

THE POTENTIALS AND LIMITS OF PHILIPPINES–SOUTH KOREA MARITIME DEFENSE COOPERATION

by Louie Dane C. Merced

The first summit meeting between Philippine President Benigno S. Aquino III and South Korean President Park Geun-hye held in October 2013 in Seoul aimed to deepen the long-standing cooperation and friendship between the two countries. Several agreements were signed, including a memorandum of understanding on defense cooperation. The document outlined plans for increase in military exchanges, sharing of defense-related information, advancement of education and training, and cooperation in military logistics and technology.

Although the Philippines has existing security-related agreements with South Korea, this latest development in their bilateral defense cooperation drew greater attention from policy-makers, analysts, and the public alike. This is mainly due to the Philippine government's efforts to modernize its military capabilities amid the territorial and maritime disputes in the West Philippine Sea. Thus, this development raises an important question on how cooperation with South Korea can advance the strategic interests of the Philippines on maritime security.

Exploring maritime cooperation between the Philippines and South Korea would require a discussion of the Korean maritime program and capabilities as well as an understanding of its interests, priorities, and position on various security issues. Having a clear understanding of these factors would enable the Philippines to find common interests, better manage its expectations, and make the most out of its defense cooperation with South Korea.

South Korea's Growing Military Profile

Being a peninsular country in a highly volatile region, South Korea gives high priority to maritime issues. President Park emphasized that protecting maritime sovereignty is crucial to South Korea's prosperity.¹ The Korean government's commitment to maritime security is best exemplified by its plan to develop a blue-water navy by 2020. This was first articulated in the early 2000s during the presidency of Kim Dae-jung and formalized in the 2005 Defense Reform Plan.

With the development of a blue-water navy as one of its primary defense-related goals, South Korea has increased its military spending. In 2013, the total military expenditure amounted to USD 33.9 billion, a 42 percent increase from the 2004 levels.² This makes South Korea the 10th largest military spender in the world and the fifth in Asia. The country has also expanded its naval fleet to include new destroyers, submarines, and amphibious assault vehicles.

Another key aspect of South Korea's military program is the role of the local defense industry. Beginning the 1970s, South Korea embarked on an industrialization program toward self-sufficiency in arms production.³ But rather than creating state-owned firms, the government relied on the *chaebols*, or private conglomerates.⁴ The *chaebols* built the country's defense industry through generous state subsidies, defense-related research, and exclusive contracts with the South Korean government. Companies such as Doosan, Samsung, and Hyundai manufacture not only commercial ships and tankers but also military aircraft, warships, and conventional weapons. As a result, South Korea now obtains as much as 80 percent of its military needs from domestic suppliers.⁵

Apart from arms production, South Korea has also joined the global arms exports market. In 2012, South Korea's exports reached USD 2.35 billion,⁶ while for the period of 2008-2012, the country was ranked as the 16th largest arms exporter in the world.⁷ The US and Turkey are among the top clients for South Korean defense exports, while Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, are also becoming important markets.⁸

But despite South Korea's emergent military capabilities and robust defense industry, it remains highly reliant on the US, which is a treaty ally. This is because of the complex security situation in the Korean Peninsula, particularly the continued nuclear and military threats from North Korea. Thus, the navies of South Korea and the US regularly hold joint exercises focusing on deterring naval attacks and improving maritime interoperability, as well as search and rescue, and disaster relief.

South Korea also heavily imports high-end aircraft and other high-technology military articles from the US. As a result, the country remains among the world's largest arms importers,⁹ with as much as 80 percent of its imports coming from the US.¹⁰ However, the country's imports are also directed at improving its domestic defense industry, as military contracts with US companies often include transfers of technology.¹¹ Meanwhile, there have also been several ventures between South Korean defense firms and their American counterparts; with the construction of three South Korean Aegis-equipped missile destroyers in 2009 as a prominent example.

South Korea's Maritime Interests

South Korea's growing prioritization of its maritime domain is brought about by the different challenges and issues that it faces. There are at least four identifiable maritime interests for South Korea which span national security, territorial integrity, and economic security.

The most immediate maritime concern for South Korea is the threat of military attacks from North Korea. The two most recent provocations by North Korea took place in the sea – the sinking of the South Korean warship *Cheonan* and the shelling of the Yeonpyeong Island, both of which happened in 2010. These incidents resulted in casualties for South Korean sailors and civilians, and revealed the vulnerability of the country's coasts to external attacks.

The second interest for South Korea pertains to the territorial and maritime disputes that it has with its neighbors. The competing claims over the island referred to as *Dokdo* by South Korea and *Takeshima* by Japan have soured relations between the two neighbors. South Korea also has a rift with China over their overlapping exclusive economic zones (EEZ), including a submerged reef, referred to as *Jeodo* by the Koreans and *Suyan* by the Chinese. Meanwhile, North and South Korea continue to have a disagreement over the Northern Line Limit, which delineates the maritime borders between the two.

