

The South-East Asia Defense Diplomacy for Capacity Building Study Case of the Philippines

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Abstract— The Philippines faces an urgent need to improve its defense capabilities amid China's assertive territorial claims in the South China Sea. This study analyzes the Philippines' cooperation with the United States through the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) as a framework for addressing these pressing challenges. Applying the “Ends, Means, Means, and Risks” model of military planning, this study dissects the goals, resources, actions, and potential pitfalls of these partnerships. Key findings reveal EDCA's critical role in strengthening Philippine maritime security, enhancing joint training and disaster response, and strengthening its integration into a broader network of allies. However, concerns regarding potential Chinese pressure, growing US regional dominance, and domestic political instability highlight the inherent risks associated with this alliance. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the importance for the Philippines to build its strong defense capacity, balancing strategic partnerships with independent capabilities to safeguard its territorial integrity and regional security interests.

Keywords— Southeast Asia, Philippines, South China Sea, Defense Capacity Building, Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), Military Capabilities, Ends-Means-Ways-Risks, Regional Stability, Geopolitical Interests.

I. INTRODUCTION

Defense capacity building involves a variety of direct support to partner nations to strengthen their security sector and better address their security issues. Defense capacity building is to create effective defense institutions that improve a partner nation's security [1]. Equipment, resources, professional military education, and training are all part of defense capacity growth. Defense capacity is essential for resilience and deterrence against security threats. Since 2008, China has become increasingly forceful, leading to a cold peace paradigm in Southeast Asia [2]. China has a better reputation than other Southeast Asian nations. China's policy appears to have changed since 2008-2009. Instead, China has become increasingly nationalistic, oppressive, and confrontational toward most of its neighbors [3].

Defense capacity building is important in the context of great power competition to enhance partner nations capacity, maintain military readiness, ensure technological superiority, and protect national interests. The Philippines foreign policy in general has the characteristics of being independent and principled. The South China Sea is a region characterized by heightened geopolitical tensions between China and the Philippines due to conflicting territorial claims made by the two nations. Specifically, China asserts its ownership over some areas that are recognized as Philippine territory. Foreign policy during the administration of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo saw that good relations with the US must be maintained to eliminate the weaknesses of the Philippines internal defense system caused by China's aggressiveness in the South China Sea Region.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Navigating a Shifting Landscape in Southeast Asia

The current security landscape in Southeast Asia is marked by a delicate balance between rising competition and the aspiration for regional stability. At the heart of this complex interplay lies defense capacity building, a strategy employed by various international actors to support partner nations in bolstering their security posture and addressing evolving threats. This essay delves into the intricacies of defense capacity building, focusing on the Philippines as a case study. The South China Sea is the largest and most intricate maritime region at issue, with competing territorial claims from China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei [4]. Significant concerns to regional multilateral security have evolved in the South China Sea, namely in the Paracel and Spratly Islands. China, Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei are just some of the countries who've staked competing claims to the disputed Spratly and Paracel Islands [5].



Fig. 1. Territorial disputes in the South China Sea

China has made a plan to improve the efficiency of its military and nuclear weapons by modernizing them. There are efforts to improve precision, speed of launch, portability, and durability. This underpins its South China Sea territorial claim. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has the potential to pose a significant challenge to American interests in the Asian region. This is primarily due to its potential impact on crucial sea lanes, oil reserves, and territories of strategic importance, such as the Senkaku Islands, Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, and Spratly Islands. The concern is further exacerbated by the recent advancements in China's military capabilities [6]. The Philippines claims most eastern and central South China Sea seas and islands. The Philippines prevailed in a maritime rights arbitration dispute against China.

B. The US Contribution to Capacity Building in the Philippines

The official military and security relationship between the Philippines and the US is primarily based on the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) of 1951. The growing apprehension of China's activities in the South China Sea has led policymakers to develop a heightened awareness of the security alliance and Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) between the two nations [7]. The US primary Southeast Asian maritime security aid recipient is the Philippines. The US plans to increase rotational deployment of US military forces to five Philippine locations under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. The pact would also increase joint drills with the Philippine Armed Forces.

C. China Shifting Role

In this intricate environment, China's emergence as a formidable military power has significantly altered the regional security dynamic. Prior to 2008, China adopted a relatively conciliatory approach, fostering economic partnerships and avoiding overt displays of assertiveness [8]. However, a marked shift occurred in the late 2000s, with China exhibiting heightened nationalism and a more assertive stance towards its Southeast Asian neighbors, including the Philippines [9]. This shift manifested in territorial disputes, particularly in the South China Sea, where China's expansive claims clash with those of the Philippines and other regional actors [10].

