

Japan's relations with China: What can the Philippines learn from it?

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Introduction

The Philippines holds an interesting position in the Indo-Pacific region. Geographically, the country sits along the western edge of the Pacific Ocean and is in close contact with both highly developed and emerging economies of Asia. Likewise, this position could be immensely significant for the Philippines in geostrategic terms. To its west is the contentious South China Sea and to its north is the volatile Taiwan Strait. The Philippines is also within the so-called 'First Island Chain' of the Chinese military doctrine, which puts the country in an awkward position should a military confrontation occur. Given these realities, the Philippines would certainly play a significant role as far as the peace and stability of the region are concerned. This predicament of the Philippines, however unique, could be likened to Japan, which also has its share of difficulties due to its geographic circumstances. Nuclear threats from North Korea and the unsettled territorial disputes with its neighbors China and Russia are some of the issues that place Japan in a difficult position. Its alliance with the United States complicates matters when it comes to its relationships with its neighbors, particularly with China. But unlike the Philippines, Japan's stable political institutions and economic assets makes it more adaptable to changes in international events. Moreover, the Japanese Self Defence Force is capable enough to protect its national interests which may not be the case for the Philippines. Definitely, Filipino policymakers should

strive to increase the country's defense capabilities and resistance to radical shifts in international affairs. Reflecting upon some of the lessons available to Japan could prove to be useful.

This policy brief explores such lessons from the Japanese experience in establishing better relations with China. The objective of this policy brief is to illustrate the successes made and the challenges encountered by Japanese policymakers in their continuing interaction with China. The paper emphasizes two things which Philippine policymakers should consider: (1) the evolution of the bilateral relations of the two countries and (2) the political realities that the country has to contend with in order to protect and advance its own interests. These two considerations are essential in guiding policymakers to design a more effective policy towards China. The author argues that consulting the Japanese experience could vastly help Philippine policymakers on this matter.

Japan–China relations

The relations between Japan and China have experienced a series of ebbs and flows in recent history. The two countries agreed to a treaty of peace and friendship, which has been effective since 1978, and a number of agreements that promote economic cooperation and political dialogues have been already in place. However, both countries lack limitations of crisis management institutions.

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This remains to be a problem and can be illustrated by the incidents in the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.² The sensitivity of both countries to these issues effectively put policymakers in a difficult position to deal with each other. In fact, there were instances in the past two decades where negotiations were halted since high-level contact between the two countries were suspended.³

At present, however, there seems to be some indications that the relations between Japan and China have been improving steadily and that the recent developments in the region have been a key factor.⁴ The domestic situations in the respective countries have also been instrumental in permitting the leaders of the two countries to adopt a friendlier policy towards each other.⁵ One issue that allows Japan and China to work together is the Korean peninsula issue. However, the geopolitical realities dictate that this is not easy to accomplish and that the apparent incongruities of national interests of the countries involved, including that of the United States and the role it plays in the region, certainly complicate matters. Consequently, this makes negotiations and close coordination between Japan and China even more important. Having warm relations with China permits Japan to focus its attention to the unstable situation in the Korean peninsula.

Another issue that could facilitate relations is the potential for economic cooperation between the two countries. The ongoing trade war against the United States provides China a motivation to engage more with other economic players in the region, particularly Japan. Especially with the slowing down of its economic growth, China could

certainly benefit from a revitalized trade with Japan and help it survive the economic policy of the Trump administration. For Japan, engaging with China could also open the country to the potential for growth despite not joining the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). After all, about half of all Japanese firms operating overseas are in China, which means that they would certainly be affected by the consequences of BRI.⁶ Recently, Japan and China have been pursuing cooperation in infrastructure developments in other countries.⁷ This is a departure from what we have seen in the previous decades, where the two countries would compete against each other. One example of this cooperation is the plan to establish a high-speed rail project in Thailand which aims to connect the country's three main airports.⁸ In addition, the two countries have signed a memorandum of agreement for collaborating on up to 30 BRI-related infrastructure projects.⁹ Developments like these signal a general improvement of both Japan and China although it should be expected that several challenges still lie ahead.

The bilateral relations between Japan and China have been notable due to steady improvements recently. The identification of the areas where the two countries could cooperate and the subsequent realization from the two countries' leaders that close coordination seems to be the most appropriate approach are two reasons for the warmer ties. Consequently, this has enabled them to work together in some areas in spite of the apparent fundamental differences in their respective national interests.

