

STRATEGIC STUDIES PROGRAM

A MONOGRAPH ON THE 6TH KATIPUNAN CONFERENCE

Philippine Strategic Outlook 2024 Onwards:

National Security and Economic Resilience



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About the Monograph

This monograph compiles a selection of papers from the Sixth Katipunan Conference, held on November 5, 2024, at the Areté, Ateneo de Manila University. Organized with the support of esteemed institutions including the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Philippines, WR Numero, ADRI-Stratbase, and the Harvard Kennedy School Alumni Association of the Philippines, this conference proved to be a vital forum for fostering dialogue, generating innovative ideas, and contributing to a robust and forward-looking Philippine strategic outlook. The conference, themed "Philippine Strategic Outlook 2024 - Onwards: National Security and Economic Resilience," served as a crucial platform for experts and policymakers to discuss the nation's evolving strategic landscape.

The featured essays are organized according to the seven sub-themes of the conference, providing a comprehensive analysis of key issues:

1. Intelligence Frontiers: Shaping Philippine Strategy in a Changing Geopolitical Landscape
2. Forging Resilient Economic Futures: Philippine-China Relations in Focus
3. Internal Security and Governance in the Philippines: Civil, Economic, and Human Dimensions
4. Maritime Defense and Diplomacy: Building Strategic Resilience in the West Philippine Sea
5. Strategic Imperatives: Shaping Philippine National Security in a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape
6. Examining Foreign Interference: Global Forces and Local Impacts in the Philippines
7. Cybersecurity, Innovation, and Sustainability: Strategic Technologies for the Philippines

By bringing together these diverse perspectives, this monograph aims to extend the conference's dialogue to a wider policy and academic audience, contributing to a more robust and forward-looking Philippine strategic outlook.

Foreword

Herman Joseph S. Kraft

Convenor, Strategic Studies Program

UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies

The Katipunan Conference was organized by the Strategic Studies Program of the Center for Integrative and Development Studies of the University of the Philippines (UPCIDS-SSP) as a venue where strategic issues concerning the Philippines could be discussed by academics, practitioners, and students. Held at the UP Law Center in 2016, it included a few plenary panels which discussed the changing geopolitical environment and security situation of the Philippines.

This volume includes a number of select articles from presentations given at the Sixth Katipunan Conference in 2024. This follows a number of years when what was supposed to be an annual event had to give way to the constraints imposed by the COVID pandemic on face-to-face conferences. Through this interregnum, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) consistently provided support for activities that had been spin-offs of the original Katipunan Conference. These included a podcast series and a webinar program. The 2024 edition also saw the inauguration of the Conference into what is hoped would be a continuing tradition of cooperation and collaboration between the three Katipunan-based schools – Ateneo De Manila University (through the Ateneo School of Government), Miriam College, and the University of the Philippines (through the UPCIDS-SSP).

The Katipunan Conference was held for the first time outside the UP Campus. The venue was the Arete Building of the Ateneo De Manila with breakout rooms in the meeting rooms of the Ateneo School of Government. At the same time, the theme focusing on the theme "Philippine Strategic Outlook 2024 Onwards: National Security and Economic Resilience" has broadened its focus to include an economic context to the discussions. The participants, however, remained the same as before – academics, practitioners, and students of security and strategic studies. From a few panels to more than 10 panels showed that interest in these fields and the issues they represent have gained traction and a burgeoning policy community is emerging. The value of fora such as the Katipunan Conference in nurturing this community, to give platforms for the discussion of emerging strategic issues, and

to allow young academics and students a venue where they can exchange ideas and allow theory and practice to interact is clear. The collaboration between Ateneo de Manila, Miriam College, and the University of the Philippines provides a possibly sound and secure stage for these discussions to flourish.

This volume provides a glimpse at the richness of the discussions and the breadth of what is catching the attention of the security and strategic studies community exhibited in the Sixth Katipunan Conference. It is a promising take-off point for further discussion and debate in future iterations of the Katipunan Conference.

Introduction

Ronald U. Mendoza, PhD

Senior Fellow, Ateneo Policy Center

Ateneo de Manila University, School of Government

In an era of significant global challenges ranging from climate change to conflict, disease risks and most recently pandemic; and in the face of rapid advancements in scientific knowledge and applications, ushering robotics, artificial intelligence and a range of technologies set to redefine the international economic landscape, nations face these myriad challenges and opportunities amidst a secular decline in multilateralism and growing risk of polarization anchored across the global economic superpowers, United States and China. Perhaps never before has the world needed international cooperation, and yet been so unready for this.

Even as the multilateral system appears frail, there is a strand of thinking that emphasizes the possible role of middle powers to build a strong middle ground for cooperation. Thanks to the period of globalization that helped connect economies, opening an era of rapid economic growth and development in various parts of the world—and most notably in Asia—the number of low income countries has more than halved from 66 in 2003 to about 31 by 2019. Of the 107 middle income countries in the world today, 60 are classified as upper middle income. These middle powers represent a broad range of countries, including Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Poland, Singapore, South Korea and Saudi Arabia near the top of the income distribution, as well as Brazil, India, Indonesia, South Africa, Turkey and Vietnam. Arguably, countries like Ukraine and the Philippines also belong to this large middling group of countries that are neither superpowers, nor less developed countries. (Based on recent estimates, and barring any major economic shock, the Philippines is expected to achieve upper middle income status by 2026 or shortly thereafter.) All of these middle income countries can muster economic and geopolitical weight in their own right, but more so when aligned in common cause.

