

New Development and Motivation in Relations between Japan and the Philippines

Zhu Haiyan

In recent years, with the active diplomacy conducted by Japan's Shinzo Abe government and positive response from the Philippine side, Japan-Philippines relations have witnessed significant improvement in the fields of politics, security, economy, and people-to-people exchanges. The strengthening of the bilateral relations epitomizes the efforts made by many Asia-Pacific countries to expand their diplomatic maneuvering space in response to an evolving regional situation and the intensifying strategic competition between China and the United States, which is of universal relevance and merits further study.

New Development in Japan-Philippines Relations

With a proactive diplomatic posture, the Abe government has been working hard to build Japan's international image and redouble its diplomatic efforts. The Philippines provides important opportunities for Japan to enhance its influence in Southeast Asia. Under Japan's active diplomatic offensive, Japan-Philippines relations have been upgraded to a "strengthened strategic partnership." President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines said that Japan and the Philippines are entering the "golden age of strategic partnership."¹

Zhu Haiyan is Associate Professor at the School of Philosophy and Government, Shaanxi Normal University.

1 Roberto R. Romulo, "The Golden Age of Japan-Philippines Partnership," *Philstar*, December 13, 2019, <http://www.philstar.com/business/2019/12/13/1976530/golden-age-japan-philippines-partnership>.

Closer political contacts

More active and stable political relations between Japan and the Philippines have become a precondition and guarantee for further development of bilateral relations. Promoted by Japan, the two countries have maintained closer contacts and exchanges at the highest level. During his term as Philippine President, Benigno S. Aquino III had visited Japan six times. In 2016, the Emperor of Japan visited the Philippines. During President Duterte's first visit to Japan in October of the same year, Prime Minister Abe expressed that Japan would support the Philippine government's projects in naval capacity building, the peace process in the Mindanao region, and infrastructure construction, and the two leaders agreed to strengthen the strategic partnership between the two countries. After that, Abe visited the Philippines in January 2017, and Duterte visited Japan in October. In 2019, Duterte visited Japan twice in May and October.

The two leaders also held bilateral talks on multilateral platforms of the East Asia Summit, "ASEAN+3", "ASEAN+1" and the APEC summit to demonstrate mutual trust and cooperation. Abe's policy toward the Philippines has received a warm response from Duterte, who called Japan "a closer friend than a brother."² Through active mutual visits and meetings, Abe has succeeded in forming a personal and working relationship with Duterte. Frequent summit meetings not only symbolize a stable development of bilateral relations, but also provide political guarantee for progress achieved in various fields. In addition to summit diplomacy, diplomatic exchanges at other levels between the two governments are also getting warmer. The two sides have established exchange mechanisms such as the bilateral strategic dialogue at the deputy ministerial level, and the dialogue on maritime and oceanic affairs, all of which have enriched contents of the "strengthened strategic partnership."

2 "Philippines Visit," Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, January 12, 2017, <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/about/actions/201701/12Philippines.html>.

Deepening security ties

Japan is making efforts to upgrade and expand its security diplomacy with the Philippines. Military security exchanges and cooperation have become the most rapidly growing and active field in Japan-Philippines relations. The improvement of the Japan-Philippines security cooperation started from the Yoshihiko Noda government, and the Abe government pushed forward the cooperation with more radical efforts. In January 2013, when then Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida visited the Philippines, security cooperation was an important part in his talks with then Philippine President and Foreign Minister. The talks started the rapid development of Japan-Philippines security cooperation. Then Shinzo Abe, as Commander-in-Chief of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces, visited the Philippines and focused on promoting defense cooperation, setting the tone and direction for bilateral defense and security cooperation. In the same year, then Japanese Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera visited the Philippines twice. In 2015, then Philippine President and Defense Minister visited Japan respectively, pushing the bilateral military cooperation to the highest level.

