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The Dynamics of Great Power Politics in the East China Sea Dispute: Strategic Implications for Philippine Defense Policy

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Introduction

In April 2014, United States (US) President Barack H. Obama embarked on a four-nation tour of Asia—a visit which highlights the administration's policy of a "strategic pivot" to the Asia-Pacific region—during which he sought to strengthen U.S alliances as well as promote other foreign policy initiatives. The tour, however, occurred against the backdrop of the territorial rows between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its neighbors, including Japan and the Philippines (PH). Addressing the problem during his press conference with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, President Obama announced that the US "*commitment to Japan's security is absolute, and Article 5 [of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States of America] covers all territories under Japan's administration, including the Senkaku Islands.*"¹ In the Philippines, the American head-of-state declared that "*our commitment to defend the Philippines is ironclad and the United States will keep that commitment.*"² It must be noted, however, that the US government has made no unequivocal assurance—similar to that of Japan—that the disputed territories in the West Philippine Sea (WPS) falls under the PH-US mutual defense treaty.

Analyzing China's maritime rows more closely, it would appear that Beijing engages itself in two types of relationships: an asymmetrical relationship with the Philippines, and a symmetrical relationship with Japan, another great power in the region. In light of the

differences in the two US pronouncements, the aim of this paper is to discuss how the dynamics of great power politics in the East China Sea (ECS) dispute affects Philippine Defense Policy vis-à-vis the territorial row in the South China Sea. Specifically, this paper aims to answer the following questions: 1.) What are the relative capabilities of the countries involved in the East China Sea dispute? 2.) What are the actions taken or being undertaken by Japan and China in asserting their claims in the disputed territory? 3.) How will the US-Japan alliance influence the escalating tensions in the region? 4.) What lessons would the dispute among the Great Powers offer the Philippines in managing the dispute in the West Philippine Sea?

The simmering maritime tensions in Asia shall be discussed in this paper through the lens of the Power Asymmetry Theory which postulates "*that a disparity of capacity and power between states creates real differences of perception and relative interest.*"³ The theory recognizes the existence of powerful (A) and weak (B) states and the difference in their capacities lead to different stakes in their relationships which, in turn, lead to varied patterns of interaction.⁴ For A, B does not present much an opportunity and relatively unimportant in the overall conduct of its foreign policy. Thus, powerful states tend to focus on engaging with countries with relatively equal capabilities, which may greatly affect its strategic politico-military and economic interests. For B, the most important calculus in its external relations would be its ties with A which, however, could lead to misperception.

Stemming from these theoretical underpinnings, this paper argues that the East China Sea dispute, which involves the great powers of East Asia, is a much more volatile problem in the short and medium-term at least. On the other hand, the South China Sea (SCS) dispute, which involves the relatively weak Southeast Asian states, has made the United States quite reluctant to make a more definitive commitment in view of its important bilateral relations with China. Nevertheless, the latter dispute illustrates a more long-term problem as the area involves vital resources and strategic sea lines of communication (SLOC).

China, Japan, US: The Capabilities

China and Japan are the main parties in the dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. However, because of its treaty alliance with Japan, the United States is now considered as a major actor in the maritime row.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Relative Capabilities

Countries	Economy	Military Expenditure	Population
<i>USA</i>	<p><i>GDP:</i> ✓ \$16.72 trillion (2013) [comparison to the world: 1] <i>Trade:</i> ✓ US-China → \$579 billion ✓ US-Japan → \$290 billion ✓ US-Philippines → \$14.541 billion</p>	✓ \$640 billion (3.8% of GDP) [2013; comparison to the world: 1]	✓ 318,892,103 (July 2014 estimate) [comparison to the world: 4]
<i>China</i>	<p><i>GDP:</i> ✓ \$9.33 trillion (2013) [comparison to the world: 2] <i>Trade:</i> ✓ China-US → \$579 billion ✓ China-Japan → \$312 billion ✓ China-Philippines → \$12.850 billion</p>	✓ \$188 billion (2.0% of GDP) [2013; comparison to the world: 2]	✓ 1,355,692,576 (July 2014 estimate) [comparison to the world: 1]
<i>Japan</i>	<p><i>GDP:</i> ✓ \$5.007 trillion (2013) [comparison to the world: 3] <i>Trade:</i> ✓ Japan-US → \$290 billion ✓ Japan-China → \$312 billion ✓ Japan-Philippines → \$16.350 billion</p>	✓ \$48.6 billion (1.0% of GDP) [2013; comparison to the world: 5]	✓ 127,103,388 (July 2014 estimate) [comparison to the world: 11]
<i>Philippines</i>	<p><i>GDP:</i> ✓ \$272.2 billion (2013) [comparison to the world: 40] <i>Trade:</i> ✓ Philippines-US → \$14.541 billion ✓ Philippines-China → \$12.850 billion ✓ Philippines-Japan → \$16.350 billion</p>	✓ \$3.23 billion (1.19% of GDP) [2013; comparison to the world: 86]	✓ 107,668,231 (July 2014 estimate) [comparison to the world: 13]

