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Japan-Philippines Strategic Partnership: Converging Threat Perceptions

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Synopsis

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's recent visit to Manila has galvanised Japan's strategic partnership with the Philippines. The re-energising of strategic partnership between the two countries is driven not only by their mutual concern over China's assertiveness but also their converging economic imperatives.

Commentary

JAPANESE PRIME Minister Shinzo Abe and Philippine President Benigno Aquino III agreed to comprehensively enhance the Japan-Philippines strategic partnership during their bilateral meeting in Manila on 27 July 2013. Japan is one of only two strategic partners of the Philippines, the other being the United States.

Prime Minister Abe announced major initiatives to bolster Tokyo's alliance with Manila such as advancing their maritime cooperation, enhancing bilateral economic cooperation, extending a stand-by credit loan for the Philippines' disaster preparedness, and continuous assistance to the Mindanao peace process, among others. Territorial disputes with China were among the regional security challenges confronting the two countries discussed by the two leaders. However, China as an 'existential threat' is not the only pillar of the burgeoning partnership between Japan and the Philippines.

Maritime security cooperation

The Japan-Philippines strategic partnership was established in 2011 initially just to facilitate the exchange of goods, services, people and investments between the two economies through the implementation of the Japan-Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement. But since the start of Mr Abe's second term, maritime security cooperation has become the main pillar of this strategic partnership.

Prime Minister Abe reaffirmed Japan's assistance towards the capacity building of the Philippine Coast Guard by providing the agency with 10 patrol vessels through a loan agreement. Maritime security cooperation between the two allies has grown more dynamic, and that must be expected. Both are maritime nations with mutual interests in maritime security and freedom of navigation in the region's vital Sea Lines of Communication. More importantly, their cooperation is a clear response to a common threat - China's maritime build-up in the East and South China seas.

Strengthening maritime cooperation with Japan is part and parcel of the Philippines' broader strategy of

intensifying its defence cooperation with its allies to compensate for its limited military capability and insecurity. It likewise signifies Manila's determination to internationalise the South China Sea disputes in a bid to counter Beijing's insistence on bilateralism, which may legally and strategically undermine Manila's territorial claims.

President Aquino stated that the US and Japan will be given access to the Subic Naval Base, a former US military facility facing the South China Sea. The Philippines will indeed play a role in Japan's nascent defence strategy of deploying marines and surveillance drones to protect its remote islands and foreign policy strategy of re-engaging ASEAN.

The maritime cooperation between Tokyo and Manila is intended to project an image of a more dynamic relationship hoping that China would be deterred from being overly assertive in the East and South China seas. However, the Philippines is mistaken to consider Japan as a counterweight to China's military build-up. China is not likely to be intimidated. It is only the US, still the dominant Pacific power, which serves as a guarantor of peace and stability in the region through its military presence.

Providing the Philippines with brand-new patrol vessels and giving Japan access to Philippine bases will not shift the balance of naval power in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, they will boost the Philippines' maritime domain awareness and help Japan monitor China's maritime activities and naval build-up.

Abenomics and Aquinomics

The revitalised strategic partnership is not just all about counter-balancing China. Prime Minister Abe and President Aquino pledged to bolster economic cooperation between Japan and the Philippines. Japan has "Abenomics" while the Philippines has "Aquinomics"; both countries are undergoing an economic renaissance and gaining international confidence due to the said programmes which combine fiscal stimulus and economic reforms.

Crucial to the revival of Japan's economy is closer ties with vibrant ASEAN economies. Abenomics triggers Japanese business interest in ASEAN. Being the fastest-growing economy in the region, the Philippines is poised to receive more Japanese investments and goods as it offers a competitive investment destination and a lucrative market for Japanese businesses, in light of frequent disruptions of Japanese business operations in China due to anti-Japan protests. According to Japan External Trade Organisation (JETRO), the Philippines is regarded as the top profit centre of Japanese firms operating in the region.

Meanwhile, Japan is viewed by President Aquino as a major driver of the Philippines' future economic growth. His administration is turning to foreign direct investments (FDIs) to rev up the expansion of the manufacturing sector to achieve the country's goal of inclusive growth. In 2012, Japan was the Philippines' number one trade partner, with roughly US\$16 billion in total bilateral trade, and the second major source of FDIs.

Mr Abe's visit is seen as catalysing Tokyo's support for President Aquino's key programmes in infrastructure development, disaster preparedness, and the Mindanao peace process through official development assistance (ODA). Besides being the leading source of ODA in the Philippines, Japan has poured aid into Mindanao, where the Philippine government has been negotiating for a comprehensive peace pact with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). While Mr Aquino clearly views a final peace accord, expected to be concluded within this year, as key to his legacy, Japan has contributed significantly to the process through its development projects under Japan-Bangsamoro Initiatives for Reconstruction and Development, or J-BIRD.

Dealing with Japan's wartime atrocities

The survivors of Japanese military sexual slavery in the Philippines during World War II urged Mr Aquino to bring up their demand for official apology with Mr Abe. But President Aquino did not delve into the issue of comfort women during their bilateral meeting and even suggested that the Philippines has moved on from its historic conflict with Japan. The Philippine government had stated earlier that it will staunchly back a rearmed Japan shorn of its pacifist constitution to counter-balance China in the Asia-Pacific.

The convergence of their geostrategic and economic interests has helped both nations overcome the bitter memories of brutal Japanese occupation of the Philippines, leading to a dynamic strategic partnership. Since the end of World War II, the two countries have grown closer due to robust economic ties, and more recently, China's assertiveness.

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