Since Duterte became President, Japan-Philippines security cooperation has been carried out continuously on the tone set by the Aquino III government. The two governments continue to implement the agreement on the transfer of defense equipment and technology to strengthen military and security relations. In August 2016, Japan delivered its first promised patrol boat to the Philippines. At the deputy defense chiefs' meeting in February 2017, the two sides worked to promote defense exchanges and cooperation in the name of countering piracy and kidnapping; in March, Japan delivered two TC-90 trainer planes to the Philippines; in June, Japan's quasi aircraft carrier *Izumo* made a "strategic stop" at the port of Subic Bay. President Duterte became the first head of a foreign government to board the ship, and he said that "Japan is a reliable friend who has always helped the Philippines, and the Philippines

is willing to keep on deepening the security relationship with Japan in the future”³; when aircraft carrier *Kaga* made a “strategic stop” at Subic Bay in September 2018, President Duterte once again boarded the ship. In August 2017, Japan and the Philippines signed an agreement to provide the Philippines with spare parts for UH-1H helicopters free of charge. In March 2019, the agreement was put into effect. When Philippine Defense Minister met with his Japanese counterpart in April, he called it “the latest evidence of the increasingly strong Japan-Philippines relationship.”⁴

The security cooperation between Japan and the Philippines is improving and diversifying. Their security cooperation is based on institutional framework such as the deputy defense ministers’ meeting, the security dialogue on maritime and oceanic affairs, and the annual defense dialogues at the level of security staff. In addition, Japan and the Philippines also have exchanges on multilateral occasions such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus and the ASEAN Defense Senior Officials’ Meeting, the Tokyo Defense Forum, and the Japan-ASEAN Defense Ministerial Roundtable initiated by Shinzo Abe. The contents and forms of security cooperation between Japan and the Philippines are also gradually diversified. At present, Japan mainly provides patrol boats, trainer planes, transport planes and relevant spare parts for the Philippines. The two sides have also expanded cooperation in information exchange, joint exercises, and mutual visits between the JMSDF and the Philippine Navy. In addition, the Japanese and Philippine Coast Guards are also exploring cooperation possibilities, in which the Japanese Coast guard would help the Philippines train its coast guard forces and improve its operational capability with Japanese patrol boats and aircraft. The Philippines in turn agreed to open its harbor base to the Japanese Coast Guard for sea area adaptability training.

3 “The Visit of H.E. Mr. Rodrigo R. Duterte, President of the Republic of the Philippines, to the JMSDF Escort Ship ‘IZUMO’,” Ministry of Defense of Japan, June 4, 2017, <https://www.mod.go.jp/e/press/2017/06/04b.html>.

4 Roy Narra, “Filipino, Japanese Defense Chiefs to Strengthen Strategic Security Partnership,” *Manila Times*, April 21, 2019, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2019/04/21/news/national/filipino-japanese-defense-chiefs-to-strengthen-strategic-security-partnership/543165>.

Accelerated economic cooperation

Japan uses the Official Development Aid (ODA) to provide economic and humanitarian assistance to the Philippines, and encourages Japanese enterprises to invest in the country, thus making economic and trade exchanges an area of great potential in bilateral relations. Japan's ODA policy to the Philippines aims at further strengthening the strategic partnership between the two countries. From 2010 to 2014, Japan ranked first in foreign ODA received by the Philippines. In 2015, when Japan revised its ODA outline, it renamed the "development assistance outline" as "development cooperation outline." While highlighting equality and mutual benefit, Japan emphasized strategic operation, linked ODA projects with shaping regional security, and made ODA one of the important tools to practice "proactive pacifism." Accordingly, Japan has stepped up its aid and expanded aid areas to the Philippines. Since 2014, ODA projects from Japan have generally witnessed an increase: 28 projects in 2014, 34 in 2015, 45 in 2016 when the Philippines changed its government, 27 in 2017, and 38 in 2018.⁵ In terms of content, ODA projects are not only limited to economic development, but also expanded to education and military training, military medical care, military port expansion, marine meteorological observation services, etc.