Nevertheless, these strong economic interlinkages due to economic (trade and investment) as well as technology ties across countries brought on by the ICT revolution in the 1990s and now the 4th industrial revolution (e.g. AI, robotics, internet of things, social media connectivity) brings with it not just benefits and

value creation across countries, but also new risks and ways to inflict damage on each other's economies and societies thanks to this very same integration and interlinkages.

The discussions and articles underpinning this journal special issue are juxtaposed against this broader context of navigating complex international linkages and domestic policy challenges, wherein the lines across economic development and national security issues have increasingly become blurred.

The articles by Inoc and Rodriguez (Strengthening the Philippine Strategic Approach: The Case of the 2016 Arbitral Award and National Security), Yap (Coping with Geopolitical Tensions through Stronger Economic Resilience), Espeña (Power Projection or Offshore Defense? Nuancing Statecraft of Naval Diplomacy for the Philippines), and Fabregas (Biodiversity beyond Borders: The West Philippine Sea and Regional Strategies) outline the difficult balancing act in tapping multilateral, regional and bilateral approaches to resolve disputes, achieve environmental and sustainability goals, and sustain international economic integration and continued economic development. If the systems in cross-border trade, investments, dispute settlement, environmental cooperation and other areas helping shape the international rule of law are less robust, then countries like the Philippines face hard choices to strike second-best or even third-best "solutions". And clearly, in each sphere or issue area, what would normally be treated as economic decisions now may generate serious security implications, and vice versa.

Nevertheless, in some of these cases, there is a potential opportunity to forge a middle ground through regional approaches (e.g. ASEAN). These opportunities must be explored and forged based on a careful calculus of perceived net benefits across all countries involved. This calculus is not always clear as these authors' analyses collectively imply. Oftentimes, these middle ground opportunities must be proactively crafted and negotiated; and the Philippines has begun to forge economic, security and cooperation arrangements in an effort to piece together this middle ground. From its present strategy, it appears to pursue this middle ground development in lockstep with the development of stronger ties with traditional allies, most notably the United States. The two are not necessarily inconsistent, particularly if one factors the democratic variable among the Philippines' traditional allies—all countries involved may also be subject to the vicissitudes of political swings. Populist politics across all these countries introduce a further complexity to the alliance building.

Meanwhile, the Philippines also faces lingering security issues within its borders, ranging from more overt foreign influence operations (see Eoy's *Lessons for Countering Foreign Influence Operations: The Case of Japan and the Philippines*), to more subtle Chinese labor migration (see Pineda's *Chinese labor migration to the Philippines: Gauging national interests under the Duterte Administration*). This is in addition to longstanding conflict risks in the Philippines' Southern

region (see the article by Fernandez on *Navigating contested land claims under a peace deal: Land governance challenges in the Bangsamoro transition*). These analysts emphasize the importance of broader security governance, implying policy responses that go well beyond the traditional military sphere. The call for "whole of nation" approaches for both national security and economic development goals underscore the importance of this broader lens. But "whole of nation" is easier said than done, particularly when the nation faces deep divides (and populist swings), as well as lingering challenges in bolstering good governance and stronger political and economic institutions.

Altogether the articles herein contribute to a much richer understanding of the complexity of contemporary national security and economic development conditions for the Philippines. And navigating the new global economic, national security and technological terrain requires this deep interdisciplinary research and discourse to better inform policymaking. While readers will not find easy answers nor settled issues herein; this journal special issue nevertheless is a useful contribution in this direction.

Coping with Geopolitical Tensions through Stronger Economic Resilience

Josef T. Yap



"Selective focus of Philippine flag in blurry world map with coins. Philippines economy and wealth concept."

John Kevin, iStock, <https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/selective-focus-of-philippine-flag-in-blurry-world-map-with-coins-philippines-gm1401082857-454451983?searchscope=image%2Cfilm>

Coping with Geopolitical Tensions through Stronger Economic Resilience¹

Josef T. Yap²

ABSTRACT

The America First policy of the Trump 2.0 administration has become a source of geopolitical tension. Friction and unease have extended from the US-China rivalry and now involve traditional allies of the US. As a result, political and economic discourse about the possibility of decoupling has expanded to geoeconomic fragmentation. Among the possible outcomes of geoeconomic fragmentation is financial instability, a salient example of which is the recent increase in yields of US government bonds in response to the uncertainty spawned by the mercurial rollout of US tariffs. Asian economies can reduce their vulnerability to financial instability by strengthening their economic resilience. This can be achieved by improving their domestic financial institutions and deepening regional financial integration. Regional financial cooperation can support both of these objectives. An example is reinforcing the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization Stability Facility. Meanwhile, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership provides a ready-made platform for its members' political leaders to protect and project their multilateral interests.

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the 6th Katipunan Conference titled Philippine Strategic Outlook 2024 Onwards: National Security and Economic Resilience, 5 November 2024. The paper was revised substantially following the global turmoil caused by the policies of the Trump 2.0 administration.

