Security Pursuits of a Small Power: The Philippines-Japan Strategic Partnership

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ABSTRACT

The administration of former Philippine President Benigno S. Aquino III pursued a policy of "lay[ing] the groundwork for a potential web of inter-locking strategic partnerships" (Philippine NSC 2011, 29), essentially "expand[ing]… defense and security engagements" (Del Rosario 2013a) with other countries apart from the United States. The Aquino government broadened relations with other nations, including Japan, the country's first strategic partner. This study aims to determine the conditions under which small powers undertake strategic partnerships. Focusing on the Philippines-Japan strategic partnership, this study argues that the said partnership is driven by the need to support the current international order, promote capacity-building, and enhance the existing multilateral architecture.

Keywords: The Philippines-Japan Strategic Partnership, small power, strategic partnerships

Introduction

In his seminal work, *Theory of International Politics*, Kenneth Waltz (1979) argues that security cooperation between and among states is usually conducted through alliances. But there are, of course, other forms of security cooperation, including coalitions, security communities, and strategic

partnerships (Wilkins 2008; 2011a; 2011b; 2015). Like other mainstream IR theories, the academic literature on strategic partnerships has been largely made with the major powers in mind. Those of small powers have yet to be fully explored. Seeking to fill this gap, this paper uses the case of the Philippines and Japan in 2011 and 2015 to shed light on the conditions under which small powers forge strategic partnerships. It argues that for both Manila and Tokyo, vulnerability to major power competition, particularly in the South China Sea, served as a primary impetus for the undertaking.

Defining Strategic Partnerships

Background and Difference from Coalition and Alliances

The end of the Cold War and the dawn of the 21st century witnessed the rise of strategic partnerships in international affairs (Amador 2014). While many studies discuss the phenomenon (Moltz 1998; Lo 2004; Mansingh 2005; Berkofsky 2006; Kim 2008; Legvold 2009; De Castro 2017a, 2017b), only a relatively small body of works attempt to establish the theoretical foundations of the term. Some scholars even describe it as "ill-defined" (Feng and Huang 2014, 7) and "a contested concept" (Schmidt 2010, 1).

Early attempts to conceptualize strategic partnerships were focused largely on their general characteristics. Vahl (2001, 4) argued that a strategic partnership differs from regular bilateral cooperation by the "presence of common values, common interests and mutual understanding" upon which such partnership is anchored. For Kay (2000, 16), it "enhances or justifies a close relationship between two states that seek mutual gains but whose interests may be more competitive rather than shared." Bereft of conceptual clarity, a strategic partnership may be used to pursue closer cooperation in light of systemic changes, or simply to deploy a "rhetorical device" in order to "help around the rough edges of global politics" (Kay 2000, 16).

It was Wilkins (2008, 2011a) who led the initial efforts in developing the theoretical underpinnings of the phenomenon. In his pioneering work on the Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership, Wilkins (2008, 363) defined

a strategic partnership as a "structured collaboration between states (or other actors) to take advantage of economic opportunities, or to respond to security challenges more effectively than could be achieved in isolation." Later, Wilkins (2011b) even developed a typology of security cooperation based on his review of the literature, which is summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Forms and Characteristics of Security Cooperation

FORM OF SECURITY COOPERATION	KEY CHARACTERISTICS	EXAMPLE
Alliance	• "Formal" • Against a "third party" • Commitment to defend each other	• North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) • Warsaw Pact
Coalition	• "Ad hoc" grouping to achieve common goals	• US-led coalition in the Gulf War (1990-91)
Security Community	• "Collective" identity	• European Union
Strategic Partnership	• "System principle" • "Goal-driven" • "Informal", "low commitment" • Security and economic cooperation	• Australia-Japan Strategic Partnership

Note: The author created the table, but the terms or descriptions used above are from Wilkins (2011b).

Unlike a strategic partnership, an alliance is a form of security cooperation between two or more countries, and is usually expressed in a formal treaty, whereby, for instance, states are legally obliged to use force and defend an ally under attack (Envall and Hall 2016, 91). Walt (1987, 1) stresses the importance of such a commitment because the failure to honor the pact would presumably cost something—perhaps the credibility of such an alliance. Moreover, an alliance is usually created against an identified actor or threat (Liska 1962). A coalition, meanwhile, is usually an ad hoc grouping of states formed for a "joint action on a specific problem at a particular time with no commitment to a durable relationship" (Pierre

2002, 2). A strategic partnership is also not a security community, which "exists when a group of states have forged a sense of community or *collective identity*, meaning they will settle their differences without resorting to force" (Capie and Evans 2002, 198, emphasis added).

