



THE SOUTH CHINA SEA AND THE PHILIPPINES' NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

BY MICO A. GALANG

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In July 2018, the Philippines released its first [National Security Strategy](#) (NSS). Developed to operationalize the [National Security Policy](#) (NSP) published in 2017, the NSS describes the external security environment as marked by “increased uncertainty and unpredictability” and identifies the rivalry of major powers as the “most important long-term strategic concern” of the Indo-Asia-Pacific region. Noting that the Philippines is between the South China Sea (SCS) and the Pacific Ocean – the area of geopolitical competition between the United States and China – the strategy document further emphasizes that the country’s geography is “both a source of strength and vulnerability” with its location and natural resources providing a “strong temptation to expansionist powers.” The remaining challenge for the Philippines is finding ways to implement the strategy.

The dispute in the SCS is characterized as the “foremost security challenge to the Philippines’ sovereignty and territorial integrity.” With remarkable candor, the NSS recognizes that the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) remains “one of the weakest in Asia,” which raises “doubt [about Manila’s] ability to protect and defend the [country’s] sovereignty and territorial integrity.” Given its limited capabilities, the strategy document notes that when it comes to the disputed waters of the SCS, Manila “will tread with prudence on this complex and delicate issue and will carefully calibrate its diplomatic moves to avert the

costly consequences of any potential outbreak of armed confrontation.”

While identified as a core interest for the Philippines, preservation of territorial integrity and national sovereignty in the SCS may be constrained by two factors. First, cognizant of its limited military capability, Manila has an ambiguous commitment from the United States under the [1951 Mutual Defense Treaty](#) (MDT). The Philippines, unlike [Japan](#), has [not received](#) an unequivocal commitment that Washington will come to its aid in the event of an armed clash in the SCS. However, this ambiguity may stem not only from obscure statutory construction but also from the fact that the US does not have a significant military presence in the Philippines to respond to contingencies in the SCS. To complicate matters, Beijing has been employing [gray zone coercion tactics](#) in the SCS. For Washington to make a public and clear-cut commitment to defend Manila in the SCS absent a credible military presence in the Philippines may lead to strategic miscalculation. Indeed, Beijing will likely test Washington’s commitment and if the US fails to respond, the credibility of the [San Francisco system of alliances](#) may be questioned.

Second, notwithstanding the [pronouncement](#) that Manila has not lost “one square-inch” of territory, the reality is that the Philippines has lost control of some of its claimed areas even before the current government came into power. China launched one of its boldest moves in [2013](#) by creating [artificial islands](#) in the SCS. In recent years, Beijing appears to have consolidated its strategic foothold in the SCS through [construction of facilities](#) on the artificial islands, deployment of [anti-ship cruise missiles and surface-to-air missile systems](#), installation of [jamming equipment](#), and other actions. The [radius of the bombers](#), which China landed on Woody Island in the Paracels, covers almost the entire Philippine archipelago. The challenge for Manila is how to respond to China’s assertiveness. It is highly unlikely that that Beijing will voluntarily abandon, let alone destroy, the artificial islands – and the military facilities on them. Given these realities, a goal for the Philippines is to collaborate with the US and other partners to limit further encroachments in the SCS

while enhancing its defense posture to secure the rest of the archipelago.

To promote Manila's interests in the SCS, the NSS provides various courses: 1) sustaining the AFP modernization program (AFPMP); 2) enhancing maritime domain awareness; 3) strengthening existing alliance and partnerships while exploring new cooperative arrangements with other countries; and 4) promoting bilateral and multilateral dialogue and negotiations. There has been progress in these areas such as the [successful testing](#) of the Philippine Navy's Mini Typhoon Machine Gun System and the Spike-Extended Range Missile Launching System, and the acquisition of [12 FA-50 fighter trainer aircrafts](#). Also, in addition to the creation of a [Bilateral Consultation Mechanism](#) on the SCS and a [Joint Coast Guard Committee](#) between Manila and Beijing, the Philippines also initiated [repairs of its runway](#) on Thitu Island.

Implementation of the NSS requires sustained focus and resources, particularly in developing a credible military force. The following initiatives should be considered.

First, a careful assessment and recalibration of Manila's strategic communication should promote a perception of coherence and lessen possible misperceptions of its foreign policy. Mindful of the US-China rivalry, the Philippines should not be viewed as favoring one power over another through its pronouncements. Neither should Manila issue statements that could diminish opportunities for managing the dispute.

Second, the implementation of the [Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement](#) (EDCA) must be fast-tracked. While the [first major project](#) under EDCA was initiated at Basa Air Base in April, broader implementation of the pact appears to have been delayed. As other observers have [argued](#), further postponements – particularly at [Antonio Bautista Air Base in Palawan](#), which is near the Spratlys – means that Washington may find it challenging to assist its ally in the SCS if needed. By implementing EDCA, Manila could modestly complement Washington's vision of a [“Free and Open Indo-Pacific.”](#) After all,

the NSS describes US presence in the region as a “stabilizing force.”

Third, in bilateral and multilateral negotiations, the Philippines must find its voice. In the [ASEAN-China Single Draft SCS Code of Conduct \(COC\) Negotiating Text](#), Beijing proposed that China and ASEAN should “not hold joint military exercises with countries from outside the region, unless the parties concerned are notified beforehand and express no objection.” Should this provision be included in the final COC, China could [effectively veto](#) military exercises of ASEAN states with other powers such as the US. As Australia's ambassador to Manila [pointed out](#), the COC “should not prejudice the interests of third parties or the rights of all states under international law.” Manila should work with fellow ASEAN members to remove this and other objectionable provisions from the final COC.

The SCS is a complex issue with various geopolitical and economic dimensions. As the NSS points out, addressing this security concern requires the “combined and coordinated use of all the resources and instruments of national power.” But the imperative to act remains foremost for Manila.

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