² Senior Research Fellow, Ateneo de Manila University School of Government. The usual disclaimer applies.

FROM GLOBAL INTEGRATION TO DECOUPLING AND GEOECONOMIC FRAGMENTATION

Eight decades of constructive US global leadership has been systematically undermined in the first eight months of 2025, highlighted by the imposition of widespread tariffs by the Trump administration on April 2.³ Even if the full implementation of the tariffs was delayed, the image of the United States as a benefactor has already been subject to self-inflicted damage. The America First policy has been pursued in such an erratic and belligerent manner that the US is now deemed an unreliable partner.

During the past two decades, China has been at the center of US pressure, and the evolution of their relationship has direct bearing on the events of the last eight months. In the early 2000s, the US and China enjoyed a period of deepening economic interdependence. China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001 marked a significant moment in this integration, with both countries benefiting from increased trade, investment, and technological collaboration. However, the mid-to-late 2000s and early 2010s saw rising concerns in the US about China's growing influence, similar to the unease with Japan's rise in the 1980s. This culminated in the US "Pivot to Asia," which was a strategic shift in American foreign policy initiated during the Obama administration, starting around 2011. The core idea was to reallocate diplomatic, economic, and military resources toward the Asia-Pacific region, recognizing its growing geopolitical and economic importance in the 21st century.

It was around this time that the concept of decoupling began to gain prominence. Decoupling refers to the process by which two economies or systems become less interconnected or interdependent. In the context of US-China relations, decoupling specifically refers to the reduction or severing of economic, trade, investment, and technological ties between the two nations. The possibility of decoupling between the US and China has drawn attention to the analogous and broader issue of geopolitical tensions and economic fragmentation. The latter refers to

3 On April 2, 2025, President Trump imposed a series of significant tariffs as part of his administration's protectionist trade policies. A basic 10 percent tariff was imposed on all imported goods entering the United States. Higher tariffs were applied to 57 trading partners, calculated based on perceived trade imbalances. These were referred to as "reciprocal tariffs," aiming to mirror the tariffs those countries imposed on U.S. goods. Additional tariffs targeted specific industries, including a 25 percent tariff on imported automobiles and a 25 percent tariff on steel and aluminum products.

the breakdown or weakening of global economic integration, where countries or regions reduce their interdependence and shift toward inward-looking or bloc-based economic systems. A more nuanced term is geoeconomic fragmentation (Aiyar et al. 2023), which is described as a policy-driven reversal of global economic integration often guided by strategic considerations. These considerations could include national or economic security, as well as enhancing autonomy via reduced reliance on other countries.

Meanwhile, relations between the Philippines and China have also contributed to geopolitical tensions. The major point of contention lies in the South China Sea/West Philippine Sea, with overlapping claims between both countries. The Philippines asserts sovereignty over parts of the Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal, while China claims a “ten-dash line” encompassing most of the waterway. This dispute has led to diplomatic tensions and international legal proceedings, notably with the 2016 Hague Arbitration ruling favoring the Philippines, which China has not recognized.

An interesting issue is whether the Philippines and China will experience their own version of decoupling. China exported USD 32.83 billion worth of goods to the Philippines in 2024, representing 25.7 percent of the latter’s total imports. Both countries are members of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and are integral to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Plus Three (ASEAN+3) financial cooperation. Hence, decoupling between the two countries will have serious repercussions on regional economic integration.

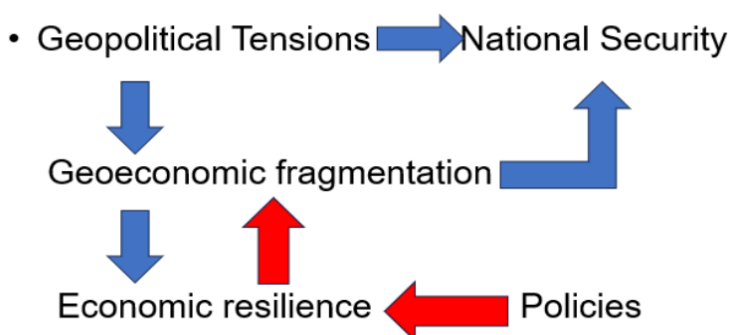
Relatedly, due to the extent and aggressiveness of the America First policy of the second Trump administration, there is concern that the adverse impact of decoupling and geoeconomic fragmentation will extend beyond the international trade system. Apart from the disruption to global supply chains, there will be spillover effects on (i) research and innovation, particularly regarding the regulation of Artificial Intelligence (AI); (ii) global governance, particularly concerning the impacts of climate change; and (iii) financial system stability, particularly regarding the management of global financial safety nets.

This paper focuses on the relationship between geoeconomic fragmentation and economic resilience. The conceptual analysis draws from The Fund for Peace (2023), which defines resilience as “the extent to which a country can anticipate, manage, and recover from a crisis, relative to the severity of that crisis.” The underlying framework is shown in Figure 1. Two issues stand out from this framework. One

is whether the economic resilience of a country like the Philippines allows it to withstand the adverse impacts of both decoupling and geoeconomic fragmentation. Second, what policies can be implemented to strengthen resilience in order to cope with geoeconomic fragmentation? The area of financial system stability will be highlighted, with regional cooperation in Asia as a focal point.