In terms of economic cooperation, Japanese enterprises have gradually expanded its scale of investment and construction in the Philippines. This is driven by China-Japan tensions, rising labor costs in China, and the transfer and upgrade of industrial chains. It is also attracted by a stabilizing social order, improving investment environment, large population, and high national English level in the Philippines. In October 2016, Japan and the Philippines signed the Industrial Cooperation Action Plan (ICAP), under which the two sides will carry out extensive cooperation in the fields of manufacturing, automobiles, micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, services, and human resources development. In the field of agriculture, Japan will provide long-

5 "Recent Japanese ODA Projects," Embassy of Japan in the Philippines, November 26, 2019, http://www.ph.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_ja/00_000077.html.

term loans for the Philippines' agricultural development, and help Filipinos purchase Japanese agricultural machinery, in order to implement the plan for agricultural mechanization. During his visit to the Philippines in January 2017, Prime Minister Abe announced that he would provide the Philippines with one trillion yen of economic assistance in the next five years. In order to implement Abe's commitment, Japan and the Philippines set up a joint committee for economic cooperation and infrastructure construction and held the first meeting in March 2017. By August 2019, the committee had held eight meetings to discuss projects involving infrastructure areas such as railways, irrigation, roads, flood control, energy, and industrial zone development. At the same time, Japan has also helped improve the distribution of electric power in the Bangsamoro region and provide humanitarian assistance to children in Mindanao, which greatly expanded the areas of bilateral economic and social cooperation and further strengthened relations between the two countries.

More active people-to-people exchanges

Japan has been actively promoting and deepening people-to-people exchanges with the Philippines, to strengthen Japan's soft power, and consolidate the people-based foundation in its relations with Manila. Shinzo Abe has personally promoted the Japanese material culture in clothing, food, housing, and transport to Southeast Asia and other countries around the world, as well as the "Cool Japan" popular culture such as animation, science and technology, tourism, entertainment and related services. As for the policy concerned, in order to achieve the goal of "building a country image through tourism," Japan has relaxed restrictions on visa and issued multiple entry visas for the Filipinos since July 2013. At the same time, the Japanese embassy, consulates and staff in the Philippines have served as basic platform for the overseas promotion of "Cool Japan," and have been working together with other institutions (International Exchange Fund, Japan Trade Promotion Association, International Tourism Promotion Association) to advance cooperation and exchanges in the fields of culture, sports, education, tourism, art, and science. In 2016, to commemorate the 60th anniversary of Japan-Philippines friendly

relations, the Japanese embassy and consulates organized 23 related activities to enhance people-to-people exchanges. In addition, Japan has also supported and assisted the Filipinos to study and train in Japan, with government scholarship programs (including teacher training scholarship, research student scholarship, specialized training scholarship, and college of technology scholarship), young leaders programs, and Japanese language exchange and learning programs. In order to deepen the Philippine people's understanding of Japan, the Japanese embassy also launched the "Hello Japan" program to introduce Japanese culture, traditions, festivals, food, language, and kimono through many formats such as PowerPoints and videos. Encouraged by Japanese publicity, the number of Philippine tourists to Japan has been increasing steadily. According to statistics of Japan National Tourism Organization, in 2016, the growth rate of Philippine tourists to Japan was 34 percent year-on-year; in 2017 and 2018, the growth continued, with a year-on-year rate of 23.8 and 20.8 percent respectively. In 2019, more than 52 thousand Philippine tourists visited Japan, a year-on year increase by 22.7 percent.⁶

Motivation of the Abe Government to Strengthen Relations with the Philippines

Under the readjustment of international and regional landscape, it is in line with the strategic consideration of the Abe government to maintain and reshape Japan's dominant role in the region by upgrading its relations with the Philippines.

To improve Japan's international image and enhance its international status and political influence

To Japan, the Philippines might help Japan improve its international image on historical issues during World War II. Strong bilateral relations will thwart the accountability and responsibility of Japan on historical issues,

⁶ For Japan's visitor arrivals by country/area and purpose of visit, see the website of Japan National Tourism Organization, https://www.jnto.go.jp/jpn/statistics/tourists_2019df.pdf.