Definitions and Motives of a Strategic Partnership

In general, a strategic partnership is a form of security cooperation between countries short of a formal military alliance (Regencia 2015). Second, it is established through a less formal agreement (i.e. joint statement/ joint declaration). Third, parties to a strategic partnership have no formal commitment to defend each other in the event of an armed attack. Beyond the overall structure of a cooperation, a strategic partnership is also about diplomatic signaling. Indeed, the word "strategic" suggests crucial higher, long-term issues—i.e. "high politics" concerns. However, possibly to avoid perceptions of being an offensive collaboration against another state, a strategic partnership is also packaged as an arrangement for cooperation on a whole range of issues beyond security concerns.

Originally from the field of organization and business studies, a strategic partnership is "governed" by four major tenets: first, it has a "system principle" or "generally security purpose," an example of which is the promotion of a "multi-polar order." Second, it is primarily "goal-driven" and is less geared towards threats or values. Third, it is usually "informal" and "entail[s] low commitment costs," which in turn gives the "partners" more "flexibility." Lastly, it focuses on "economic exchange" and "security concerns" (Wilkins 2008, 360–61). Anchored on these principles, strategic partnerships are formed largely because of "environmental uncertainty" and "strategic fit" (363), the latter referring to shared interests (364). Both factors drive states to "increase their capabilities" and initiate actions to "counter such uncertainty" (364).

Like Wilkins, Amador (2014) argues that the concept of a strategic partnership emanated from organization and business studies, and borrows four factors from the said disciplines to determine how such partnerships

should be examined in international relations. First is the commitment to serve the "ultimate customers," i.e., the "people and/or the people of the state." Second is the need to "collaborate on both the planning and implementation of the strategic partnership agreement." Third is to "share information relevant to the agreement" (strategic partnership). Lastly, it has a "focus on the "customer." A strategic partnership does not "aim to fight third party."

Focusing on the Asia-Pacific, Nadkarni (2010, 48–49) does not provide a broader framework by which one can understand strategic partnerships, but nonetheless supplies their characteristics. First, they are "formalized in multiple written declarations, statements, agreements," and others. Second, they "create institutional formal links at various government and non-governmental levels" (48). Third, they help establish "summit meetings" between "top leaders" or among "sub-ministerial and bureaucratic levels, where officials explore common interests." Fourth, they strengthen security relations through "joint military exercises" and "ports of call," among others. Fifth, they help develop a "stronger economic relationship" and lastly, seek greater cultural "awareness" between two parties. Of course, not all strategic partnerships have these attributes. All the same, mindful of their typically comprehensive nature, Nadkarni (2010, 201) highlights the main difference between a regular bilateral relationship and a strategic partnership. The latter has a "sustained and regularized interactions underpinned by multiple webs of institutionalization at the intergovernmental level that [the latter] encompass."

A Gap in the Literature: Strategic Partnerships from Major Powers to Small Powers

Writing about alliances, Bailes et al. (2016, 10) argued that IR theories were largely developed "to explain great power alliance behavior and classical balancing in Europe." Indeed, the works of Wilkins (2008, 2011a, 2011b, 2015), and Envall and Hall (2016) discuss the strategic partnerships of major powers: Australia-China, Australia-Japan, China-India, China-Russia, and Japan-India strategic partnerships. These powers pursue such

partnerships under two key conditions. First, they use it to address the balance of power by projecting military and diplomatic prowess (Wilkins 2008, 2010; Parameswaran 2014; Ross 2013), an example being the strategic partnership between the US and Singapore. Second, they also deploy it to manage security challenges, as did the Washington during Obama administration (Parameswaran 2014, 265–66) or to manage strategic rivalries.

While "little theoretical attention has been paid to small states" (Bailes et al. 2016, 10), small powers "must not be assumed [as]…simply downsized version of larger states." Their survival is "governed by different rules from those that govern great powers" (Maas 2017, 2). Also, one must note that "structures are defined not by all of the actors that flourish within them but by the major ones" (Waltz 1979, 195). As such, a lack of material capabilities is a strategic constraint for small powers. "Weak states operate on narrow margins. Inopportune acts, flawed policies, and mistimed moves may have fatal results" (195). As such, major powers have been called as "rule makers" or "price makers" while small powers are "rule takers" or "price takers" (Katzenstein 1985 quoted in Maas 2017, 32).

