely to remain unless more changes on the ground take place. A consideration of Beijing's response reveals the delicate balancing act that hedging demands. Finally, Japan's wartime legacy, though greatly diminished thanks to Tokyo's decades-old economic and cultural soft power initiatives, linger. Host to the largest US bases in the Far East during the war, the Philippines was one of the most devastated countries in the region with Manila earning the nickname the "Warsaw of the East."

Despite these challenges, Philippine-Japan security cooperation presents opportunities for both countries. Japan can bridge differences that may arise between the Philippines and the US. Although longstanding allies, ties unraveled quickly during the Obama administration; relations have improved since Trump entered the White House. Second, Japan can complement and possibly even fill the gap should the US diminish security support to regional allies. Although this scenario appears less likely as the US military is set to get a big boost in Trump's budget, allies voice concern about being asked to raise defense spending or pay more for US troops on their soil. Under the policy of a "Proactive Contribution to Peace," Tokyo has issued a National Security Strategy, which includes a goal of improving the security environment in the Asia-Pacific not only by enhancing military capabilities, but by boosting US-Japan alliance and security cooperation with regional partners. To operationalize this initiative, Japan not only created the

National Security Council but also passed legislation that will enable its Self-Defense Forces to play a greater regional security role.

Third, Japan has invested in and continues to actively invest in regional cooperation initiatives geared toward combatting nontraditional security threats, such as maritime piracy (e.g., the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia). As such, Japan may extend assistance to subregional anti-piracy efforts (e.g., Philippines-Indonesia-Malaysia joint patrols in the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas), whenever its support is sought. Fourth, Philippine support for a greater Japanese regional security role gives a diplomatic boost to Tokyo's initiatives. Shortly before Abe returned as prime minister in December 2012, then-Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario announced that Manila welcomed a stronger Japanese defense force as the Philippines was looking for significant balancing factors. When Japan passed its controversial security law, the Philippines moved swiftly to express support for its strategic partner.

Duterte appears to be sustaining this support, though not in the high-profile fashion as the former Aquino government. Building on the momentum of the Philippine-Japan strategic partnership, Duterte announced that he is open to maritime patrols and exercises with Tokyo in his country's territorial waters. Moreover, during the fifth Philippine-Japan Vice Defense Ministerial Meeting in Tokyo last February, Manila mentioned the need for both sides to ink a VFA, which was first proposed during the Aquino administration.

Fifth, the less formal nature of the Philippine-Japan strategic partnership allows the two countries to focus on cooperative initiatives. A strategic partnership does not commit parties to defend each other in the event of armed hostilities. Therefore, bilateral security cooperation will not be hindered by concerns over abandonment or entrapment, which can strain alliance relations. Nevertheless, the Philippines expects sustained Japanese assistance to improve its maritime and air capabilities to help build a minimum credible defense.

Finally, after his win in last month's elections, Abe will feel less restrained to expand security cooperation with Southeast Asia, especially as those governments court other powers to engage in regional security affairs as a counterweight to China's rising maritime ambitions.

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