prevent countries in the region that suffered from Japan's invasion from forming coalitions, and make Japan-Philippines reconciliation an example for other victim countries. In 2015, on the 60th anniversary of the end of the WWII, Asian countries expressed their dissatisfaction with Shinzo Abe who, in his talks, refrained from apologizing for Japan's war responsibility. However, Aquino III claimed that Japan, in the post-war era, had done a great deal to fulfill the responsibility of "repairing historical trauma." They "not only rebuilt their own country," but also "selflessly helped us (the Philippines) to build our country." At the same time, he expressed his hope that Shinzo Abe would take Japan-Philippines relations as an example to show "common prosperity through cooperation."⁷ To all the countries that suffered from the Japanese invasion, Aquino III's statement might serve as a check for Tokyo's revisionist attitudes on history to spread unchecked.

In addition, the cordial Japan-Philippines relationship helps Japan improve its political status and influence, and win more votes on the reform of the United Nations. After Shinzo Abe was in power once again, he pursues the policy of winning more maneuvering room by military force, and tries to gain recognition and tolerance of the international community for Japan's pursuit of world political status. However, Japan's efforts are restricted politically by the United Nations' "enemy state clause."⁸ To this end, Japan's UN diplomacy is aimed at pushing for a revision to the UN Charter, deleting the "enemy state clause," normalizing Japan's position in the UN, and paving the way to realize its greater objective of becoming a permanent member of UN Security Council." The revision of the UN Charter requires sufficient votes of support. The Philippines, as a member of ASEAN and an influential country with a large population in Southeast Asia, will help Japan with political support in its effort for international

7 "Speech of His Excellency Benigno S. Aquino III, President of the Philippines, before the Joint Session of the National Diet of Japan," June 3, 2015, <http://www.sangiin.go.jp/japanese/ugoki/h27/pdf/Speech-of-President-of-the-Philippines-EN.pdf>.

8 The "enemy state clause" is in Articles 53 and 107, and as a half sentence in Article 77 of the UN Charter. Any "enemy state," which during WWII was an enemy of any signatory to the UN Charter, will face consequences by "aggressive behaviour" from the other UN states.



Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte delivers a speech during the 25th International Conference on the Future of Asia in Tokyo on May 31, 2019. (AFP)

status, and will lead other ASEAN countries to recognize and support Japan's pursuit for political power.

To push the transformation of the US-led regional alliance system and build a Japan-centered regional order

To upgrade and strengthen Japan-Philippines relations is an important part in Japan's "sub-alliance system." The basic structure of the post-war order in the Asia-Pacific region was a hub-and-spoke alliance system centered on the United States. Both the Philippines and Japan were US allies supporting American hegemony in the region, while Japan and the Philippines were not allies. The Obama administration, in implementing the Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy, transformed the hub-and-spoke alliance system into a networked system, encouraging US allies in the region to undertake more security obligations while developing and strengthening security relations among themselves. The rapid development of the Japan-

Philippines security relations was also a by-product of the United States' Asia-Pacific strategy.

The Trump administration, which has focused on “America First” and been reducing the scope and velocity of the United States' security responsibilities, is speeding up and deepening the readjustment of regional power structure. Japan is determined to take advantage of the changes in the regional order to get rid of the post-war system and realize its strategic objective of “building a strong Japan.” Therefore, while strengthening hard power to protect itself, Japan has made efforts to play a leading role in the formation of regional order through close cooperation with the US.⁹ Japan has adjusted its strategic objective from serving as the strategic frontier and an “unsinkable aircraft carrier” of the US to maintaining the security by its own strength. It is also working hard to shape a favorable regional situation, and constructing a Japan-led “sub-alliance system” in line with the American architecture of regional order. In order to achieve this strategic ambition, Japan needs diplomatic support from Manila. The Philippines also needs Japan's muscles, and thus the two are forming a symbiotic relationship.¹⁰

In addition, Japan also tries to stabilize relations with the US by solid ties with the Philippines to ensure that the US remains in the region until it gets strong enough to defend itself. The “America First” strategy has brought a strong “Trump shock” to Japan, which has always been dependent on American protection since the end of WWII. In order to deal with the security anxiety caused by the shock, Japan wants to demonstrate that it takes the initiative to build an international order in the region. “If Japan makes it clear that it will dominate the East Asian situation, the Trump administration may have to focus on Japan-US alliance and adjust its East Asian strategic direction accordingly.”¹¹ Therefore, the other purpose of Japan's proactive efforts for

9 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Diplomatic Blue Book 2017*, September 26, 2017, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2017/html/index.html>.