The term "small power" does not refer to a country's size but rather to its "lack [of] efficient political and military might to challenge great powers" (Lee 2012, 4). These characteristics hark back to a classic passage from the Melian Dialogue in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, "….[t]he strong do as they can and the weak suffer what they must" (Kluth 2020). However, this is not to suggest that realism (e.g. balance of power) does not guide the foreign policies of small powers, only that these initiatives must also be viewed in cognizance of the overall dynamics that govern their behavior. Thus, while states seek to maximize relative power, with the ultimate goal of becoming the hegemon in the international system (Mearsheimer 2001), one must bear in mind that this applies more to the great powers. To achieve such hegemony is highly unlikely, if not outright impossible, for small powers. It is from these theoretical underpinnings that the reasons for a small power like the Philippines to pursue a strategic partnership shall be examined.

The Philippines as a Small Power

Mindful of the differences between small and great powers, Magcamit (2016, 1) remarks that the "strategic behavior of small powers in the international system can be described in one word: dependence." Their behavior is governed by four key features. First, they recognize that it is "both futile and reckless to rely exclusively on their own capabilities to obtain their security" and, by extension, their ability to influence the dynamics of international politics to their advantage (Mares 2008 and Toje 2010, 2011 cited in Magcamit 2016, 1; Wivel 2014). Second, small powers "tend to favour the status quo… instead of plotting to thwart and revise" the current order (Magcamit 2016, 1–2). Third, they prefer to work within the framework of "international laws" and organizations. Similarly, they "'globalize' those issues that they deem pose the most lethal threats to their existence" (2). They also appear to "display high levels of paranoia" as a result of their "size and position in the international system" (2). In this sense, small powers are what Handel (1961, 1) calls "weak states."

The Philippine government during the Aquino administration recognized its limitations as a small power (Philippine National Security Council [NSC] 2011). In its Active Archipelagic Defense Strategy (AADS), the Philippine Navy (2014a, 7) openly admitted its weakness. "While we continue to benefit from our maritime endowments, our capacity and capability to protect them are seriously challenged. The lack of resources to fully develop and exploit our marine wealth is further exacerbated by our inability to fully protect and conserve them for the benefit of our citizens."

Like other small powers, the Philippines favors the status quo, which is showcased by, among other things, its support for the US-led international order. This partly stems from Manila's paranoia, which in turn is due to its relative position and size in the international arena. There appears to be two manifestations, among many, of the Philippines' mindset vis-à-vis the SCS and the uncertainties of major power competition. First is the state's decision to fast-track the modernization of the AFP (De Castro 2017c). While the Philippines' defense budget increased during the

Aquino administration (Sobrepeña 2018), it is arguably unlikely that such efforts will have a substantial effect on its strategic predicament over an increasingly assertive China in the SCS. As such, the Philippines sought clear security assurances from its sole ally, the United States, over the latter's commitments under the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1951. Secondly, the Aquino administration preferred to globalize its approach to, and count on international law in, the SCS dispute in 2013.[1] In response to the escalating tensions in the SCS because of the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident, Manila commenced arbitration proceedings against the People's Republic of China in accordance with Article 287 and Annex VII of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Batongbacal 2015). The Philippines presented the issue as something beyond Manila and Beijing (Del Rosario 2015a). Moreover, in packaging the arbitration case and its outcome as crucial components of the current international order, Manila expressed its support for, and warned about China's effort to undermine, the status quo (Del Rosario 2015b).

The Philippines-Japan Strategic Partnership

Under what conditions do small powers like the Philippines forge its strategic partnerships? As archipelagic countries situated within what is commonly referred to as the First Island Chain (FIC), the Philippines and Japan both have territorial and maritime disputes with China—the former in the SCS, and the latter in the East China Sea (ECS). If Beijing successfully dominates the SCS and ECS, it could alter the dynamics of geopolitical order to its favor (Kaplan 2014). In this respect at least, Manila and Tokyo have shared strategic interests.

In 2011, then-Philippine President Benigno S. Aquino III and then-Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda issued the "Japan-Philippines Joint Statement on the Comprehensive Promotion of the 'Strategic Partnership' between Neighboring Countries Connected by Special Bonds of Friendship" (Japan MOFA 2011). The joint declaration builds on similar efforts of their predecessors, but its scope is relatively more comprehensive,

covering various issues, including politico-security affairs. The following interests/principles underpin the 2011 declaration: US alliances in the Asia-Pacific that promote regional peace and stability; promotion of a "rules-based" order; "peace and stability" in the SCS, which connects the world and the Asia-Pacific region; "freedom of navigation" and flight in the SCS, as well as the protection of sea lanes of communication (SLOCs); and support for ASEAN centrality. Economic growth is a concern as well.