GEOECONOMIC FRAGMENTATION AND FINANCIAL STABILITY

Geopolitical tensions refer to conflicts or rivalries between nations that stem from competing strategic interests in specific geographic regions or from divergent political ideologies. In recent years, these tensions have intensified on a global scale. Key drivers include the worsening diplomatic relations between the US and China, as well as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has had far-reaching implications for global security and international alliances. As discussed earlier, a prominent flashpoint in Asia is the South China Sea/West Philippine Sea.

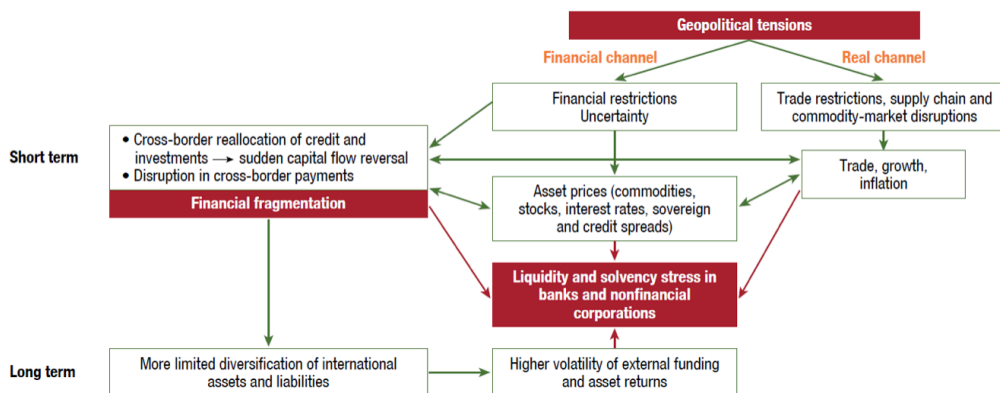


■ **Figure 1.** Framework of the paper

Meanwhile, the aggressive and belligerent nature of the current US administration has contributed significantly to geopolitical tensions. Apart from the announcement of tariffs on April 2, US Vice-President JD Vance delivered a speech at the 61st Munich Security Conference, where he criticized European Union leaders for what he described as backsliding on freedom of speech and democracy. This perspective contrasts sharply with the traditional bipartisan support for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and strong transatlantic ties. Meanwhile, remarks by President Trump about annexing Greenland and Canada becoming the 51st state of the US have added fuel to the fire.

An increase in geopolitical tensions can have significant adverse implications for macro-financial stability. As outlined in the framework shown in Figure 2, there are two primary channels through which financial instability may be transmitted. The first is the financial channel, which operates directly through disruptions in capital flows and cross-border payments. This can occur due to the imposition of capital controls, financial sanctions, or the freezing of international assets. Additionally, heightened uncertainty and a rise in investors' risk aversion—fueled by fears of future restrictions, escalating conflicts, or potential expropriations—can further amplify financial volatility and capital flight, thereby weakening financial systems.

These same factors could lead to financial fragmentation that affects cross-border capital allocation. In this scenario, investors and lenders may adjust portfolio investment allocations and cut cross-border credit lines to the rival country (or group of countries). In its simplest sense, financial fragmentation is the opposite of financial integration, since it leads to reduced diversification of international assets and liabilities. The framework shows that financial fragmentation, financial restrictions, and an increase in uncertainty can adversely affect asset prices, leading to liquidity and solvency stress in banks. It should be noted that President Trump postponed the full implementation of tariffs after a selloff hit US Treasury bonds, sending bond yields soaring and triggering concern about assets that typically serve as a safe-haven investment. A prolonged hike in bond yields could threaten the financial system if costlier debt strains the balance sheets of large banks and other key firms.



■ **Figure 2.** Key Channels of Transmission of Geopolitical Tensions and Macro-Financial Stability. Source: Figure 3.3 of Catalán et al. (2023)

Note: The figure shows the two key channels of transmission, financial and real, through which geopolitical tensions could contribute to financial fragmentation and exacerbate macro-financial stability risks. In addition to these channels, macro-financial stability could also be affected if geopolitical tensions increase cybersecurity risks, compliance, legal and reputational risks for entities, risks associated with money laundering and financing of terrorism, or climate-related risks due to a lack of international coordination to mitigate climate change.