10 Richard Javad Heydarian, “Japan: The Philippines' New Best Friend?” *The Diplomat*, June 17, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/06/japan-the-philippines-new-best-friend/>.

11 Ryuichi Teshima, “How Should We Face the Trump Administration?” *Nippon*, November 10, 2016, www.nippon.com/ja/domains/d00268.

partnership network is to guard against a sudden collapse of the American-pillared regional order in the Asia-Pacific, and prevent and restrict American withdrawal from the region. In February 2017, on the eve of his visit to the US, Shinzo Abe called on Japan's regional partners, including the Philippines, to coordinate policies for coping with the "America First" strategy. Japan's move not only highlights its attempt to fill in the possible power vacuum caused by "America First" in the region, but also shows Japan's strategic intention to balance Washington's strategy by its own Asia-Pacific regional network.

To help Japan realize the pursuit of a maritime power

In order to break through the bottleneck of island state status to Japan's great-power ambition, the Abe government has actively worked to formulate a new comprehensive ocean strategy. Taking the ocean state status as a basis for becoming a great power, Japan resorts to the oceans as a platform to realize its ocean power goal. The Philippines is one of the key target countries in Abe's southward drive of maritime diplomacy, and maritime security cooperation becomes an important part in Japan-Philippines cooperation. In October 2016, Japan and the Philippines issued a joint statement, declaring that, as maritime nations, they "share common interests in maintaining and promoting peace, stability and prosperity regionally and globally." The two leaders "look to their network of friendships and alliances, in particular the ever stronger ties between Japan and the Philippines, to help promote the peace, stability and maritime security of the region."¹² Among the 15 articles in the statement, as many as ten articles were related to ocean affairs. On a return visit to the Philippines in January 2017, Prime Minister Abe emphasized once again the identity of both Japan and the Philippines as maritime countries, saying that Japan would increase support for the Philippines' maritime security capacity-building. At the same time, Japan has resorted to economic means to cajole and court the Philippines, thus winning agreement from President Duterte to Abe's diplomatic rhetoric—

12 "Japan-Philippines Joint Statement," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 26, 2016, https://www.ph.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_en/00_000168.html.

Japan and the Philippines will “continue to work together to achieve goals of a more stable and secured region so that our nations and peoples can enjoy more peace, progress and prosperity.”¹³

To restrain further development of China-Philippines relations

By strengthening Japan-Philippines relations, Shinzo Abe tries to drive a wedge between China and the Philippines and restrain China. From Abe’s perspective, establishing Japan’s leading position in the region and restraining China’s development are closely related. Therefore, Japan has adopted all possible means to curb China’s development: activating and amplifying China-Japan controversies, intensifying rather than reconciling disputes between China and its neighbors, shaping common discourse with those countries that have problems with China, and building a “coalition of victims” that allegedly suffer from China’s “sabotage” of regional order and rule of law. While keeping China in check, Japan tries to build its leading position in fighting against the “Chinese hegemony,” and achieve its goal of both reining in China and realizing Japan’s leading position in the region.

So far as the China-Philippines relations are concerned, to meddle in the South China Sea dispute is one of the means by the Abe government to alienate relations between China and the Philippines. First, Japan encouraged the Philippines to resort to the so-called arbitral tribunal for the South China Sea arbitration under the chairmanship of Shunji Yanai, who is Abe’s confidant; after the ruling, top Japanese government officials including Abe and Fumio Kishida talked repeatedly for the enforcement of the ruling and accused China of destroying international law, attempting to restrain China’s legitimate actions to safeguard territorial integrity; at the same time, Japan invited irrelevant organizations like the G7 and put the South China Sea dispute on the agenda to promote the internationalization of the issue. After Duterte became President of the Philippines, Abe still called for the implementation of the so-called arbitration award. In response, Duterte said

13 Catherine S. Valente, “Abe Offers PHP430B Package,” *Manila Times*, January 13, 2017, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2017/01/13/news/headlines/abe-offers-ph-p430b-package/306694/306694>.

that “Japan shares same experience with us, and we will, as always, stand by Japan.”¹⁴ This suggests that the Duterte government has only temporarily shelved the South China Sea dispute and the so-called arbitration award, and may at any time bring up the issue and complain about the arbitration.