In 2015, President Aquino and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe issued the "Japan-Philippines Joint Declaration: A Strengthened Strategic Partnership for Advancing the Shared Principles and Goals of Peace, Security, and Growth in the Region and Beyond" (Japan MOFA 2015a). Largely reaffirming the previous declaration, it also identifies interests/principles such as: ensuring "peace and stability" and prosperity "in the Asia-Pacific region;" maintaining "open and stable seas" as an "essential" element of regional stability; "serious concern on the unilateral actions to change the status quo in the South China Sea including large-scale land reclamation and building of outposts" therein; "peaceful settlement of maritime disputes based on international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea;" promotion of interoperability; and support for ASEAN centrality. The 2015 declaration also had an annex to implement its provisions (Japan MOFA 2015b). Table 2 below shows the declarations' pertinent provisions and underlying characteristics and conditions.

The meetings of officials and ministerial offices of the Philippines and Japan, as well as the declarations and written statements, affirm the characteristics of a strategic partnership that Nadkarni (2010) cites. And, as will be seen below, some of the activities between Tokyo and Manila conform to the attributes—outlined above—by Wilkins (2008; 2011a; 2011b; 2015). For instance, the "system principle" is evident in the championing of a rules-based order, the politico-security focus lies in the various military exchanges and exercises, and its principles show how the partnership is "goal-driven."

TABLE 2: The Philippines-Japan Strategic Partnership

UNDERLYING CONDITIONS	PERTINENT PROVISIONS
The Need to Support the Current International Order	• Ensure "peace and stability" and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region • U.S. alliances in the Asia-Pacific promote regional "peace and stability" • Promotion of a "rules-based" order • Maintaining "open and stable seas" as essential element of regional stability; peace and stability in the SCS, which connects the world and the Asia-Pacific region; freedom of navigation and over flight in the SCS, as well as the protection of SLOCs • "Serious concern on the unilateral actions to change the status quo in the South China Sea including large-scale artificial island-building, and establishment of outposts" therein • "Peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law, including" UNCLOS
The Necessity to Promote Capacity-Building Efforts	• "Information sharing on security environment and challenges in regional and global context, and enhancement of information security in relation to the information sharing" • "Information exchange and policy coordination on respective security policies" • "Maritime security including maritime domain awareness" • "Defense equipment and technology cooperation" • "Capacity building"
The Imperative to Support and enhance existing multilateral architecture	• Support ASEAN centrality. • Bilateral and multilateral security dialogue and cooperation platforms (including EAS, ARF, ADMM-Plus)

Note: The author compiled the information from MOFA Japan (2011 and 2015).

While there is no public Aquino-era document or pronouncement that defines a strategic partnership in detail, there are some elements on how the administration appeared to view the concept. The National Security Policy (NSP) states that "the government shall take both bilateral and multilateral tracks in pursuing the maintenance of regional and international agreements and lay the groundwork for a potential web of inter-locking strategic partnerships" (Philippine NSC 2011, 29, underscoring supplied). The pursuit of strategic partnerships offers the Philippines at least two diplomatic

advantages. First, with no formal commitments to defend each other in the event of an armed conflict, strategic partners will not experience the anxiety over abandonment and/or entrapment which parties to an alliance sometimes come across. Second, strategic partners can, in turn, have clear expectations of the objectives of areas of bilateral cooperation and focus their attention on specific collaborative initiatives (Galang 2017, 3). The Aquino administration adopted a comprehensive view of national security, and there are two intertwined strategic interests relevant to the discussion, the "preservation of world order" and the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity (Philippine NSC 2011, 3, 5). Another criterion in selecting strategic partners is location (Gazmin 2019). Under particular conditions, countries with relatively similar geographical predicaments gravitate towards each other to promote cooperation. These sentiments dovetail with the two factors—cited by Wilkins (2008)—that drive states to form strategic partnerships: "environmental uncertainty" and "strategic fit" (363–64), which in turn refers to the convergence of strategic interests.

Environmental Uncertainty: Philippines

The Philippines under the Aquino government perceived that regional stability is under threat by an increasingly assertive China, not least because of its actions in the SCS. The importance of the seas in international relations is not new. The geopolitical strategist, A.T. Mahan, argued that the effective control of the seas is vital to achieving world power status (Dikshit 1994). A naval power that dominates in the Indian and Pacific Oceans can affect the decision-making of states—the very essence of power—in an area that H.J. Mackinder calls the Eurasian "Heartland." It is therefore not surprising why China seeks to control the SCS as a precursor to its grand design to dominate the Asia-Pacific, a region in which the US has enjoyed pre-eminence. Shaped by the dynamics of this power shift, the SCS dispute, although not new, has become one of the major geopolitical hotspots around the world. It is interesting to note that, at the operational level, China has an ambitious plan to displace Washington from its hitherto secure position in

the region. In 1982, Beijing's People's Liberation Navy (PLAN) developed a strategy to control the first and second island chains (FIC and SIC) (Cordesman and Colley 2015). As in the 19th century America, this strategy is largely similar to the Monroe Doctrine. As a corollary to the FIC-SIC plan, Beijing appears to employ what has been called "Anti-Access/Area Denial" (A2/AD) concept (US Department of Defense [DOD] 2013, 2; Galang 2016).