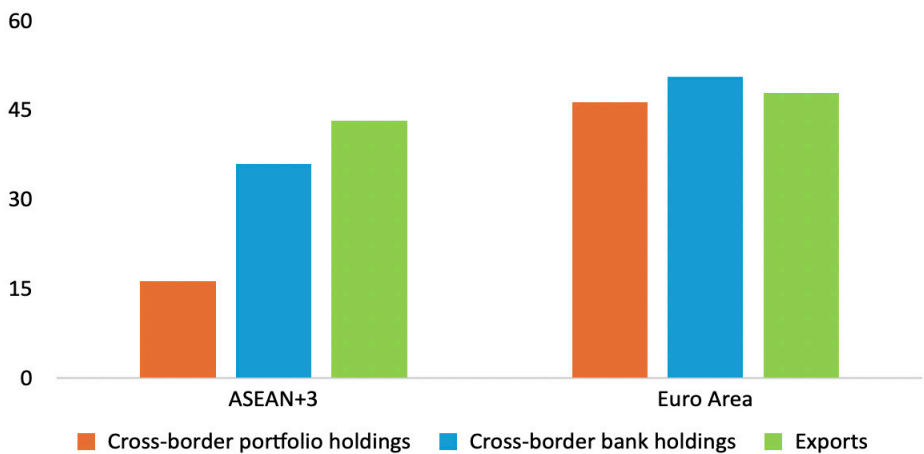
The second pathway is the real channel through which geopolitical tensions impact financial stability by disrupting the broader economy. Restrictions on international trade and technology transfers—often implemented as part of strategic decoupling or sanction regimes—can lead to supply chain disruptions and volatility in commodity markets. These shocks can weigh heavily on international trade and global economic growth while also contributing to inflationary pressures. In turn, these adverse economic conditions can erode the liquidity and profitability of nonfinancial corporations, heightening credit risks for banks and other financial institutions. As these risks accumulate, they can undermine macro-financial stability, especially in economies that are highly exposed to external trade or reliant on fragile supply chains. A deeper analysis of global supply chain disruptions can be found elsewhere (See Bednarski et al. 2025).

More resilient economies will be better equipped to cope with the adverse impacts of geoeconomic fragmentation. The next section explains why Asia is particularly vulnerable to geoeconomic fragmentation, followed by an analysis of the resilience of selected Asian countries. This serves to illustrate the importance of resilience in addressing geoeconomic fragmentation. The final section presents the argument

that regional cooperation is the primary tool for enhancing economic resilience at both the regional and country levels.

REGIONAL INTEGRATION AND VULNERABILITY TO GEOECONOMIC FRAGMENTATION

The degree of economic integration in Asia has implications for the speed and magnitude of fragmentation and the resulting financial instability that may arise from geopolitical tensions. A comparison of ASEAN+3 and the Euro Area (Figure 3) shows how far East Asia has advanced, with its level of intraregional trade integration at a similar level to Europe. However, East Asia lags in terms of intraregional financial integration.



■ **Figure 3.** Intraregional shares, 2023—ASEAN+3 versus Euro Area (%). Source: Figure 4.4 of ADB (2025)

ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations; ASEAN+3 = ASEAN plus People’s Republic of China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea

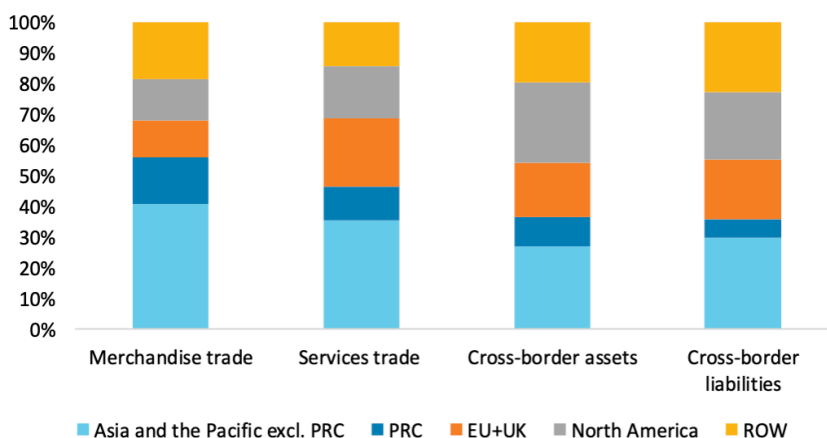
Note: ASEAN+3 includes Hong Kong, China

Experts (Montanes and Schmukler 2018; Park and Rajan 2021) have observed that the level of financial integration within Asia and the Pacific region has remained lower than its connections with economies outside the region, contradicting the trend in trade. Using a more comprehensive list of Asian economies,⁴ Figure 4 shows that the share of intraregional trade in both goods and services is indeed higher than the share of intraregional financial flows.

Asia's relatively high level of trade integration makes it vulnerable to disruptions in global supply chains caused by geopolitical tensions. As discussed earlier (Figure 2), this is the real channel through which geoeconomic fragmentation can lead to financial instability. The analysis on resilience and regional cooperation will deal less with mechanisms to cope with the impact of geopolitical tensions on international trade.

Meanwhile, financial integration makes economies more susceptible to external shocks by amplifying the volatility of capital flows. Geoeconomic fragmentation can function as an external shock since abrupt reversals of capital inflows and widespread uncertainty can lead to substantial swings in exchange and interest rates, and trigger finance sector imbalances. The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the 2008 Global Financial and Economic Crisis provide direct evidence of the consequences of financial instability. However, deeper financial integration remains a desirable goal since it is associated with faster economic growth and other advantages. Hence, policy measures should be implemented to foster deeper financial integration while simultaneously establishing guardrails against financial instability.