Japan’s another approach is to support the building of Philippine military force to rein in China. This has become the core in Japan’s pivotal policies.¹⁵ The Philippines’ de facto shelving of the South China Sea dispute makes it impossible for Japan, for the time being, to disrupt China-Philippines relations under the pretext of “international order” and “rule of law.” The Abe government has actively implemented its previous commitment to assisting the development of the Philippine Coast Guard and the Navy, and even provided the Philippines with second-hand weapons, equipment and spare parts more often and greater in number, so as to win over Manila and hamper the expansion and deepening of the China-Philippines relations in the security field. Under the background of deteriorating US-Philippines relations caused by the US criticism of Duterte’s drug control policy, Japan tried to act as bridge between the US and the Philippines. Japan has tried to further tighten the chain of the US Asia-Pacific alliance system, and implement the Indo-Pacific strategy which was initiated by Japan and later taken over by the US, to prevent the fracture of the first island chain due to the warming China-Philippines relations, and ensure the blocking of China in geopolitical strategy.

The closer relationship between Japan and the Philippines also has certain economic significance, such as helping Japan expand its overseas market, facilitating the implementation of “Abenomics” policies, and expanding the Japanese tourism market. However, the economic demand is only the derivative content in Japan’s strengthening of relations with the Philippines. The fundamental purpose is to consolidate Japan’s pivot points in its

14 “Philippines and Japan Summit,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 26, 2016, https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sea2/ph/page3e_000608.html.

15 Jimbo Ken, “Japan and Southeast Asia: Three Pillars of a New Strategic Relationship,” Tokyo Foundation, May 30, 2013, <http://www.tokyofoundation.org/en/articles/2013/japan-and-southeast-asia>.

“diplomacy with a bird’s eye view of the globe” in Southeast Asia. Closer ties with the Philippines can also enhance Japan’s regional presence and influence, helping it gradually build a sub-alliance system in the region, fill in the gap which might be caused by “America First,” and achieve step by step its ultimate goal of freeing itself from the post-war system.

Policy Considerations of the Philippines’ Positive Response

The rapid development of Japan-Philippines relations is not only the result of Japan’s active implementation of its established national strategy, but also the product of the Philippines’ policy response for the benefit of expanding national interests. From this perspective, the Philippines believes that it will gain greatly in diplomacy, military security, and economic development by developing friendly relations with Japan.

To return to balance-of-power diplomacy

At the diplomatic level, it is necessary for the Philippines to strengthen its strategic relationship with Japan in order to carry out its independent diplomacy. After the Cold War, the United States withdrew its forces from the Philippines, but the two countries still maintained their alliance relationship. After that, the Philippines sought to improve relations with regional powers, and pursued a diplomacy of keeping balance with major countries. However, Aquino III completely turned to rely on Washington, set up a “strengthened strategic partnership” with Japan, and engaged in an all-round confrontation with China, making the South China Sea dispute more complicated and internationalized at the multilateral level. However, the facts show that the Philippines had not gained any practical benefits from confrontation with China.

On the South China Sea dispute, the US was unable or had no intention to implement the alliance agreement with the Philippines. As a coastal country of the South China Sea, a continued tense and turbulent situation is not in Manila’s national interest. Based on a clear understanding

of reality and a clear positioning of the national interests, President Duterte changed the pro-American approach to an independent diplomacy and readjusted the foreign policy to “keeping balance among big powers.” In the course of this transition, the Philippines’ relations with Japan have maintained a stable development trend, which is conducive to flexible operation of the Philippine diplomacy.