D. The Need for Enhanced Defense

The post-Cold War era ushered in a surge in defense capacity-building initiatives, fueled by the recognition that strong national security capabilities contribute to regional stability and deterrence against a spectrum of threats [10]. These threats encompass traditional concerns like territorial disputes and interstate conflicts, alongside newer challenges such as piracy, terrorism, and climate change [11].

E. The Philippines: Balancing Interest in a Complex Terrain:

The Philippines navigates a particularly precarious position within this evolving security landscape. On the one hand, it maintains a long-standing alliance with the United States, a partnership rooted in historical ties and perceived strategic benefits [12]. On the other hand, the nation aspires to maintain amicable relations with China, a vital economic partner [13]. This balancing act necessitates a nuanced approach to defense capacity building, one that simultaneously strengthens internal security capabilities while carefully navigating the competing interests of major powers.

III. THE FRAMEWORK OF ENDS, MEANS, WAYS AND RISKS

The three parts of a military plan are military goals, strategic ideas, and military assets. The above-mentioned "trinity" is made up of the things that are needed to frame and explain military missions so that they are in line with political goals. These include coming up with military goals (ends), deciding how to use resources like capabilities and troops (means), and thinking about how to use them (ways) through courses of action, doctrines, and concepts [14]. The above described framework functions as a strategic instrument for organizing and executing military operations, covering a diverse array of military engagements, including the continuing dispute in the South China Sea. The "trinity" of military planning – ends, means, and ways – provides a framework for understanding the strategic goals, resources, and operational methods employed in military missions. This framework is particularly relevant to the Philippines' pursuit of defense capacity building in the context of the South China Sea dispute.

A. The Ends

As to the official statement from the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Philippines, the primary goal of defense cooperation between the Philippines and the US is to participate in mutually beneficial initiatives that seek to strengthen their individual and shared defense capabilities. These initiatives comprise the efforts to counteract terrorism, strengthen marine security and knowledge of maritime domains, as well as improve disaster risk management, readiness, and fast response measures [15]. The primary ends of defense cooperation between the Philippines and the United States, as outlined by the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs, are to: Strengthen individual and shared defense capabilities: This encompasses initiatives to combat terrorism, enhance maritime security and domain awareness, and improve disaster risk management and response capabilities Department of Foreign Affairs, Republic of the Philippines, 2023. Deter aggression and respond to threats: This necessitates joint efforts to modernize militaries, train personnel, and coordinate military operations, particularly in the strategically important South China Sea [10].

This means the Philippines and the US will work together to strengthen their militaries to deter aggression and respond to threats. This may include selling weapons and equipment, training, and coordinating military efforts. The Philippines has a large coastline and the South China Sea is a vital maritime route for commodities. Defense cooperation between the US and the Philippines could help the Philippines protect its maritime borders and monitor marine activity in the region. This may include navy warships, aircraft, marine domain awareness improvements, and maritime security training.

B. The Means

The means employed to achieve these ends rely heavily on US support and Philippine internal efforts, Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) signed in 2014, the EDCA grants the US military temporary access to Philippine bases, boosting training opportunities and US capacity for maritime domain awareness, disaster relief, and regional support [13].

Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative (MSI): Launched in 2014, the US-led MSI allocated \$425 million over five years to Southeast Asian nations, with the Philippines receiving \$41 million in 2016 – the largest share – for naval and coast guard modernization, training, and equipment upgrades [16]. Philippine modernization efforts: The Philippines is actively investing in its own military capabilities, including naval vessels, aircraft, and cyber defense technologies [13].

The 2014 EDCA gives the US military temporary use of Philippine military bases. This arrangement improves cooperative training and boosts the capacity of the US to contribute in maritime domain awareness, rescue efforts, and disaster relief in the near and intermediate future. It also aids the Philippine Armed Forces' long-term modernization and capacity-building [17]. The defense partnership between the US and the Philippines is widely recognized as a fundamental element of the US' strategic realignment towards the Asian region.

The cooperation enhances the Philippines' dedication to multilateralism by facilitating its integration into a regional network of countries that share similar values and objectives [18]. The collaboration in defense between the US and the Philippines has the potential to bolster the defensive capabilities and diplomatic influence of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).