From a broader perspective, China's actions in Scarborough Shoal and elsewhere in the SCS, including the cabbage and salami-slicing tactics, can be described as forms of "gray zone" coercion. Gray zone action is "coercive and aggressive in nature, but that is deliberately designed to remain below the threshold of conventional military conflict and open interstate war" (Brands 2016). While such tactics may fall short of an armed conflict, they are nonetheless one of the major security concerns in the region, particularly in the SCS. "The manner by which Beijing seized control of Scarborough Shoal in 2012—practically without firing a shot—is now viewed as a successful employment of gray zone coercion to the point that some in China have called for replication of the so-called "'Scarborough Shoal' model'" (Galang 2019a; cf. International Crisis Group 2012).

A rising China has created much unpredictability for the US-underpinned regional order. In the National Security Policy (NSP) 2011–2016, President Aquino stressed that the "[s]ecurity challenges of the present are indeed far more complex than at any time in the history of our country… Today, the security environment is constantly changing due to uncertainties brought about by geopolitics and the shifting landscape of armed conflicts" (Philippine NSC 2011, i–ii). Among the major challenges is the "shift of demographics, economic, and political centers of gravity and attention from the US and Europe to Asia-Pacific countries" (7). The NSP goes on to say that "the rise of China generates policy considerations not only among developed countries such as the United States, Japan, and Korea, but also among the ASEAN nations due to socio-cultural interactions, significant trade and investments, as well as territorial claims in the West Philippine

Sea" (12, underscoring supplied). Adding to the uncertainty is that the Aquino administration saw the SCS disputes in the context of major power rivalry. In a 2015 interview, Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert Del Rosario expressed that

> [China's] aim is to fulfill their expansionist agenda. They obviously have one.... I think the international community should be vigilant about what is happening in the South China Sea because it has the potential to change the international order. You now have one superpower, which is the United States. I think if China's expansionist agenda, which is unlawful, is not curtailed, that could bring change. (Weymouth 2015, underscoring supplied)

Asked about the basis of the Aquino administration in determining strategic partners, former Philippine Defense Secretary Voltaire T. Gazmin (2019) noted the importance of location. "[I]f you will observe, Australia is situated south of [the] Philippines, Viet Nam is to our [left], and Japan is to our north." Manila's position—somewhere between China and the US, and along the strategic SLOCs (Sea Lines of Communication)—made the country vulnerable to the competition of the major powers, which has been exacerbated by the competing territorial and maritime claims between Manila and Beijing, as well as other countries in the region.

Environmental Uncertainty: Japan

Tokyo had a similar perception of the uncertain regional security environment, writing in its 2013 National Security Strategy (NSS) that

> Since the beginning of the twenty first century, the balance of power in the international community has been changing on an unprecedented scale, and this has substantially influenced the dynamics of international politics. The primary drivers of these changes in the balance of power are the emerging countries, including China... (Cabinet Secretariat, Japan 2013, 6, underscoring supplied)

Likewise, the location of the Philippines appears to make it important to Tokyo. It is part of the Japan-US Alliance, which is "the cornerstone of Japan's security" (Cabinet Secretariat, Japan, 2013, 20). Both countries are also part of the First Island Chain, which, as discussed above, appears to be part of China's plan to establish its hegemony in the Western Pacific (National Institute for Defense Studies Japan 2016, 18, 70). If Beijing successfully dominates the SCS, it will likely have the capability to strangle the economy of Japan, which, as a maritime and archipelagic state, relies heavily on SLOCs. Moreover, should China become the hegemon in the SCS, it will likely only be a matter of time before Beijing also dominates other portions of the First Island Chain.

The Philippines-Japan Strategic Partnership: A Strategic Fit and Geography

The 2011 Philippine NSP identified international "Peace and Harmony" as one of the country's national interest, which has been defined as the "preservation of world order. National security is engendered and sustained through harmonious relations with our neighbors and allies [sic]" (Philippine NSC 2011, 5). The NSP also underscored that the US—"the only superpower in the world" that "maintains its strategic presence around the globe" (11)—provides a "positive stabilizing force" in the region, "particularly with the growing complexity of security challenges that confront it" (12).