The third important maritime issue for South Korea is freedom of navigation in the key sea lines of communication (SLOCs) in East Asia. Virtually all of South Korea's foreign trade takes place in the sea, since the only land border that the country has is with North Korea.¹² As the world's second largest importer of liquefied natural gas (LNG) and the fifth biggest importer of petroleum, South Korea heavily depends on tanker shipments due to the absence of connecting international pipelines.¹³ Thus, any disruption in the flow of maritime commerce in the region would debilitate the South Korean economy. In addition, the country's concern over the SLOCs is also brought about by issues such as smuggling, piracy, terrorism, and weapons proliferation. South Korea is particularly wary about how the SLOCs may be used in the transfer of nuclear and missile materials to and from North Korea, which may only exacerbate the tensions in the Korean Peninsula.

Lastly, South Korea's maritime interest involves coping with the changing geopolitical and military balance in Northeast Asia. As noted by one analyst, the regional security environment largely revolves around the seas; thus, the tensions would have a strong maritime component.¹⁴ China is developing a strong and modern navy as it also becomes more assertive in its territorial claims in the East and South China Seas. Japan, despite constitutional limits in its military force, is also enhancing defensive capabilities amidst territorial rifts and other regional threats. In response to these developments, South Korea is building a robust naval posture in order to prevent China and Japan from completely

dominating the waters in East Asia.¹⁵ Therefore, South Korea's military and naval modernization can also be viewed as part of its larger strategy in dealing with the uncertainties in the region.

The Philippines and South Korea: Finding Areas of Convergence

As an archipelagic and littoral state, the Philippines also places great importance to its maritime security. Recent developments such as the escalation of disputes over the Spratly Islands, the recent incursions in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (e.g., Scarborough Shoal and the Ayungin Shoal), and other non-traditional security threats, have emphasized the need for the country to further improve its maritime capabilities. The Philippine government has been expediting the modernization of the armed forces to develop a 'credible defense posture'. This included the acquisition of two warships—the *BP Gregorio Del Pilar* and *BP Ramon Alcaraz*—to better protect the country's maritime domain. The government also has plans to procure other modern vessels and military equipment.

In addition, the Philippines has also been bolstering its defense cooperation with a number of countries. This is in line with the Philippine National Security Policy (2011-2016) which calls on the government to strengthen cooperation with allies and like-minded neighbors. Foremost of these allies is the US, with which the Philippine government signed an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) allowing American military personnel greater access to Philippine military facilities. The Philippines and Australia also have a Status of Visiting Forces Agreement (SOVFA), which came into force in 2012. Meanwhile, the Philippine government also elevated its bilateral ties with Japan to a strategic partnership in 2011.

It is in this context that the Philippines is likewise expanding its defense relations with South Korea. The two countries have already signed defense-related agreements in the past, most notably the 1994 Memorandum of Understanding on Logistics and Defense Industry Cooperation which facilitated the procurement by the Philippine government of defense articles from South Korea. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the Philippines procured the following military assets from South Korea:¹⁶

- 1993-1994 – 12 Killer patrol crafts;
- 1995-1996 – five Sea Dolphin patrol crafts;
- 1996 – three F-5A Freedom Fighter FGA aircrafts;
- 1998 – 10 F-5A Freedom Fighter FGA aircrafts;
- 2006 – two Sea Dolphin patrol crafts;
- 2009 – 15 Cessna-172/T-41 trainer/light aircrafts

During the Aquino-Park summit in October 2013, the two leaders also discussed the planned purchase by the Philippine government of 12 brand new FA-50 fighter jets from South Korea. The jets, which will be manufactured by Korean Aerospace Industries Inc. (KAI) for PHP 18.9 billion (USD 410 million), are expected to bolster the Philippine air force's capability to regularly patrol the country's territory and maritime domain.

Clearly, the first area of convergence between the Philippines and South Korea is in military sales. The Philippines can look at South Korea as an alternative source of less expensive but reliable military hardware to support its modernization plans. South Korea's geographical proximity to the Philippines, as well as its lower production costs can make the maintenance and transfer expenditures of its military products cheaper compared with those from the US and Europe.

At the same time, the Philippines' procurement of new military assets aligns with South Korea's overseas promotion of its products and industries, including the defense industry. President Park has taken an aggressive 'sales diplomacy' in Southeast Asia, particularly in the 'VIP countries' namely Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines. South Korea views

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these emerging economies as potentially rich markets for its products. The country also seems to be taking advantage of the Philippines' military modernization plans by presenting itself as a supplier of defense articles. Apart from fighter jets, South Korea is also bidding to supply the Philippine navy with two frigate vessels.

Another shared interest between the Philippines and South Korea is ensuring the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. While the Philippines views China's expansive claims over the area as the more immediate threat, the main concern for South Korea is how the tensions could affect the flow of maritime commerce in the region. Maritime security and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, therefore, becomes an integral part of South Korea's national interests.¹⁷

Given its shared reliance with South Korea on the sea lanes in the South China Sea, the Philippines (and other littoral Southeast Asian countries) can engage the Korean government to contribute more in the maintenance of the freedom of navigation in the area. The Philippine government can collaborate with its South Korean counterpart in capacity-building through trainings, joint patrols, and other logistical support. While given its special concern over weapons proliferation, South Korea can also support the navies and coast guards of Southeast Asian countries in monitoring shipments of missile materials and other weapons in crucial sea routes in the region. Meanwhile, the Philippines can seek greater support from South Korea in addressing other maritime concerns such as piracy and smuggling, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), and protection of marine environment.