² Sanaa Yasmin Hafeez, "The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Crises of 2004, 2010, and 2012: A Study of Japanese–Chinese Crisis Management," *Asia-Pacific Review* 22, no. 1 (2015): 86–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13439006.2015.1038885>.

³ Zhang Tuosheng, "Changes in China-Japan Relations and East Asian Security," in *The Architecture of Security in the Asia-Pacific*, ed. Ron Huisken (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2009), 2.

⁴ Reiji Yoshida, "Rising trade war with U.S. the mere 'last push' for Japan and China to improve ties, but officials still cautious," *The Japan Times*, September 13, 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/09/13/national/politics-diplomacy/rising-trade-war-u-s-mere-last-push-japan-china-improve-ties-officials-still-cautious/#.XA9kbszaM8>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Madoka Fukuda, "Maintaining momentum in Japan–China relations," *East Asia Forum*, March 27, 2018, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/03/27/maintaining-momentum-in-japan-china-relations/>.

⁷ Oki Nagai, "China and Japan kick off joint effort on foreign infrastructure," *Nikkei Asian Review*, September 26, 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-Relations/China-and-Japan-kick-off-joint-effort-on-foreign-infrastructure>.

⁸ "China, Japan: Relations Continue to Thaw Amid Talk of Joint Infrastructure Projects," *Stratfor Worldview*, September 11, 2018, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/china-japan-relations-continue-thaw-amid-talk-joint-infrastructure-projects>.

⁹ Ibid.

Lessons from Japan: What Filipino policymakers could reflect upon

Certainly, Filipino policymakers could use the relations between Japan and China as an instructive case. Essentially, the bilateral relations of the two countries have been improving because of three things. First is that the leaders of both countries were able to identify issue areas in which they can work together closely. The key was to find an issue that does not necessarily contradict the two countries' respective interests. For the Philippines, reflecting on the recent steps that Japan and China have taken could be a meaningful approach. Apart from the contentious South China Sea territorial issues that would likely end up in a gridlock, Filipino policymakers should look for less sensitive issues that they can discuss with their Chinese counterparts. One such issue is food security. The challenge that must be solved, however, is the framing of the issue in their respective domestic audiences. Looking at it like a 'zero-sum' game is not advisable since it will promote competition—a battle that the Philippines will likely lose. Instead, Filipino policymakers should strive to frame food security as a 'positive-sum' game. This framing will involve cooperation in marine science research and environmental conservation—an endeavour that promotes the idea that there are enough resources for both countries. Hopefully, this will be seen by Chinese policymakers as a 'win-win' situation and therefore contribute actively to its solution.

The second reason for the improvement of the bilateral relations is the identification of less controversial joint cooperation projects that the two countries could pursue. In the case of Japan and China, having a 'third country' (e.g., Thailand) as a direct beneficiary of the infrastructure projects seem to do the trick as far as improving their relations is concerned. It could be argued that the bilateral relations between the two countries will not be in a positive state today if the two countries have

decided to settle their more controversial issues like the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute right away. As mentioned previously, one joint project is on marine science research and environmental conservation, provided that they are properly framed, could address food security issues for both countries. Hence, pursuing a 'low-hanging fruit' approach is an appropriate step that the two countries can take in order to move forward. It is important to work on less controversial projects since this could establish trust and confidence, which are important ingredients in any successful negotiation. The Philippines and China should be on the lookout for opportunities that could foster trust and confidence as this might pay off in the future. In other words, solving 'minor' issues could serve as a preparation for solving the more difficult ones.

Lastly, Filipino policymakers should understand the political realities, including the options available to the country, to effectively deal with China. Observers are split as regards to how Japan would act given the ongoing US–China trade war. Some have noted that the trade war being waged by the Trump administration contributes to the warming of ties between Tokyo and Beijing.¹⁰ On the contrary, others have noted that the US remains as a 'cornerstone' of Japan's diplomacy and security and that the ongoing trade war will not change this.¹¹ Nevertheless, the fact remains that the US' presence in Japanese affairs is immense. Speaking at a roundtable discussion held at the University of the Philippines Diliman, Professor Akio Takahara, an international relations expert from the University of Tokyo, stated that the Philippines and Japan have no choice but to consolidate their respective relationships with the United States in order for them to balance China's dominance in the region.¹² He added that however difficult, countries should strive to find this 'balance' in spite of the fact that the interests of China and their own interests may not be necessarily be the same.¹³

¹⁰ Justin McCurry, "New trajectory: Abe heads to China as Trump trade threats help bury old tensions," *The Guardian*, October 24, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/24/shinzo-abe-to-china-trump-trade-threats-closer-ties>.