In response to the rising power of Beijing, the Aquino administration pushed for closer ties with the US. In 2014, the two countries signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which, as an implementing agreement of the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1951, aims to "increase[d] the rotational presence" of American forces in the Philippines (Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs 2014). Former Philippine Defense Secretary retired Lt. Gen. Gazmin (2013, 29) identified "freedom of access throughout the global commons, [including] the maritime domain," and the US Rebalance "towards Asia and greater interests in keeping peace and

stability in the region" as "key features of US defense and security interests that are in consonance with [the Philippines'] own national goals." Like the Philippines, Japan links the seas to the overall stability of the international order, affirming "open and stable seas" throughout its NSS.

> Surrounded by the sea on all sides and blessed with an immense exclusive economic zone and an extensive coastline, Japan as a maritime state has achieved economic growth through maritime trade and development of marine resources, and has pursued Open and Stable Seas. (Cabinet Secretariat, Japan 2013, 2)

The two countries articulated this shared interest in the 2011 strategic partnership declaration. "South China Sea 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" (Japan MOFA, 2011, par. 4 (2)). This was reiterated in 2015. "Maintaining open and stable seas is essential in ensuring regional stability and is an imperative issue [for] both countries as maritime nations" (Japan MOFA, 2015, par. 6, underscoring supplied). In view of the developments in the SCS at the time, the 2015 strategic partnership declaration continues.

> Both countries share serious concern on unilateral actions to change the status quo in the South China Sea including large-scale land reclamation and building of outposts which contravene the 2002 ASEAN-China Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). (Japan MOFA 2015a, par. 13, underscoring supplied)

With Tokyo, Manila established the following under the ambit of the PJSPD 2011: Philippines-Japan Vice-Ministerial Strategic Dialogue (PJVMSD) (Japan MOFA 2011, par. 4 (1) (ii)); Philippines-Japan Vice-Ministers' Defense Talks (PJVMDT) (Philippine DND 2016); and the Philippines-Japan Dialogue on Maritime and Ocean Affairs (PJDMOA) (Japan MOFA 2011, par. 4 (ii)). The first PJVMSD was convened in

2012 when foreign ministry officials from both countries "undertook a comprehensive review of relations and engaged in extensive and fruitful discussions on key regional developments, as well as bilateral and multilateral issues relevant to the strategic direction of Philippine[s]-Japan relations" (Philippine Official Gazette 2012).

The first PJVMDT was convened in 2014 to discuss "how to further substantiate the Statement of Intent [SOI] on Defense Cooperation signed in 2012 by Secretary Voltaire T. Gazmin and then Defense Minister Satoshi Morimoto" (Philippine DND 2014). The SOI was later upgraded into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The PJDMOA was convened in 2011 in which both parties agreed to promote capacity-building efforts (Japan MOFA 2011, par. 4 (ii)). The PJVMSD, PJVMDT, and PJDMOA complement existing dialogue and cooperation mechanisms, including the Japan-Philippines Political-Military and Military-Military Dialogues.

Supporting the International Order and Upholding International Law

The free and open seas policy under the Japan-Philippines strategic partnership dovetails with the promotion of stability in the Asia-Pacific. Noting that they are "countries sharing strategic interests in the region" and that they are "allies of the United States of America," the 2011 PJSPD also emphasizes that "Japan and the Japan-US Alliance have played an essential role to maintain the stability and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region, and President Aquino welcomed it" (Japan MOFA 2011, par. 4 (2)).

The support for the international order, or a rules-based system, runs parallel to the Philippines' internationalization of the SCS disputes. The Philippines-Japan Strategic Partnership—which expresses a "serious concern on unilateral actions to change the status quo in the South China" and upholds, among other things, the 2002 ASEAN Declaration of Code of Conduct in the SCS—supports not the Philippine position per se but the process of arbitration that Manila initiated (Japan MOFA 2015a). Nevertheless, the mere mention of settlement of disputes in accordance with UNCLOS may already be construed—in view of the timing and context

in which the statements were made—as tacit support for the Philippines because China rejected the legal process from the very beginning. Although the decision on the case had yet to be released at the time the strategic partnership declarations were made in 2015, such (implicit) backing of the Philippines may have been designed to impose on China certain reputational costs, with the aim of dissuading Beijing from its actions in the SCS.

Promote capacity-building efforts

Closely intertwined with the support for the current international order is the necessity to advance capacity-building efforts, which form a key area of cooperation in implementing the strategic/comprehensive partnership of the 2011 and 2015 PJSPD. Mindful of the limited capacity of Philippine maritime agencies to address security challenges in the SCS, Japan and the Philippines focus capacity-building on several fronts: "transfer of defense equipment and technology" (Japan MOFA 2015a, par. 4) and "joint training activities and exercises" (Japan MOFA 2015b, par 1 (4)). In July 2012, Manila and Tokyo signed the Statement of Intent (SOI) on Defense Cooperation, which was later upgraded into the Memorandum of Understanding on Defense Cooperation (MOUDC). "The enhancement of the defense relationship between the [Philippines and Japan] will be instrumental in promoting mutual understanding and trust as well as in contributing to peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond" (Philippine DND 2015, par. 2c).