C. The Ways

The ways in which these means are implemented involve a multifaceted approach there are Joint military exercises, regular exercises between the US and Philippine militaries enhance interoperability and readiness for potential threats [10].

Technology transfer and training, US assistance in training personnel and providing advanced equipment like Hamilton-class cutters and communication systems bolsters Philippine maritime capabilities [15]

Multilateral cooperation, engaging with other Southeast Asian nations through regional initiatives and forums promotes collective security and strengthens regional stability [11].

Under the Excess Defense Articles program, the United States has committed to providing the Philippines with a Hamilton-class cutter. The United States Congress has allotted a substantial sum of \$425 million for the Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative (MSI) under the jurisdiction of the Pentagon. The allocated cash will be disbursed over a span of five years to the countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. In fiscal year 2016, Congress granted authorization for a total funding amount of \$49.72 million.

The Philippines will get \$41 million, roughly 85% of the \$49.7 million allotted for 2016. Thus, the Philippines receives most US maritime security aid in Southeast Asia [19]. The Philippine Navy and Coast Guard will improve training and logistics using the funds. Philippine Air Force marine operating capabilities will also be improved. These funds will fund navy maintenance, fleet upgrades, interdiction vessels, communication equipment, and aircraft purchase.

D. The Risks

Despite the potential benefits, the Philippines' defense capacity building efforts face several challenges. There are Balancing alliances, The Philippines must navigate the complex relationship between the US and China, its primary security partner and economic benefactor, respectively. This balancing act carries the risk of alienating either power [20].

Domestic political uncertainties, shifts in Philippine leadership could alter the country's foreign and security policy priorities, potentially impacting its defense cooperation with the US [13].

Escalation in the South China Sea, the ongoing dispute over territorial claims in the South China Sea could trigger regional instability and jeopardize the US-Philippines alliance [8].

The alliance between the US and the Philippines, while potentially beneficial due to the opportunity it presents for the US to establish facilities in the Pacific Ocean and strategically monitor China, may face challenges that could undermine its stability

[21] China is a rising economic and military force that could challenge the US. The Philippines may worry about China's growing power and be less likely to work with the US, especially under Chinese pressure. The US is losing its regional dominance and influence.

The US-Philippines relationship may be threatened by this situation. Philippines is a democratic nation with a volatile domestic political situation. In the event of a Philippine government transition, the next administration may be less friendly to the US. The Philippines and China are concerned about the South China Sea conflict. If the dispute escalates, it might damage US-Philippine relations.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study has explored the intricate intersection of defense capacity building and the Philippines' position within the dynamic security landscape of Southeast Asia. Throughout the analysis, The Philippines faces a complex balancing act. It must simultaneously maintain a vital alliance with the United States for security assurances while fostering economic ties with China, a rising power with assertive territorial claims. This tightrope walk requires careful and strategic navigation, lest the Philippines fall victim to the pull of one power at the expense of the other.

Defense cooperation between the US and the Philippines is considered essential to the US' strategic realignment toward Asia. This alliance strengthens the Philippines' commitment to multilateralism, which is essential for integrating it into a regional network of like-minded allies. Defense cooperation between the Philippines and the US aims to discourage Chinese aggression and protect Philippine maritime interests. Their defense coordination includes trading weapons and equipment, facilitating training and education, and deploying military people and resources. These entities promote collaboration through joint exercises, intelligence sharing, and diplomatic cooperation. These efforts may improve Southeast Asian defense diplomacy and capacity building. Defense capacity building must be tailored to address specific challenges. Investments in maritime security are crucial to protect the Philippines' territorial claims in the South China Sea. Robust cyber defense capabilities are equally important to counter contemporary threats from both state and non-state actors. Neglecting these critical areas could leave the Philippines vulnerable to exploitation and instability.

Regional cooperation and multilateral partnerships offer promising avenues for enhanced security. Collaborating with Southeast Asian neighbors on matters of maritime security and joint exercises can foster regional stability and create a rules-based order in the South China Sea. Moving beyond bilateral ties and embracing a community-oriented approach to security holds immense potential for the Philippines and the region as a whole. Looking ahead, the Philippines' pursuit of defense capacity building remains a delicate dance. By carefully considering its strategic partnerships, prioritizing critical capabilities, and embracing regional cooperation, the Philippines can emerge as a resilient and influential player in Southeast Asia. Its success in navigating this complex landscape will have profound implications for its territorial integrity, economic prosperity, and long-term stability in a ever-shifting geopolitical environment.

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