Sources: World CIA Factbook, US Trade Representative, Japan External Trade Organization, Philippine Statistics Authority

Using the parameters of Power Asymmetry Theory, the type of relationship—i.e. symmetrical or asymmetrical—can be determined by three major indicators: economy, military, and population. While there are disparities in the economic, military, and population figures of China, Japan, and the US as

presented in Table 1, they are nevertheless relatively at par with each other. Putting into perspective, when compared to all others around the world, the capabilities of the three countries, as measured by the three indicators, are more or less of the same league with each other.

The disputants in the ECS dispute, i.e. China and Japan, are major powers wielding comprehensive capabilities. Thus, a collision between these two great powers—both with huge defense budgets—can greatly affect the international economy and undermine regional stability.

Escalating Sino-Japanese Conflict

Normalized during the 1970s, Sino-Japanese relations are again at a crossroads. As China propels itself into the world stage, historic rivalries with Japan reignite. The re-emergence of China seems to threaten the status quo in the Asia-Pacific region where the US has been considered as the “primary security guarantor.” Thus, Japan has been alarmed by the systemic changes in the region especially as its ascendant neighbor, i.e. China, has been accompanying its economic progress with significant defense enhancement. China, for its part, views Japan as a stumbling block in its bid to alter the regional order in its favor.⁵ It is from this geopolitical context that the Diaoyu/Senkaku Island dispute figures as a pivotal flashpoint in the grand chessboard game between the two Asian great powers.

The recent episode of tensions dates back to 2010 when a Chinese fishing boat rammed Japanese Coast Guard (JCG) vessels in the waters close to the disputed territory which led to the arrest of the former’s captain.⁶ Almost instantly, the incident led to a steep upward trajectory of nationalism in both countries which exacerbated the existing acerbity in their relations.⁷ Since then, both nations have undertaken steps to bolster their claims in the area.

In 2012, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda “nationalized” the islands—a move which has irked the Chinese public.⁸ In retaliation, Chinese activists attempted to land in the uninhabited islands in the East China Sea. In addition, Beijing unleashed a set of economic sanctions against Japan. Analysts warned that, in view of the enormous amount of trade between the two nations, these sanctions could have major repercussions on regional growth as well as global supply chains. Since Shinzo Abe was reinstated as Prime Minister in late 2012, Japan has been militarily reasserting its claim in the area. Aside from creating the National Security Council, Tokyo has moved to enhance its security alliances in the Asia-Pacific region, especially with the United States. Domestically, the Abe government has been quite successful

in overcoming opposition towards reinterpreting its pacifist constitution in order to play a more active role in the region towards a “collective-defense” strategy, i.e. the Japanese military can now come to the aid of allies in the event that the latter come under attack from a common

enemy.⁹ In the long run, Japan has announced plans to amend its constitution by 2020, paving the way for Japan to have, once again, a full-fledged military force.¹⁰

The rulers of China have also taken assertive actions in order to establish a claim in the islands. In two occasions in 2012 and 2013, reconnaissance air craft and fighter jets of China’s People Liberation Army (PLA) entered Japanese airspace. A more significant development came in November 2013 when Beijing announced the creation of a Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea—an area which covers the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands and overlaps with Japanese airspace—in a subtle move to challenge Japan’s administrative control over the area.¹¹

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As tensions flare between two countries, the danger of an accidental or unintended military incident could worsen and spiral out of control. Considering the respective defense spending of the two conflicting parties, anxieties about a violent military confrontation are not unjustified. Emboldened by nationalist fervor, the Japanese view China's action as part of the latter's grand aim to revive its days of glory and prominence in the region often labeled as the "Middle Kingdom" era.¹² Arousing public sentiments on Japanese wartime aggression vis-à-vis its recent military buildup, China has portrayed Japan as a "trouble maker" in the region.¹³ Hence, the fear of miscalculation on either side increases, which could then open the floodgates of full-scale military conflict from which either side has been clear that they would not back down.¹⁴

The US-Japan Alliance

With the unfolding dynamics of the dispute, a major factor is critical in the strategic calculations of both Tokyo and Beijing: the US-Japan alliance. For more than half a century, the treaty alliance between the US and Japan has served as the cornerstone of US security policy and power projection in the Asia-Pacific. From the US perspective, East Asia is the region where the "strategic fulcrum of Asia"¹⁵ lies because, as argued above, it is home to two great powers. Thus, in order to keep the peace won in World War II (WWII), the US transformed an erstwhile enemy, Japan, into one of its staunchest allies. The US and Japan forged a strategic security alliance paving the way for the stationing of around 53,000 troops and establishing a base in Okinawa—the major

