Maritime Security Cooperation: The Philippine Experience

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With the heightened importance of maritime issues in the region coupled with strategic competition between the powers of the Indo-Pacific, the maritime domain has turned into a platform for increased inter-state dynamics. It is in this domain of great uncertainty that maritime services operate, cooperate, and compete.

Complex politico-economic dynamics of the current and emerging powers largely affect the strategic positioning of nations in the region. The contrasting interests of the major powers reflected in their constant dynamic in the regional maritime domain hide an underbelly of greater unpredictability and instability in their internal affairs. For one, the complex politico-military dynamics of the United States, including a so-called "isolationist" stance of the Trump administration, create a constraint upon its former "global police" identity to surface. Also, despite the rapid technological leap which allows for precision operations utilizing less boots on the ground, with the issues with US ships and aircraft exposes what could be considered "operational fatigue," or what others term as "overextension" due to the various engagements of the US armed forces around the globe.

On the other hand, with the recent crackdown on massive protests in Hong Kong, and censorship and coverups of the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square incident, the question of China's internal political stability once again arises. In order to maintain the primacy of their current political order under the Chinese Communist Party, China seems to be employing an aggressive geo-economic strategy in the international arena in the midst of these internal cracks. The Chinese have been proactive in the maritime domain to cement their foothold in the region in support of their economic initiatives.

Further, in response to these dynamics, the world is seeing intricate diplomatic undercurrents in Southeast Asia in a scale like never before. The power play is very visible in the balancing, bandwagoning, and hedging by several ASEAN states toward China and the US.

Aside from these, there are also operational realities in the region that complicate the entire security situation, such as China's thrust to gain operational superiority in the Pacific using its wide array of maritime agencies, the prevalence of transborder terrorist networks, and the geographical issue of the Indo-Pacific being the world's most disaster-prone region.

The volatile security environment of the Indo-Pacific region, coupled with these enduring and emerging strategic and operational realities in the maritime domain, gave rise to the development of new and improved responses, reflected in the changing "face" of regional maritime security cooperation mechanisms to secure the vast regional waters.

The 1990s were characterized by several strategic-level and navy-dominated cooperative mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) and the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), due to the inherent international nature of navies, and the focus was more on establishing lines of communication and developing avenues for greater dialogue. There had been a rise in functional cooperative mechanisms in the 2000s such as the Southeast Asia Cooperation Against Terrorism (SEACAT) exercise, especially in the areas of counter-terrorism and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

The late 2000s to the 2010s welcomed the rise of more actors in the maritime playing field as the importance of Coast Guards and other maritime law enforcement agencies have been magnified due to several operational developments. One of the major successful multilateral mechanisms include the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), which was inaugurated in 2006 as a response to the piracy problem in the region. Further, the 2010s also saw the "hardening' of institutions and cooperation measures, and the flourishing of "minilateral" practical maritime security cooperation measures. Examples of these include the Malacca Straits Sea Patrols (MSSP) and the "Eyes-in-the-Sky" Combined Maritime Air Patrols (EiS) between Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand's navies to ensure safety and security in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, and the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA) between Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, set up in 2016. This is due to the emerging delicate diplomatic dynamics between the countries in region, the challenge is now on how to develop cooperation which transcends strategic differences.

Ideally, considering its geostrategic location and the diversity of security challenges it has to address, the Philippines is in a crucial position to develop and initiate responses that may have a significant impact to regional maritime cooperation. However, the country is still plagued with several internal challenges that hinder its unilateral maritime security initiatives and its capacity to influence and make a difference in the security milieu. This includes the lack of a coordinated maritime strategy, which stems from the lack of a comprehensive national policy on maritime issues; lack of inter-agency collaboration, as coordination in the inter-agency platform has not yet been operationalized; shortage in proper assets and platforms for sustained participation in maritime security cooperation initiatives, and other practical obstacles, which include resource constraints, prioritization issues, and lack of common doctrine, language and interoperability of equipment.

In order to address this, the author suggests a simple framework to guide Philippine maritime security cooperation initiatives with other countries such as Australia centered on the characteristics of functionality, inclusivity, and sustainability. Functionality is defined as the convergence of security priorities and state interests in order to address present, pressing, and persistent challenges. This includes identifying and working on <u>issues</u> that can be considered as "convergence points" between interest and priority. As we have seen with ReCAAP and the TCA, cooperative mechanisms with strong foundations on particular functional issues produce favorable results. Given the transnationality of issues, it should also be determined which issues overlap and can be addressed by a single mechanism.

Inclusivity is comprehensiveness and coherence of initiatives between states, government agencies, and between the public and private sector. It covers the specific <u>actors</u> in developing cooperation. The author identified three: states, government agencies, and the private sector.

Finally, sustainability refers to the commitment of states in addressing security challenges through the development of cooperative frameworks. It is all about the development and strengthening of <u>institutions</u> that promote coordination and collaboration, and safeguard interests of each state. Further, sustainability requires proper monitoring and evaluation processes for participation in cooperative mechanisms, the feedback of which will aid in prioritization and planning for resource management, and in capability and capacity development.

Between the Philippines and Australia, which have one massive shared maritime environment, there are several areas where collaboration and cooperation may be deepened. These include maritime domain awareness, maritime safety and shipping, search and rescue, coastal welfare, fisheries (particularly fish stock data collection), connectivity, transnational crimes and piracy, maritime terrorism, marine environmental protection, and disaster resiliency.

For the military, another major functional area that may be a good platform for collaboration is in the development of strategic assessments as the Philippines moves towards an external defense outlook. This will be of great importance to both nations as there are several converging interests here, such as domain awareness, ensuring the freedom of navigation, and protection of vital sea lines of communication. Furthermore, as the Armed Forces of the Philippines transitions into a more technologically-adaptive armed force, a good point of convergence lies in developing cyber security, electronic warfare, and Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) capabilities.