4 For Figure 4, Asia includes Australia; Bangladesh (equities only); Cambodia (equities only); Georgia (equities only); Hong Kong, China; India; Indonesia; Japan; Kazakhstan; the Kyrgyz Republic (equities only); the Lao People's Democratic Republic (equities only); Malaysia; Mongolia (equities only); Nepal (equities only); New Zealand (equities only); Pakistan (equities only); the People's Republic of China; the Philippines; the Republic of Korea; Singapore; Sri Lanka (equities only); Taipei, China; Thailand; Uzbekistan (equities only); and Viet Nam.



■ **Figure 4.** Trade in merchandise and services and cross-border assets and liabilities of Asia and the Pacific, by partner (%). Source: Figure 4.13 of ADB (2025)

PRC = People's Republic of China, EU = European Union (27 members), ROW = rest of the world.
UK = United Kingdom

Note: Estimates are as of 2021 for services trade and as of the end of 2023 for merchandise trade and cross-border assets and liabilities.

A pertinent source of vulnerability is the disproportionate share of North America in the cross-border assets and liabilities of Asia. Figure 4 shows that the share of North America is higher in comparison to its share in trade in goods and services. Financial fragmentation, brought about by the America First policy, can therefore result in significant instability in the region.

North America's disproportionate influence can also be linked to the concept of asymmetric network structures, which underpin the idea of “weaponized interdependence.” This concept suggests that states or actors controlling key nodes in global networks—such as finance, information, or supply chains—can leverage their central position for strategic and coercive advantage. Instead of fostering mutual benefit, interdependence becomes asymmetric, serving as a tool of power.

Farrell and Newman (2019) highlight two distinct strategies through which states can weaponize interdependence: the panopticon and chokepoint effects. The panopticon effect allows dominant states to use their network position to gain informational advantages over adversaries. Meanwhile, the chokepoint effect enables them to restrict or sever adversaries' access to critical network flows, thereby exerting control through exclusion.

An example is the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT), which is a global messaging network used by financial institutions to securely transmit information and payment instructions. It is not a payment system itself, but it underpins the flow of global finance, facilitating trillions of transactions daily. Based in Belgium, SWIFT is governed by EU law but has strong ties to the US, which can exert influence due to the role of the US dollar and US-based banks in global finance. Control over SWIFT represents a “chokepoint”—a key node in the global financial network that can be leveraged to cut off or isolate actors from the global economy.

THE NATURE OF ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

The Fund for Peace (2023) reports a quantitative measure termed the State Resilience Index (SRI), which is an aggregate of seven categories: Inclusion, Social Cohesion, State Capacity, Individual Capabilities, Environment and Ecology, Economy, and Civic Space (Table 1). This allows for a systematic analysis of a country’s resilience, particularly its ability to cope with the adverse impacts of geoeconomic fragmentation. This can be further enhanced by dissecting the “economy” component, defined as: “Diverse and innovative economies with access to capital are less vulnerable to price shocks and supply-chain disruptions, and they recover more quickly after a disaster. For longer-term economic resilience, infrastructure and high-quality economic management are necessary to compete in a changing global economy” (Fund for Peace 2023, 42).

Following this definition, the economy component is disaggregated into six sub-pillars, defined in Table 2. The highest value of the SRI among 154 economies is Norway at 8.4. Singapore, which has the highest SRI value among the countries shown in Table 1, is only ranked 17th. However, it has the highest score in the “economy” category among the 154 economies. Therefore, using Singapore as a benchmark and comparing it with its more advanced Southeast Asian neighbors can provide valuable policy insights.

Table 1. State Resilience Index and Selected Components

	STATE RESILIENCE INDEX	ECONOMY	DIVERSIFICATION	CAPITAL FLOWS	ECONOMIC MANAGEMENT
China	6.0	6.7	9.4	3.6	7.5
Indonesia	5.9	5.3	7.7	3.5	6.2
Malaysia	6.3	6.5	8.2	4.1	7.3
Philippines	5.9	5.5	8.4	4.1	7.0
Singapore	7.4	8.2	8.4	7.3	8.6
Thailand	6.0	6.2	8.9	3.6	7.5
Viet Nam	5.8	5.5	7.9	3.4	7.1

Source: The Fund for Peace (2023)

Table 2. Sub-pillars of “Economy”

Diversification	Diverse trading partners, diverse specializations, and diverse exports improve states' product development, market penetration, and ability to withstand sector-specific shocks.
Business Environment	A strong business environment within a fair regulatory framework is conducive to individuals recognizing new opportunities, mitigating potential threats, and forecasting developments across marketplace sectors.
Dynamism/Innovation	Innovative economies generate productivity while applying new ideas and technologies that improve the quality of goods and services.
Physical Infrastructure	Reliable infrastructure improves the productivity and quality of domestic life (stable electricity, etc.) while also easing transportation, overcoming physical barriers to economic exchange, and saving travel time.
Capital Flows	Alongside remittances, direct foreign investment can impact growth positively through access to credit, small business development, and increased employment.
Economic Management	States that practice informed economic management can manage economic shocks, maintain steady GDP growth and macroeconomic stability, and remain competitive in global markets

Source: The Fund for Peace (2023), page 44

There is not much difference between Singapore and the other countries in terms of “diversification.” As a matter of fact, China has a higher score. The relative homogeneity in terms of economic diversification can be attributed to the advanced level of intraregional trade (Figures 3 and 4). In turn, cross-border trade in goods in Asia has been anchored on regional production networks (Obashi and Kimura 2017).

