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### DUTERTE'S COAST GUARD DIPLOMACY

By

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Recently, the Philippine budget secretary approved an increase of Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) personnel to 4,000 for this year. This increase is only intended for 2019, while the funds for an additional 6,000 personnel are also anticipated by the PCG to be appropriated in 2020.

The increase of the PCG's human resources to almost 23,000 surpasses the 14,000 active sailors of the Philippine Navy (PN) despite the rise of the Armed Forces of the Philippines' (AFP) troop ceiling. Most maritime scholars find it puzzling why President Rodrigo Duterte has favored the PCG more than the PN in terms of personnel increase and even in the acquisition of additional floating assets.

Even during his first year as president, it was evident that Duterte has a fondness for the PCG. In 2016, during the 115th PCG anniversary, he highlighted that the Philippines, with more than 7,000 islands, needs more PCG ships for maritime safety, search and rescue, marine environmental protection, and drug interdiction. Unlike his predecessor, Duterte looks at the coast guard as a tool of the state in dealing with domestic concerns and not as an apparatus of maritime strategy in promoting the Philippine claim in the South China Sea (SCS).

Duterte's appreciation of the PCG as a civilian maritime force that primarily deals with constabulary roles at sea perfectly fits his approach on how to deal not only with China but even with the United States and its allies concerning the SCS. He has understood that the unique identity of the PCG – being not a military force but a law enforcer – allows it to be tacitly accepted by other claimant states as it patrols the contested waters. Further, Duterte appreciated that this particular institution could

offer more avenues of cooperation in the region. It has to be noted that this is not something new; Japan had been relying on its coast guard not as part of its security strategy but in propagating “coast guard diplomacy.”

### **The PCG: Dealing With China**

Learning from the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff, former President Benigno Aquino began to utilize the coast guard as part of his white ship strategy in the SCS. Since China criticized him for militarizing the maritime dispute in 2012 when the refitted USCG Hamilton-class PF-15 attempted to arrest Chinese fishermen, Aquino turned to relying on coast guard vessels to maintain the Philippines’ presence in the SCS. In the case of Duterte, he understood that if he aggressively employed the coast guard in his maritime strategy to deal with China, it will negatively affect his closer ties with Beijing. Instead, he decided to take advantage of the functions of the PCG that could spark cooperation with the Chinese.

When Duterte first visited China, one of the first memoranda of understanding (MOU) that he signed with Xi Jinping established a joint coast guard committee on maritime cooperation. Through this MOU, the senior ranking officers of both the PCG and China Coast Guard (CCG) participated in Joint Coast Guard Committee meetings in 2017 and 2018 held in Manila and Guangzhou province, respectively. Interestingly, the most relevant outcome of these committee meetings has been the training given to PCG officers on law enforcement capacity building at China Maritime Police Academy. Further, there were also scholarships given to some PCG personnel to study in China. The next high-level meeting will be held in Manila this December, which is expected to be attended by high ranking CCG officials and to be hosted by the newly installed PCG Commandant, Admiral Joel Garcia.

The other notable result of softening the role of the PCG in the South China Sea is that the bigger China Coast Guard vessels are no longer hostile and intimidating toward the smaller PCG vessels as both parties patrol the South China Sea. Though one can argue that Duterte’s foreign policy has caused that change in behavior, it is still worth noting that the annual meetings between the PCG and CCG have set the tone for their mutual respect.

Surprisingly, the PCG was put in the limelight when it was tasked by Duterte to conduct a maritime casualty investigation on the ramming incident involving a Chinese fishing vessel and the capsized F/B Gimver 1, owned by Filipino fishermen, in Reed Bank early this year. The public criticized the PCG since its investigation report highlighted the violations committed as well by the Filipino fishermen. Such criticism was even exacerbated when Duterte’s spokesperson stressed that the PCG only cited the violations of the Filipino fishermen. What is surprising in this incident is that the PN had been expected to lead the investigation since PN vessels received the rescued fishermen.

Before Duterte came to power, these white hulls were considered to be contenders in the maritime spaces of the SCS. While both the PCG and CCG still are used by the states in their sea row, Duterte has employed coast

guard diplomacy to ensure that these vessels will not be ramming one another, which could trigger a much bigger conflict.