First, it tries to balance and restrain China through closer ties with Japan, avoid a complete tilting towards China, and ensure to conduct the Philippine diplomacy for the benefit of national interests. Second, sound Japan-Philippines relations will increase Manila’s position in its relations with China so as to help it gain more financial and technical assistance. At the same time, the Philippines can use its relations with China as a bargaining chip in its negotiations with Japan. In the event of instability in China-Japan relations, Manila can gain benefits anyway. When the China-Japan relationship becomes stable, the Philippines can push forward regional integration by taking advantage of the trilateral relations, and upgrade its regional influence while ensuring independence. Third, to enhance military and security relationship with Japan will reduce Manila’s excessive dependence on US military technology and equipment, and help diversify its military and security ties for the good of its “independent diplomacy.” In addition, Japan, as an ally of the US, can play an intermediary role and serve as a bridge in the relations between the Philippines and the US, so as to prevent complete decoupling between the two countries, and avoid recurrence of imbalance in Manila’s diplomacy with major powers.

To promote military modernization with Japan’s help

In terms of military and security, the Philippines intends to promote its military modernization with the help of Japan’s leading position in military technology and equipment. The Philippines, with poor military strength and equipment, is incapable to meet security challenges at home and abroad. The comprehensive power of the Philippines’ military force ranked 64th among 137 countries and regions in 2019. With 125,000 soldiers in active service,

the Philippines ranked 38th in terms of military size. The power of its air force ranked 55th, and its army ranked 99th and 77th in terms of the size of battle tanks and that of armored infantry fighting vehicles respectively.¹⁶ The overall military strength of the Philippines does not accord with the complex situation and challenges the country faces in its national security. With a scattered territory, a coastline of 36,000 kilometers, a backward economy and prominent social problems, the Philippines is prone to be a place for criminal breeding and hiding, and has even become a gathering place for separatist and terrorist forces. At present, a certain supply-chain relationship has been established in the Philippines between local insurgent forces and domestic terrorist organizations in terms of membership composition. What is more serious is that the domestic terrorist organizations have collaborated with international terrorist groups (such as ISIS), which makes the security situation more severe. At the same time, piracy is rampant in the waters around the Philippines, posing a challenge to its naval and air forces.

In order to meet the security challenges, Aquino III, taking advantage of the South China Sea dispute, restarted the military modernization plan in 2012, and promised to invest about US\$1.8 billion as the start-up fund within five years. Duterte has made quelling domestic armed insurgencies and fighting terrorism his top priorities and continued to push for the modernization of the country's armed forces. In July 2017, Duterte proposed to arrange 140.4 billion pesos in 2018 to enhance the capacity-building of the army, which was 7.5 percent higher than the military expenditure in 2017, and promised to allocate 3.1 billion pesos for Coast Guard modernization.¹⁷ However, the defense technology and industrial capacity of the Philippines cannot meet the needs of military modernization for weapons and equipment, and therefore it needs to import relevant equipment from other countries. With increasingly close relations with Japan, the Philippines

16 "2019 Philippines Military Strength," *Global Firepower*, https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=philippines.

17 Alexis Romero, "P140 B for Military Upgrade in 2018 Budget," *Philstar*, July 25, 2017, <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/07/25/1721633/p140-b-military-upgrade-2018-budget>.

hopes to import defense equipment and related technologies from Japan and conduct joint training and exercises with the Japanese Self-Defense Forces to enhance the combat capability, and the intelligence collection and analysis capability of its military. With the easing of arms export control and the implementation of the new security law, the Abe government is actively promoting Japan's defense equipment and Self-Defense Forces on the world stage. The Philippines sees Japan as an important source of arms imports and a strategic partner for security cooperation.

To improve people's livelihood and implement relevant "Duterteconomy" policies

In order to break the bottlenecks that restrict the country's development, after Aquino III came to power, the Philippines was committed to reform, crackdown on corruption, and fiscal reconstruction. Although some results were achieved, the barriers remained. The Duterte government continues to promote economic and social reforms, prioritize infrastructure construction and better livelihood of the people, and push forward "Duterteconomy," meaning the government will increase input in infrastructure, human capital formation, and social protection in its economy strategy. Sufficient funds and corresponding technical support are important guarantees of its success. Mid-term capital needs in infrastructure construction are estimated to be US\$4.4 trillion, and attracting foreign investment and aid becomes an important goal of the government.