Disruptions in the global supply chains arising from geoeconomic fragmentation will therefore have severe consequences for the economies of the region. Policy responses must focus on preserving the international trading system.

Meanwhile, Singapore's score in "capital flows" significantly exceeds that of the other countries. This relates to the earlier statement that deeper financial integration remains a desirable goal since it is associated with faster economic growth and other advantages. This accentuates the recommendation for policy measures to foster deeper financial integration while simultaneously establishing guardrails against financial instability.

STRENGTHENING ECONOMIC RESILIENCE THROUGH REGIONAL COOPERATION

Regional cooperation can play a key role in supporting the current international trade system and promoting financial integration. In the process, the involved countries can strengthen their economic resilience. This section focuses on finance and, to a certain extent, trade.

Asian economies can address potential financial instability arising from geopolitical tensions by strengthening their domestic financial institutions and enhancing regional financial cooperation (RFC). The objectives of RFC can be considered threefold: (i) it facilitates the development of domestic financial institutions by promoting reforms and good governance through collaboration among economies in terms of prudential regulation and supervision of domestic financial systems; (ii) it supports the establishment, operation, and continuing improvement of regional financial arrangements; and (iii) it serves as the engine of regional financial integration (ADB 2025). With regard to the first and second objectives, several regional forums and organizations have been established over the years for the purpose of information exchange, economic monitoring, research and training, and policy dialogue to develop expertise and build capacity for better policymaking. Through their activities, surveillance institutions have helped domestic financial actors adopt common best practices according to international standards in terms of investment and the implementation of macro-prudential policies (Lee and Kring 2024). The third objective relates to efforts to channel Asian savings into investment projects within Asia, a process that can address the disproportionate share of North America (Figure 4). RFC also establishes guardrails to protect against financial instability while promoting financial integration.

Policy measures aimed at reducing vulnerabilities should focus on the macro-financial linkages that lie at the interface of macroeconomic outcomes and financial variables (ADB 2020). On the demand side, shifts in borrowers' balance sheets can amplify macroeconomic volatility. On the supply side, financial shocks can impact bank lending, capital adequacy, the leverage cycle, and overall liquidity conditions. At the domestic level—particularly in emerging markets—macroprudential policies play a key role in curbing the procyclicality of the financial system (Bergant et al. 2023). These include countercyclical provisions, capital and liquidity buffers, and balance sheet tools such as leverage ratios and limits on debt-to-income and loan-to-value ratios.

Meanwhile, strengthening the regional financial safety net is essential for advancing deeper regional financial integration. Despite multiple crises—including the 2013 taper tantrum, the COVID-19 pandemic, and recent spikes in inflation—the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization Stability Facility (CMIM-SF) has yet to be utilized (Khor et al. 2022; Lee and Kring 2024). While its presence may have helped reassure markets and preserve access to financing for the region's sovereigns, several factors explain its underutilization.

First, the CMIM's USD 240 billion liquidity pool, paired with fixed borrowing quotas, may be too limited if multiple large economies are simultaneously affected by shocks. Introducing flexible multiples of swap quotas for smaller economies could better meet financing needs below the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-delinked threshold (Han 2022). Second, the CMIM's lending instruments are designed primarily for short-term balance of payments crises, offering rapid liquidity support. In contrast, other regional mechanisms—such as the European Stability Mechanism—also cover bank recapitalization and sovereign bond purchases (Park and Rajan 2021). Similarly, the IMF has expanded its toolkit with programs like the Resilience and Sustainability Trust, which address longer-term structural challenges such as climate change.

RFC can also play a critical role in mitigating the adverse effects of rising geopolitical tensions. First, geopolitical risks should be systematically integrated into regional macroeconomic surveillance frameworks. Second, cooperation should focus on enhancing the resilience of cross-border payment systems and developing robust interoperability mechanisms. In this regard, Asian economies must be aware of “weaponized interdependence” when they attempt to improve and even reconfigure RFC. For example, they can consider the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System,

which is China's system that aims to provide an alternative to SWIFT and facilitate the use of the Chinese yuan in international transactions.

Third, CMIM should serve as the region's primary financial safety net, thereby reducing reliance on bilateral swap lines, which risk exacerbating financial fragmentation. Finally, the scope of CMIM's lending instruments should be expanded. For example, the CMIM Precautionary Credit Line could be adapted to include the escalation of geopolitical tensions as an explicit trigger for access.

With regard to global supply chains, there is a risk that Asian economies will pursue bilateral agreements with the United States to avoid the so-called 'reciprocal' tariffs. This could undermine the core principles of nondiscrimination and multilateralism on which the global trading system was founded. Armstrong and Sta. Maria (2025) argue that RCEP provides a ready-made platform for its members' political leaders to protect and project their multilateral interests. In other words, Asia and the Pacific must rely on one of its core strengths (i.e. regional cooperation) to counterbalance the forces of geoeconomic fragmentation. "With leadership from its core ASEAN caucus and the constructive participation of ASEAN Dialogue Partners enmeshed in the agreement, RCEP has a pivotal role to play in shaping international trade policy dynamics" (Armstrong and Sta. Maria 2025, 2).

