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**AMERICAN NATIONAL INTERESTS AND CHINA'S CORE INTERESTS  
IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA:  
PHILIPPINE SECURITY PREDICAMENTS IN US-CHINA RELATIONS**

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When the People's Republic of China (PRC) declared the South China Sea as an integral part of its core interests at the same level with Taiwan and Tibet, the United States (US) quickly responded that the South China Sea is pivotal to regional security and stressed that peace and stability in the contested area is in America's national interests.

This exchange of policy declarations from the two major powers explicitly validates the long-standing view that the US and China have incessant and real interests in the security situation in the South China Sea. This development also re-emphasizes the divergent position of the US and China on the South China Sea disputes. The Philippines, being a major claimant in the disputed islands, islets, reefs and shoals in the area, is again torn between two important lovers: the US, as a defense ally, and China, as a "strategic partner" in regional security.

The recently announced positions of US and China on the South China Sea disputes have revived Philippine security predicaments on two fundamental issues in Philippine foreign and security policy: a) How to strategically balance its relations with the two important major powers that wield tremendous influence on Filipino decision-makers; and b) How to operationally protect its security interests in the South China Sea given its limited military capabilities.

As a security ally cemented by the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1951, there is a high expectation in the Philippines that the US will continuously build the defense capability of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) to address its security challenges. But since the expiration of the Military Bases Agreement in 1991, US role in building this capability has become minimal and inadequate. In fact, since the complete withdrawal of American troops in 1992, the capability of

the AFP has rapidly deteriorated. From one of the finest armed forces in Asia, the AFP has become one of the world's ill-equipped armed forces. Since the end of the Second World War, the Philippine military has focused its attention on internal security operations.

The AFP's external defense capability is extremely limited at present. The Philippines has the only in Navy in Asia without a missile capability. The Philippine Navy, which should be at the frontline of Philippine external defense, has no anti-submarine, electronic warfare and mine warfare capabilities. The Philippine Navy does not even have enough assets to hold its presence in the various maritime areas of its archipelago of more than 7,100 islands. Its facilities in the nine occupied areas in the South China Sea are the most modest and in the desperate state of rapid deterioration due to poor maintenance and harsh weather conditions. Thus, the Philippines, militarily speaking, is the weakest American ally in Asia, a grim reality that casts doubt on the reliability of the US as a security ally.

The weak military capability of the Philippines has strongly encouraged China to assert a much bolder position and aggressive posture in the South China Sea, once described as an "American lake" during the cold war but not anymore now as it has no doubt become a China lake. China has made known to the world that the South China Sea is part of its internal waters and has now built growing naval capability to protect these waters and beyond. China already has a firm offshore forward defense strategy that is matched by modern and high-tech naval assets. Though these naval assets are still far below the capabilities of the US, China has the fastest growing military in the world supported by the fastest growing economy.

The inconvenient truth of China's growth as a comprehensive power is indeed a great challenge to Philippines' claims in the South China Sea. With its limited defense capability, the Philippines has no illusion of military challenging the claim of China and has accepted the fact of American strategic ambiguity in the South China Sea.

Thus, the Philippines is presently faced with a more pragmatic option to constructively engage China and maintain a peaceful, cordial and positive relations with the traditional Middle Kingdom in Asia. While the Philippines still values its defense alliance with the US, the government in Manila has to hedge with China and even cultivate a better military relationship with China as

American support to Philippine armed forces is small, inadequate and below expectations.

If Philippine defense capability is not improved through autonomous effort or stronger military assistance from the US, Manila will eventually pay tribute to China being its traditional vassal state and a closer Asian neighbor. If the US fails to assist the Philippines in building its security capability in the midst of the renewed tensions in the South China Sea, Philippine defense alliance with the US will just become archetypal, sentimental and devoid of military value.

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