### **Dealing With the United States**

In 2016, Duterte mentioned that the war games between the United States and the Philippines should soon be halted. However, since he came into power, it is evident that the PCG has had an unusual increase in maritime exercises together with foreign coast guards. Since Duterte assumed office, the Southeast Asian Cooperation and Training (SEACAT) has been hosted annually by the PCG, and was held for the fourth time this year. This weeklong activity has brought together foreign maritime law enforcers and navy officials from seven nations across the region. Though the United States Coast Guard spearheaded this, it is worth noting that the training is related to the capacity building of these maritime agencies in addressing nontraditional security threats, where all parties have common interest in preventing illegal fishing, smuggling, and drug trafficking among others.

Furthermore, this year alone, the dedicated two USCG ships for the Indo-Pacific Command participated in two different maritime exercises with the Philippines. Intriguingly, Duterte did not condemn the last maritime exercise, which included participation by the USCG Bertholf near the vicinity of Scarborough Shoal last May. And in October, the USCGC Stratton took part in the Maritime Training Activity Sama Sama with the maritime forces of Japan, the United States, and the Philippines, which was held near the contested waters of Palawan Island. However, since the objective of these exercises is to develop the capability of the PCG in dealing with non-state actors, Duterte never criticized the presence of the USCG cutters within the six-month duration of their stay.

Since Duterte came into power, the United States government has tremendously increased the number of PCG personnel who go to the United States for various trainings in different U.S. coast guard facilities. Before, only senior PCG officers were allowed to attend training and seminars in the United States, but now even the low-ranking nonofficers are trained to enhance skills that are required on-board their vessels, like training for a machinery technician, electrician's mate, and boatswain's mate, among others.

Despite the apparent bid of Duterte to move away from the Americans, he has still allowed Washington to engage the PCG - albeit with the understanding that the capacity building is not intended to purely apply to the troublesome waters of SCS. Duterte has employed the PCG as a cushion to show that he is moving away from the U.S. influence in maritime security, but on the one hand, he is continuously engaging the Americans for maritime cooperation. He knew that this balance is necessary as he engages Beijing as a great power challenger.

## **Dealing With Japan**

Though Duterte benefited from the ODA loans initiated by Aquino for the acquisition of the 10 44-meter patrol boats from Japan, it is necessary to highlight that he secured an additional two 92-meter offshore patrol vessels from Japan during his first meeting with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2016. Since Duterte recognizes not just the importance of the sea trade routes of Japan but also its inclination to curtail the vast territorial claims of China, he was able to use these interests of Japan to the Philippines' own advantage.

To address the problems of armed robbery at sea and the movement of terrorists in the porous waters of Sulu and Sulawesi, Duterte was able to seek help from the Japanese government in providing 11 pieces of monitoring radar equipment for the PCG, which are to be installed strategically along the coastlines of Zambasulta area. Besides, Tokyo has also given the PCG a total of 13 high-speed boats, which can be used by the PCG's elite force in patrolling the treacherous waters in Mindanao.

Japan Coast Guard (JCG) vessels, since Duterte was elected, have been actively conducting maritime exercises with the PCG. As a matter of fact, the total number of sea drills that the JCG has had with the PCG in the past three years is equivalent to the total number of exercises that it had for the entire six-year incumbency of then-President Aquino. Remarkably, the JCG is actively engaging its Philippine counterparts not just for maritime exercises but even in bringing PCG officers to Japan for various trainings, from maritime pollution to maritime law enforcement and even disaster response.

Accordingly, Duterte takes care that his closeness with Japan and its steadfast support in developing the PCG could not be deduced as an alliance to restrain the creeping territorial claim of China. He has clearly stated from the very beginning of his presidency that the Philippine white hulls are badly needed in addressing domestic issues and nontraditional actors that have an impact in the region.

## **Dealing With the EU**

Despite the threat of Duterte to expel the EU ambassadors from the Philippines, it has to be noted that the PCG's first offshore patrol vessel, delivered this year, was funded by the French government. Moreover, four 24-meter patrol boats, also part of the loan agreement, were already delivered last year and are currently being utilized in patrolling the southern Philippines. Though this loan agreement was realized during the Aquino administration, it is essential to note that it was Duterte who approved the construction and acquisition of these vessels.