US forward logistics base in the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁶ With the US and Japan also cooperating in areas of trade and development, as well as ballistic missile defense and arms sales and co-production, the alliance has become more symmetrical.¹⁷

As the pendulum of global power swings from the West to the East, the United States and Japan have gained greater impetus in strengthening their alliance. There is a great degree of uncertainty in the outcome of the current maritime dispute between China and Japan. If the two countries head for a violent collision course, it would be detrimental to peace and prosperity of the entire international system. As a treaty ally, the US has been unequivocal in expressing its support for Japan. Although the US has also extensive economic ties with China, abandoning Tokyo will not only significantly damage the credibility of American alliances but, more importantly, the Japanese will see much more incentive to take a more dangerous course in dealing with its neighbor, such as acquiring nuclear weapons.¹⁸ With the second largest economy in Asia empowered by technology and innovation, Japan has the wherewithal to develop the most sophisticated weaponry to bolster its defense capabilities.

In this geostrategic context, the US has been very clear that, pursuant to the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, it will defend Japan in the event of armed conflict in what it calls as the Senkaku Islands. Aside from President Obama's firm commitment stated earlier, the US Congress has also been

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clear in backing Japan when, in November 2012, it passed an accompanying resolution to the National Defense Authorization Act which stated that “*the unilateral action of a third party will not affect the United States’ acknowledgment of the administration of Japan over the Senkaku Islands.*”¹⁹ Thus, notwithstanding China’s declaration of ADIZ in the ECS, the United States continues to recognize Japan’s control over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

As a major player in the region, China has enjoyed economic success which has also gained some political overtones aimed at eventually influencing the existing regional order. It is therefore apparent that, in the larger context of geopolitical dynamics, the United States, as the preeminent status quo power, desires to preserve the regional order in the Asia-Pacific which it has largely shaped and influenced since the end of WWII. Thus, in order to maintain stability, the United States has been at the forefront in balancing China by supporting Japan.

Implications for the Philippines

Further south of the East China Sea lies another body of water which is also a potential flashpoint of conflict amidst China’s reemergence: the West Philippine Sea. Like the East China Sea, the WPS involves another treaty ally of the United States, the Philippines. However, unlike US-Japan relations, the US and the Philippines have, as Table 1 shows, an asymmetrical relationship—with a superpower on one hand, and a developing country on the other. Understanding the milieu of regional power dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region, the East China Sea dispute has three major implications for Philippine defense policy in the WPS territorial row: (1) the East China Sea is a more volatile situation and thus a much more delicate problem for the US (2) the US is constrained in aiding Southeast Asian allies, like the Philippines, in the WPS conflict, and (3) the Philippines must ensure a long-term implementation of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Modernization program.

1. East China Sea dispute: A more volatile problem

From the US perspective, the ECS represents a much more dangerous problem compared to the WPS maritime conflict. As noted above, the former involves the great powers of the region—both of which are, as Table 1 portends, economic and military powerhouses. Encumbered by nationalist sentiments, both China and Japan are now engulfed in an anxious and complicated situation that may generate miscalculation leading to an all-out military confrontation. Moreover, with China and Japan posturing their strong military capabilities, it is highly uncertain what the outcome of an armed clash between them would be.

The dispute in the WPS between China and the Philippines illustrates a more certain outcome. As shown in the Scarborough Shoal incident of 2012, the Philippines was easily overwhelmed by China. The episode also exemplifies China’s policy of “*safeguarding rights and maintaining security*”²⁰, challenging the status quo while maintaining stability and economic progress. Based on the foregoing discussions, China cannot be sure it can engage in a similar maritime conquest in the East China Sea without provoking a violent backlash from Tokyo. Hence, the ECS dispute proves to be much more complicated for the United States to handle since the outcome thereof may eventually lead to a new regional order that can supplant the US-dominated status quo.

It is therefore evident that the ECS dispute is—at least in the short and medium term—a much more volatile problem for the United States. Given that the disputants are undoubtedly great powers, the ECS dispute is more difficult to deal with for the United States. This is not to suggest, however, that the WPS dispute should be totally sidelined. Rather, the ECS dispute presents a more immediate concern to the US and the region’s great powers.

2. A Constrained US

As it involves the first and second largest economies in the world, US-China trade, as shown in Table 1, hovers around \$ 579 billion. This figure indicates the tremendous economic cooperation between the two nations. This alone, suggests the importance of US-China bilateral relations for regional stability and continued economic growth. Because of their sheer economic weight vis-à-vis the international system, any disagreement or potential conflict between China and the US would certainly cause worldwide alarm.