Japan is not only the most important source of ODA funds for the Philippines, it is also committed to providing US\$9 billion to finance Philippine infrastructure construction.¹⁸ The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) promised to provide US\$2.4 billion in low interest loans for the construction of the North-South Commuter Railway (NSCR) connecting Tutuban, Manila and Malolos, and US\$4.4 billion in official development assistance funds for the construction of the first underground railway in the

18 "Japan's Development Cooperation in the Philippines," <https://www.ph.emb-japan.go.jp/files/000466831.pdf>.

Philippines—the Manila metro system.¹⁹ This will greatly relieve the traffic pressure in Manila and help President Duterte in his grand reconstruction plan. In addition, a positive relationship with Japan makes it easier for the Philippines to get project assistance from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which is jointly led by Japan and the United States. It is also conducive to the leap-forward development of the “golden age of infrastructure” in the Philippines. After Duterte took office, the ADB said it would continue to support the healthy and stable growth of the Philippine economy and the growth of the Philippine middle class, and would focus on supporting the Philippine government’s social undertakings and poverty reduction.

The huge trade surplus between Japan and the Philippines is also a major concern of the Philippine government. From January to March 2019, Japan is the Philippines’ second largest trading partner, second largest source of imports and second largest export destination. Different from its trade with China, the Philippines enjoys a favorable position in its trade with Japan, which provides important foreign exchange capital for Manila’s domestic economic development. In addition, the Philippines can learn from Japan, also an island country, and make use of Japan’s advanced technologies in environmental governance, urban planning and agriculture to realize the “green development” objective set forth by President Duterte.

Japan and the Philippines get closer to each other out of their respective strategic considerations and interest needs. Moreover, the readjustment of regional order and external forces also promote further development of Japan-Philippines relations. The United States’ foreign policy, as mentioned above, encourages US allies to strengthen their unity and cooperation in exploring possible military self-protection. China’s irreversible rise also makes some neighboring countries to adopt double-sided balancing policies, taking a free ride in terms of economy while watching out for China. All of this constitutes objective driving forces for

19 Reicelene Joy Ignacio, “JICA to support Davao City Urban Infra Dev’t Project,” *Manila Times*, January 26, 2017, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2017/01/26/business/jica-support-davao-city-urban-infra-devt-project/308837>.

the improvement of Japan-Philippines relations.

Conclusion

Japan-Philippines relations have maintained steady development, not affected by changes in their respective governments. For a long time to come, the demands of both countries to have sound mutual relations will become a stable constant to promote further improvement of bilateral relations. This need has risen to the level of national interests beyond domestic partisan disputes. It should be noted that Japan's geostrategic layout has a clear intention to restrain China, and the Philippines will still be an important target for cultivation and utilization in the future. The Philippines, as an ally of the US, an ASEAN member and a party in the South China Sea dispute, is an influential variable in China's neighborhood diplomacy.

Despite warming Japan-Philippines relations, it should also be noted that relations between the two countries will not undergo qualitative changes oriented to an alliance in the short term. First, Japan's current constitution is still the red line restraining it from forming close military alliances with other countries other than the US. Second, the public security situation and political operation mode in the Philippines will hinder Japanese companies that pursuit profits from expanding investment in the Philippines. Third, in the short term, the real need to develop China-Philippines relations for economic and security interests will, to some extent, limit the speed and depth of the Philippines moving towards Japan. Fourth, China's neighborhood diplomacy featuring amity, sincerity, mutual benefit and inclusiveness has effectively removed concerns from its neighbors especially when the implementation of China's Belt and Road Initiative has brought real benefits to the countries concerned. China has proved forcefully that its rise will continue to firmly follow the path of peaceful development and adhere to the policy of building amicable partnerships with its neighbors. This will weaken and even eliminate the impulse of China's neighbors to join hands with other countries to restrain China. 