¹¹ Tomoyuki Tachikawa, "Could Japan shift away from the U.S. and toward China? No chance, government sources and experts say," *The Japan Times*, October 27, 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/10/27/national/politics-diplomacy/japan-shift-away-u-s-toward-china-no-chance-government-sources-experts-say/#.XBCJb9szaM8>.

¹² Akio Takahara, "Roundtable Discussion on the Bilateral Relations of Japan and the Philippines with China" (Roundtable discussion, University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies, August 29, 2018).

¹³ Ibid.

Another area that Philippine policymakers should understand is the nature of domestic politics not just in the Philippines but also in China. Philippine domestic politics could be described as erratic and this may pose a problem as far as crafting a foreign policy is concerned. Every six years, a new Philippine president comes in, and with him or her, a new set of policymakers. This reality has proved to be a limitation to the country's capacity for long-term planning and strategic thinking which might want to be exploited by other countries. In the case of Japan, which is technically governed by democracy like the Philippines, its government should change composition regularly. However, unlike the Philippines, only one party, the Liberal Democratic Party, has been virtually dominating Japanese politics since the 1950s. This presents key advantages as far as establishing a solid foreign policy position is concerned. It was observed that the Japanese foreign policy towards China has not changed much even though the government changes.¹⁴ When the Democratic Party of Japan briefly took over in 2009, the official foreign policy with regard to China was virtually a continuation of the Liberal Democratic Party stance, i.e., to focus on improving relations with China through continuous direct engagements with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).¹⁵

On the other hand, China, which is ruled by the CCP since its founding in 1949, seems to not have any problems in the continuation of its long-term plans. Although it is true that personalities change at the helm of the Chinese government, the Chinese leadership retains continuation as evidenced by the regular release of its Five-Year Plan. This ensures that the crafted policies are consistent with the principles of the CCP as well as the previously-instituted Five-Year Plans. One important question that emerges is: how would any of these political realities affect the strategy of the Philippines as far as managing the bilateral relations with China is concerned?

Mr. Julio Amador III, a research fellow based in the Asia Pacific Pathways to Progress, Inc., proposed the idea in a roundtable discussion that the country should strive to strengthen its institutions as this will promote and constrain behavior among political actors.¹⁶ This means that the country's policies are likely to be continued even in the event of drastic leadership transitions. In other words, strong institutions contribute to the growth and expansion of strategic thinking in the country which becomes more important when you have a powerful neighbor like China. Mr. Raphael Lotilla, former Secretary of the Philippine Department of Energy, stated in the same roundtable discussion that one problem of Philippine foreign policy is that it does not have a very strong constituency and this causes radical shifts in the leadership's views of the Philippine–China relations.¹⁷ He added that China realizes the inconsistencies brought about by the weak status of the Philippine institutions.¹⁸ Filipino policymakers should treat this as a warning that their counterparts in China could exploit this weakness and advance their interests—some of which may not be good for the Philippines.

Conclusion and recommendations

The Duterte government should consider recalibrating its strategies to accommodate opportunities and mitigate the political realities that could be unfavourable to the country's interests. Areas for cooperation, such as joint infrastructure cooperation projects, should be seen by Filipino policymakers as an opportunity to contribute to the stability and security of the region. However, the Duterte administration should still be wary of the consequences of these projects as far as economic viability and security considerations are concerned. The Japanese experience demonstrates that to have meaningful negotiations with China, policymakers should identify issue areas that are non-contentious and promotes a 'win-win' attitude for both parties.

¹⁴ H.D.P. Envall, "Japan's 'Pivot' Perspective: Reassurance, Restructuring, and the Rebalance," *Security Challenges* 12, no. 3 (2016), 8–9, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26465595>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁶ Julio Amador III, "Roundtable Discussion on the Bilateral Relations of Japan and the Philippines with China" (Roundtable discussion, University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies, August 29, 2018).

¹⁷ Raphael Lotilla, "Roundtable Discussion on the Bilateral Relations of Japan and the Philippines with China" (Roundtable discussion, University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies, August 29, 2018).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

However, this is not to disregard issues such as the South China Sea dispute. Instead, it should be seen as a confidence-building measure and a preparation for the resolution of the more crucial issues facing the region.

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