Juxtaposed with the PH-China maritime dispute, the United States seems more constrained in helping its allies in the region, cognizant of the risks of damaging ties with Beijing. As argued earlier, symmetrical relationships between great powers command greater attention than asymmetrical ones because the former involve the strategic interests of powerful nations. This suggests that ***in an asymmetrical relationship, such as the PH-US alliance, the more powerful country is predisposed to pay less attention to its less powerful partner in the conduct of its foreign policy.*** The latter, however, is more likely to focus on its relationship with its great power ally.

In this milieu of geopolitical relations, the US has been very careful about its rhetoric and actions on aiding the Philippines in the WPS maritime row. As noted in the introduction, President Obama did not categorically state if the US will protect the Philippines in the event of an armed conflict in the disputed maritime area—an assurance which was made to Japan. Instead, the US has just focused on encouraging diplomatic channels and other peaceful means in attempting to manage the dispute. It is therefore apparent that given the tremendous importance of the Sino-American relations for regional stability, the US has been very careful not to overly antagonize China in the WPS dispute.

3. Sustainability of the AFP Modernization Program

It is clear from the discussion above that in the event of an armed conflict between countries with asymmetrical relationships, such as that between the Philippines and China, the stronger power has the greater chances of prevailing. The weaker party tends to rely on its other powerful ally, as the Philippines does with the US. However, given the important ties between the United States and China, both of which have the capacity to affect the regional balance of power, the Americans are more constrained in exerting greater support to weaker allies.

During the 2014 Obama visit, however, the Philippines and the United States signed the “Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement” (EDCA), a defense pact which, among others, aims to increase the rotational presence of American forces in the Philippines. The EDCA, as an implementing agreement to the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) and the 1999 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), was forged by the United States and the Philippines against the backdrop of an emerging China. Given that China has overlapping territorial claims with the Philippines, there is an impression that the *raison d’être* of the EDCA is to serve as a tentative response to Beijing’s assertiveness. While the EDCA serves as a window of opportunity for areas of cooperation such as humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HADR), it should not be mistaken as a powerful and sustainable deterrent against any party in the territorial row in the WPS. As argued earlier, the outcome of a possible PH-China armed clash in the WPS is relatively predictable: a swift Chinese victory that, as manifested with the Scarborough shoal incident, does not necessarily conflagrate into an all-out military confrontation. By contrast, an armed conflict between China and Japan would be instantly detrimental to international and regional peace and stability.

Indeed, the EDCA aims to complement current efforts to boost the capabilities of the Philippine military. However, the Philippines

should not be complacent in its belated AFP modernization program because, as history suggests, the American presence in the country seemed to have led to lesser attention given to external defense than what was warranted. The Philippines must ensure that even after the term of the current administration, the AFP modernization program will be sustained to achieve its vision of a military with “minimum defense capability.” This is not to suggest that the Philippines should not enhance security relations with other nations. Rather, the Philippines must focus on building its defense capabilities—especially in terms of enhancing the navy and the air force—in order to play a more significant role in such security ties, notwithstanding obvious asymmetrical realities.

The challenge for the Philippines, therefore, is to ensure the effective and long-term implementation of the AFP modernization program, which needs to cut across presidential terms. Mindful of its asymmetrical relationship and in order to avoid systemic misperception, the Philippines should not exclusively rely too much on an external power for its external defense, as it had in the past.

Conclusion

Utilizing the Power Asymmetry theory, this paper highlighted the dynamics of great power politics in the East China Sea dispute and its implications for Philippine Defense Policy. Against the backdrop of an emerging and increasingly assertive China, the US has been relatively unambiguous in expressing its full support of Japan in the event of an armed conflict in the Diaoyou/Senkaku islands. Enjoying a symmetrical relationship, the US-Japan alliance—touted as the cornerstone of US policy in the Asia-Pacific—is bent on preserving the status quo, and hence, important in maintaining peace and stability in the region.

On the contrary, the Philippines, which is also embroiled in a territorial row with China, has an asymmetrical relationship with the US, its treaty ally. For a host of reasons, the US has been constrained and reluctant to extend the

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similar assurance it has given Japan. Thus, the Philippines should not just rely on an external power to defend itself but also ensure a long-term implementation of the AFP Modernization Program in beefing up its defense capabilities. Moreover, the US views the Sino-Japanese conflict as a much more dangerous dynamics because it involves the heavyweights in the Region. This is not to suggest that the WPS dispute is less important. Whereas the ECS dispute is much more volatile, the WPS is more of a long-term challenge that also requires great attention from pertinent parties.

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Endnotes

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