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## The Rise of Defense Diplomacy in the South China Sea

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**Jacqueline Espenilla, Non-Resident WSD-Handa Fellow at the Pacific Forum CSIS, explains that “Countries like the Philippines and Vietnam are shrewdly using the power of defense diplomacy to link their navies and military to strategically interested countries, thereby getting tacit support for positions that conform to shared values [regarding] internationally acceptable behavior.”**

The South China Sea (SCS) region is a seemingly endless story of action and reaction. China’s increasing assertions of sovereignty over the waters and features within its so-called nine-dashed line have served to catalyze its neighbors to adopt ever more cautious and defensive postures in the last few years. Apart from well-publicized boosts in military spending across the board, the Philippines and Vietnam, in particular, have intensified their defense diplomacy efforts, actively seeking out formal extra-regional alliances to help fill their readiness gaps.

On May 11, 2016, the Philippines and France signed a framework defense cooperation arrangement that would provide avenues for high-level dialogues, defense policy consultations, and bilateral training activities. Under the arrangement, France also committed to provide the Philippines with assistance in relation to defense equipment, logistics and defense industry. The signing of this framework arrangement followed closely on the heels of a similar agreement between the Philippines and Japan (Agreement Concerning the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology, signed 29 February 2016), wherein the latter agreed to sell new military hardware, transfer defense technology, donate used military equipment, and provide training to the Philippine armed forces. This is the first defense cooperation agreement concluded by Japan with any Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) country after the Diet passed legislation last year allowing the Japanese military to have a more proactive role in regional security. These two agreements join existing ones that the Philippines already has with Australia (2012 Status of Visiting Forces Agreement) and India (2006 Philippines-India Agreement Concerning Defense Cooperation). The Philippines has also continued to build upon its close alliance with the United States via the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which was signed in 2014 but was only given the green light by the Philippine Supreme Court in January 2016, when it affirmed the constitutionality of this new agreement by saying that it simply carries out the provisions of the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) and the 1998 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA). The EDCA allows for rotating US military presence at five Philippine bases, and will likely be essential to the United States’ rebalance to the Pacific region. More importantly, military cooperation under the EDCA will help enhance the Philippines’ maritime security and maritime domain awareness, as well as contribute to the modernization of Philippine military forces.

On the other hand, Vietnam is moving closer towards formal defense cooperation arrangements with Japan (2014 Extensive Strategic Partnership), Australia (2015

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Declaration on Enhancing the Australia-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership) and India (2009 Memorandum of Understanding for Defense Cooperation). These arrangements renew the focus on enhancing Vietnam’s maritime law enforcement capacity via the provision of vessels and defense equipment as well as the possible co-production of weapons and defense supplies. They also facilitate the conduct of joint patrols, bilateral training exercise, and people-to-people exchanges. Vietnam is also deepening its strategic relationship with the United States (2015 Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relationship). This is further reinforced by President Barack Obama’s announcement on May 23, 2016 that the United States would be lifting a decades long ban on a sale of military equipment to Vietnam.

These SCS defense diplomacy endeavors deliver results for the Philippines and Vietnam on two strategic fronts: capacity building (including equipment provisioning and enhancement) and global signaling. The first is tangible and more immediate while the latter is intangible but may ultimately be of greater value in the long run.

Capacity building activities (CBAs) under these agreements have taken on many forms, depending on the specific needs of the partner country. What is clear, however, is that the CBAs are intended to counterbalance obvious asymmetries among the key actors in the region. Furthermore, the active negotiation and rapid conclusion of all these defense cooperation agreements not only draws a line under the geopolitical and commercial importance of the SCS, but also sends a clear signal that extra-regional stakeholders are carefully watching the developments as they unfold. In a territorial dispute of this magnitude and complexity, the real winner will be the side that, as Australia so aptly put it in its Defense White Paper, “upholds a rules-based global order”. The party perceived to not be playing by the rules risks losing much-needed political capital and ultimately, being the odd man out in a high stakes game where allies and alliances will be crucial to reinforcing and further validating national positions. In this sense, countries like the Philippines and Vietnam are shrewdly using the power of defense diplomacy to link their navies and military to strategically interested countries like Japan, India, Australia, France, and the United States, thereby getting tacit support for positions that conform to shared values and beliefs about what constitutes internationally acceptable behavior.

A decision on the Philippines-China arbitration case (wherein Vietnam also filed an intervention in support of the Philippines’ case at the same time asking the arbitral tribunal to take note of its claims on certain islands in the Paracels) will likely be given by July 7. For many, this ruling is the proverbial line in the sand and China’s reaction will be closely watched. Certainly, it will be a defining moment in regional politics and power play. Assuming the arbitral tribunal rules against China, the Philippines’ defense diplomacy will come in handy, as its strategic allies will be morally obliged to lend their support to an outcome that upholds international law and global order. Such support is the first and most obvious consequence of their earlier global signaling. For the Philippines, a favorable ruling – as well as its allies’ vocal support for it – will be a particularly powerful tool for President-elect Rodrigo Duterte, who will have by then assumed the Philippines’ highest office. Mr. Duterte appears to have adopted a more amicable attitude towards China than his predecessor and has even hinted at the possibility of going back to the negotiating table. If and when he does, Mr. Duterte may be able to package both the ruling and the subsequent global attention and support from allies into a strong bargaining position that China will be unable to ignore.

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