In February 2016, the two countries signed the Agreement on the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology (ATDET). However, Manila and Tokyo had already begun to transfer assets to other security agencies. In December 2013, the Aquino administration and the Japan International Cooperation Agency [JICA] (2013) signed a loan agreement in which the latter would provide the former with about 18.732 billion yen for the *Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project* (MSCIP) of the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG). Through this initiative, the PCG would acquire, through JICA, ten multi-role response vessels (MRRVs) from Tokyo, to help enhance Manila's

capability to patrol its large coasts and strengthen the PCG's "maritime law enforcement functions" (Esplanada 2013). "In May 2016, the PCG (2016) also acquired the first of the MRRVs in a launching and naming ceremony held in Japan" (Galang 2021). To date, all ten MRRVs have been turned over to, and commissioned in the PCG (2018) under, the Duterte government.

In March 2016, a month after the ATDET was signed, President Aquino announced that Manila would lease five Beechcraft TC-90 King air advance trainer aircraft from Tokyo "to assist [the Philippine Navy] in patrolling [the country's] territories particularly in the West Philippine Sea" (Mogato 2016). In November that year, Japan announced that it would also train the navy pilots to use such assets (Kyodo News 2016). In 2017, Tokyo declared that the five aircrafts would no longer be leased but would instead be donated to Manila (Nikkei Asian Review 2017). By 2018, all the assets had been given to the Philippines (Talabong 2018).

Beyond the transfer of defense equipment and technology, the June 2015 PJSPD notes that the MOUDC, signed in January of that year, provides a framework by which the two countries can conduct training activities and exercises, which had already been done even prior to the signing of the MOUDC. In 2006, the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) and the PCG, along with JICA, had the first "seminar and joint exercise on 'Maritime Search-and-Rescue'" (JICA 2006). Although the joint exercise is largely about non-traditional maritime security, it nevertheless contributed to confidence-building between Manila and Tokyo.

The Japan Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF) also undertook a number of goodwill visits to the Philippines during the Aquino administration. While these visits are designed largely to enhance overall defense diplomatic ties, they too provide opportunities for capacity-building. For example, in April 2014, during the visit of JMSDF's Japanese Ship (JS) Shirane (DDH 143) and JS Asatuki (DD132), personnel of the Philippine Fleet and Defense Acquisition System Assessment Teams (DASAT) familiarized themselves with advanced communication and weapons systems of the

visiting vessels (Philippine Navy 2014b). In May 2015, JS Harusame (DD-102) and JS Amigiri (DD-154) held a passing exercise (PASSEX) with BRP Ramon Alcaraz near Corregidor and Manila Bay (Philippine Navy 2015a). The "ships conducted maneuvering, visual communications and publication exercises utilizing the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES)," as well as deck landing qualifications and cross deck exercises (Philippine Navy 2015a). Apart from promoting capacity, another corollary objective of such an exercise is to promote interoperability, which allows Japan and the Philippine military personnel to operate jointly. This was reaffirmed in the 2015 PJSPD (Japan MOFA 2015b).

In 2012, Tokyo participated, for the first time, in the annual Philippines-US Balikatan Exercises (Kyodo 2012). Albeit as an observer, Japan has since taken part in Balikatan's succeeding iterations at a time when strategic competition in the Asia-Pacific region was intensifying, not least because of heightened tensions in the SCS (Philippine DND 2013; Oishi 2016). During the 2016 Balikatan Exercises, Tokyo sent not only military officers but also three ships of the JMSDF (De Castro 2016). The then-executive director of the Philippine contingent to the Balikatan Exercises and commander of the AFP Western Command, Vice Admiral Alexander Lopez, said that it "sent a clear message across the seas that our partnerships remain undaunted, united and strong" (Indo-Pacific Defense Forum 2016).

The signing of the MOUDC in January 2015 arguably institutionalizes further Philippines-Japan exercises. In June of that year, the Philippine Navy (PN) and JMSDF conducted a maritime training exercise with the aim of "developing the fleet skills and interoperability of units… particularly on search and rescue of stricken vessels or downed aircraft in the high sea" (De Castro 2017a, 43). The exercise interestingly took place in Palawan, near the disputed islands in the SCS. In addition, two foreign P3-C Orion spy planes—one owned by the US Navy, and the other by the JMSDF—were also present, just as Beijing was constructing its artificial islands in the disputed waters. This was the first time that the JMSDF flew over the West Philippine Sea (Fonbuena 2015b). Colonel Jonas Lumawag, commander of the Philippine Navy's air group, pointed out that as far as the Philippines

was concerned, the exercise with Japan is aimed at "trying to align ourselves with the capabilities of other nations so that the standard would be the same" (Fonbuena 2015b). Nevertheless, some criticized the exercise because of the absence of a status of visiting forces agreement (SOVFA) with Japan (Fonbuena 2015a).