It is also worth emphasizing that most of the PCG's senior officers completed a master's degree through a scholarship at the World Maritime University in Malmo, Sweden. Notably, the number of students that the PCG has been sending there is gradually increasing. Further, PCG lawyers also

have a funded scholarship to study at the International Maritime Law Institute in Malta.

This goes to show that the support that the EU had been extending to the PCG is still steady, despite the rhetorical narrative of Duterte in other issues. Duterte's recognition of the importance of the PCG in his maritime governance domestically gives the EU room to maintain cooperation that serves their interest in protecting and securing sea lines of communication.

### **Dealing With Southeast Asia**

It is essential to understand that the coast guard development in the region is thriving across the board, especially for those claimant states in the South China Sea. These countries like Malaysia and Vietnam, in particular, have also learned that the deployment of gray ships in the disputed waters could be interpreted as a militarization of the South China Sea. These countries also recognized that the aggressive projection of power in these waters might also affect economic ties with China.

Though security cooperation is undoubtedly elusive in the region because of sovereign sensitivities and lack of trust due to territorial disputes, collaboration between their respective coast guards is easier to foster. Duterte understood that the maritime problems inherent in the porous region of Southeast Asia could better be addressed by coast guard organizations and not navies. More importantly, Duterte knows that coast guards perform complicated tasks that require technical skills, like oil spill response. This year, Duterte has allowed the PCG to conduct a multilateral maritime pollution exercise with the vessels of Japan Coast Guard and their Indonesian counterparts in Davao Gulf.

Further, the PCG was also given the green light by the Department of Foreign Affairs to engage Indonesia's Bakamla. Recently, a bilateral meeting between Bakamla and the PCG was held in Cebu City for the drafting of a memorandum of understanding on maritime law enforcement and maritime security. For the Philippine side, this is a welcome development to regulate the movement of people and cargo nearing the border of Indonesia. Remarkably, since the Gulf of Thailand Initiative (GOTI) was upgraded to the Southeast Asian Maritime Law Enforcement Initiative (SEAMLI) this year, the Philippines became one of its focal members. SEAMLI had its inaugural meeting in Bali, Indonesia, wherein the best practices for combatting illegal fishing and drug trafficking were discussed.

Due to the region's handicaps in building security cooperation, Southeast Asian countries have been innovative in utilizing white ships to foster collaboration. Since Duterte is aware of these idiosyncrasies, he positively relied on the PCG in engaging neighbor states to build cooperation. Moreover, he understood that the nontraditional security threats that the coast guards are addressing are of mutual interest in the region and will not disrupt economic development.

## Conclusion

The reappointment of Admiral Joel Garcia to lead the coast guard indicates how Duterte wants the PCG to engage countries, not just for the purpose of strengthening the capability of the PCG but as a diplomatic instrument in managing the tension in the South China Sea. Notably, Garcia has the support of the Japanese government since he was elected as the chairperson of the Governing Council of the Regional Cooperation Against Armed Robbery and Piracy at Sea (RECAAP). At the same time, since he is the director of the U.S.-funded National Coast Watch Center (NCWC), it is also apparent that he has already entrenched his connections with the U.S. government. Lastly, his legal acumen in understanding the Law of the Sea reduces the risk that the military will inflate issues with regard to the territorial dispute not just with China but even with Southeast Asian countries.

The idea that the PCG will be placed under the proposed Department of Homeland Security is another significant indication as to how Duterte values the PCG. It is important to note that this idea originated from a bill filed by Senator Manny Pacquiao, who is also known to be a strong ally and supporter of Duterte. Relatedly, Duterte's trusted Interior Secretary Eduardo Año in September emphasized the importance of creating the DHS, which would oversee various law enforcement bodies, to include the PCG. Arguably, the transfer of the PCG to another department hints that Duterte plans to pole-vault its relevance and development in the next coming years.

In conclusion, Duterte is continuously recalibrating his use of the coast guard to a different level. However, in contrast to what other maritime security scholars argue, this is not aimed toward using the PCG in gray zone tactics; instead, it hinges on the interest of the state to negate armed conflict. On the one hand, Duterte uses the PCG to consolidate support for cooperation in addressing nontraditional security threats inclusively, but on the other hand, his objective is to support his own interests in addressing domestic issues and for the Philippines not to be entangled in a great power rivalry.

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