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The Philippines and South Korea: Limits to Cooperation

While there are shared maritime interests between the Philippines and South Korea, there are also factors that may limit the extent of their defense cooperation.

On a more practical aspect, the language barrier between Filipino and South Korean troops can constrain military cooperation. Military equipment purchased from South Korea may have instructional manuals that are either in the Korean language or are not sufficiently translated into English. For the same reason, military exchanges and exercises with South Koreans can also be challenging for Filipino soldiers, unlike for instance conducting the same with American or Australian troops.

But more importantly, South Korea's defense cooperation with the Philippines will significantly be shaped by the Korean government's strategic calculations in the region, including its position on the South China Sea disputes. South Korea has consistently maintained a neutral and low-key stance in the territorial disputes. Pronouncements from South Korean officials have been limited,¹⁸ and have relied on general themes of freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution in accordance with international law.¹⁹ During the summit meeting with President Aquino, President Park did not explicitly support the Philippines' move to submit the South China Sea issue to international arbitration, but rather emphasized the importance of peaceful resolution of disputes.²⁰

South Korea is expected to project an image of impartiality in the region. This despite the country's increasing defense cooperation and military transactions with the Philippines and other Southeast Asian states, which may be interpreted as its indirect involvement in the South China Sea. The South Korean government particularly avoids antagonizing China, which it considers as a valuable partner in trade and other security issues, particularly the perennial North Korean nuclear threat. Even though South Korea has a dispute with China over the *leodo/Suyan* Reef, the said issue has not yet figured prominently in their bilateral relations.

Because of this, South Korea is expected to maintain a more muted stance to the ongoing tensions in the South China Sea. It is unlike Japan, which has issued stronger statements mainly because of its equally tense territorial disputes with China over the *Senkaku/Diaoyu* islands. While the South Korean government may also be anxious about China's long-term strategic directions, it is also keen on maintaining healthy relations with its giant neighbor.

Furthermore, South Korea remains a middle power that can still be vulnerable to pressures from other larger powers in the region, particularly China. During the Aquino-Park summit, it was reported that China requested South Korea to terminate the sale of the fighter jets to the Philippines.²¹ Although South Korean officials denied any such report, the allegation exposes the possible quandary that the South Korea may face as it copes with the geopolitical dynamics in the region.

Future Directions and Expectations

Despite such limitations, maritime defense cooperation can be another fertile area in Philippines-South Korea relations. The two countries have many shared maritime interests—freedom of navigation, non-proliferation of nuclear and missile-related materials, as well as non-traditional concerns such as anti-smuggling, disaster relief, and protection of marine resources.

For the Philippines, South Korea can be an important supplier for the country's growing military needs. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Department of National Defense (DND) should carefully study and explore which particular military articles can be purchased from South Korean companies. As South Korea demonstrates high interest in selling its military equipment and defense exports, the Philippine government can take advantage of this alternative military supplier and seek for more favorable deals with the country.

With the new memorandum on defense cooperation, the Philippines can also examine how bilateral military exchanges and exercises with South Korea can be operationalized. These can be patterned after the multinational military activities where the two countries are already involved in. For example, Philippine and South Korean military personnel took part in the 22-nation Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercises in 2012. The biennial event hosted by the US Pacific Fleet is regarded as the world's largest international naval exercise focusing on maritime interoperability and maritime domain awareness.²² South Korea also participated in one of the main events in the 2013 Philippines-US *Balikatan* exercises—the Multinational Maritime Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (HA/DR) Roundtable Discussion.²³ While in December 2013, the South Korean government sent over 500 soldiers to the Philippines to assist in the rehabilitation efforts in the areas hit by typhoon *Haiyan/Yolanda*. The Philippine and South Korean governments can therefore use these examples as the foundation for more meaningful collaborations in the future.

Indeed, both countries can benefit from exploring the growing opportunities in their defense cooperation. For the Philippines, engaging with South Korea can be a way to diversify its defense relations apart from its traditional alliance with the US. This will empower the Philippines with more options and greater autonomy as it responds to the threats and challenges that it currently faces in the region. For South Korea, cooperation with the Philippines can be a chance for the country to become a stakeholder in ensuring stability in the South China Sea. By assisting the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries in addressing various maritime threats, South Korea is consequently ensuring its own maritime security.

Finally, given South Korea's neutrality in the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, the Philippines must continue to widen the discourse to include other maritime issues where the two countries have mutual interests. Solely focusing on territorial and national sovereignty issues may be perceived as self-serving and may consequently alienate other countries to the Philippines' cause. Instead, strategically framing the South China Sea disputes into a broader maritime concern would convince other countries in the region that they have a stake in the issue and that they need to cooperate in upholding peace and stability in the area. 

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