Support and enhance existing multilateral architecture

The imperative to elicit support for and enhance the existing multilateral architecture, particularly the centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), is another characteristic of the Philippines-Japan strategic partnership. After all, the Philippines is a founding member of the organization. The Asia-Pacific region does not have a European Union (E.U.)-like structure that drives multilateralism. Rather, ASEAN multilateralism is relatively looser; it is not led not by any of the major powers but by a group of relatively small and weaker countries. It must be pointed out, however, that ASEAN centrality is in no small part due to the tacit license bestowed by the major powers of the Asia-Pacific region (Weatherbee 2009, 3). It is mostly a default position resulting from competition and from an apparent deficit of strategic trust among such hegemons. As Amitav Acharya (2015) points out, "[t]here is currently no alternative to ASEAN's convening power in Asia. The Asia- Pacific's great powers are not capable of leading Asian regional institutions because of mutual mistrust and a lack of legitimacy." Nevertheless, despite its constraints, the Philippines and Japan expressed support for ASEAN's role in the region in the 2011 declaration, seeking to continue "active participation in regional cooperation frameworks such as Japan-ASEAN meetings, ASEAN+3, East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)" (Japan MOFA 2011, para 4 (2)). In the annex to the 2015 declaration, both states also reaffirmed "the growing significance of the evolving regional architecture built upon ASEAN's centrality" (Japan MOFA 2015b).

ASEAN's centrality, however, has come under stress in view of the major power competition more generally, and the SCS disputes more specifically. "ASEAN's relevance in the multilateral security architecture will be enhanced by addressing traditional security challenges, including those in the SCS. However, the same challenges further risk unravelling ASEAN's unity and centrality as it exposes the grouping's internal rifts" (Galang 2019b, 5). In addition, "ASEAN's consensus and consultation mode of decision-making—essentially a policy of veto-power for each member—has arguably made the organization increasingly susceptible to major power rivalry…" (Galang 2018). Despite the weakness of ASEAN, the Philippines supports ASEAN and its role in the broader region because during the Aquino administration—and arguably for the foreseeable future as well—there is no actor that could fill the role that ASEAN plays. Thus, "obtaining reaffirmation for ASEAN centrality is needed diplomatic support for a small power like the Philippines, especially as it faces uncertainties in the regional security environment" (Galang 2018). As a strategic partner of Manila, Tokyo supports not only the ASEAN-led platforms, but also the process of crafting the ASEAN-China Code of Conduct in the SCS.

Conclusion

This paper sought to examine the characteristics and conditions behind a small power's pursuit of strategic partnerships. Absent the economic foundations of national power, military might, and the diplomatic prowess, the Philippines clearly felt vulnerable from China, which had become the second-largest economy in the world. As such, for Manila, a strategic partnership with Japan is part of an overall strategy for small power survival. In this regard, the conditions for the Philippines' pursuit of strategic partnerships are the need to support the US-led order, promote capacity-building efforts, and support ASEAN centrality. Indeed, the Philippines-Japan strategic partnership is an important element in Manila's policy of protecting the country's national security, as well as shoring up support for the centrality of ASEAN in multilateral diplomacy. As a small

power, the Philippines "operates on narrow margins," to borrow a phrase from Waltz (1979). Therefore, it had to broaden its diplomatic space for maneuver and choice, and expand its resources. Strategic partnerships are established in this regard. By contrast, for major powers, it appears the strategic partnership is not just a tool for survival but also a projection of military and diplomatic power. For small powers, such projection far beyond its own territory is not feasible. Rather, as Magcamit (2016) points out, the concern is more of extracting demands from its immediate environment.

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Endnotes

[1] On the diplomatic front, President Aquino various platforms to promote the Philippines' position on the SCS, including the annual State of the Nation Address (SONA). Anchored on the presidential pronouncement of "what is ours is ours," Aquino III (2011) cabinet members used various platforms to promote the Philippine position in the SCS. Discussing the SCS dispute frequently, Foreign Secretary Del Rosario (2013b) said: "There has been no forum where I was not expected to tackle the West Philippine Sea issue." Clearly, the Aquino administration sought to further internationalize the SCS dispute.

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