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Navigating contested land claims under a peace deal: Land governance challenges in the Bangsamoro transition

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"Bangsamoro Government Center"

Bangsamoro Information Office, <https://bangsamoro.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/1BE2C6EE-1A5B-4FC5-A568-5619F8AE09AD.jpeg>

Navigating contested land claims under a peace deal: Land governance challenges in the Bangsamoro transition¹

Maria Carmen (Ica) Fernandez²

ABSTRACT

In cases where land governance reforms and intensified socio-economic development are components of negotiated political settlements, how can state and non-state actors navigate multiple land claims in areas associated with multiple indigenous groups, protracted displacement, and resultant plural land tenure regimes? This chapter provides an overview of the key land-related challenges faced by the transitional Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), focusing on the components related to the ‘normalization’ process provided for in the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) signed by the Philippine Government with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Conditions creating land tenure instability in the Philippines as a whole are magnified in the region. Nevertheless, the powers provided by the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) and the BARMM Administrative Code create opportunities to decisively address these challenges, in line with the MILF-led Bangsamoro Transition Authority’s aspirations of ‘moral governance.’

Keywords: overlapping land claims, peace deals, ancestral lands, land governance, Bangsamoro

1 This paper draws from the author’s PhD project, “Land contestation in peace agreements: evidence from Bangsamoro, Philippines.” Elements have been publicly released in policy form in partnership with the Institute of Bangsamoro Studies (Fernandez, 2021) and Initiatives for International Dialogue (Fernandez 2023).

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LAND AND ‘NORMALIZATION’ IN BARMM

Land conflict is acknowledged as a root cause and complicating condition of internal armed struggles worldwide (World Bank 2011; Human Development Network 2005). As a result, contemporary peace deals³ commit to the dignified return of internally displaced populations, post-crisis reconstruction and restitution, environmental resource management, and land reform. This is on top of standard provisions on territorial scope and control, as well as socio-economic development packages related to the delivery of ‘peace dividends’⁴ for former combatants and affected communities. In subnational conflicts, a negotiated political settlement is signed between the central government and a non-state armed group purportedly representing the grievances of a local indigenous population. What happens when there are multiple ethnolinguistic groups indigenous to these areas, each with legal, historical, and other use claims over the same sites?

I engage these questions using the case of the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB), signed between the Government of the Philippines (GPH) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which created the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Having recently celebrated its 10th year, the GPH-MILF CAB has so far survived the curse of agreements failing within five to seven years. It is the latest milestone in a protracted armed conflict and the fourth of a series of major compacts, beginning with the 1976 Tripoli Agreement between the GPH and the MILF’s precursor, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF); a 1996 Final Peace Agreement with the MNLF that provided enhanced regional autonomy through the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM); and the 2012 Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB), which the CAB fleshes out.

The term ‘Bangsamoro’ can refer to the people, the subregion, or the political entity, drawing from the word *Bangsa* meaning ‘nation’ and *Moro* referring to the indigenous peoples of Mindanao and Sulu whose forebears chose to follow Islam

3 Notable examples of peace deals with provisions on customary land rights in the last three decades apart from the Philippines include Colombia, Guatemala, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Rwanda, and South Africa. Conversely, the devastating effects of ambiguity or overt mishandling of land and property issues before and after the signing of a peace agreement feature in Nicaragua, Mozambique, and El Salvador. It is a core element of the ongoing violence in Gaza-Palestine.

4 Peace dividends refer to the post-war social and economic benefits accrued when resources previously allocated to defense spending are invested in other public goods.

prior to colonization. The Bangsamoro is the only autonomous region out of the Philippines' 17 administrative areas and only regional parliament within the Philippine unitary presidential state. At the point of its creation in 2019 by plebiscite, the entity now known as the BARMM comprised the areas previously belonging to the ARMM—namely, Maguindanao (since divided into Maguindanao del Norte and Maguindanao del Sur as of September 2022), Lanao del Sur, and the island provinces of Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi—with the addition of Cotabato City as well as sixty-three barangays of the Special Geographic Area formerly belonging to North Cotabato. Home to approximately 4.5 million people, most of whom identify as Muslim, it is still officially considered the largest region in the Philippines in terms of land area, even with the excision of Sulu due to a 2023 Supreme Court ruling (PSA 2020). It is also the only region in the Philippines without an updated cadastral survey, with land data integrity as a fundamental stumbling-block.⁵

Efforts since 2014 have focused on the political transformation of the BARMM into a regional parliament with enhanced administrative and fiscal autonomy. But the heart of the peace deal is the goal of 'normalization'. Normalization—as opposed to classical combatant disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR)—is defined as “a process whereby communities can achieve their desired quality of life, which includes the pursuit of sustainable livelihood and political participation” to “ensure human security” and “build a society that is committed to basic human rights where individuals are free from fear of violence or crime and where long-held traditions and values continue to be honored.”⁶

Of the seven components of normalization, at least three have land-related implications: (i) the delivery of socioeconomic packages; (ii) trust-building measures and the transformation of the six acknowledged MILF camps; and (ii) transitional justice and reconciliation (referred to as 'dealing with the past', or TJR/DWP), which compels both parties to “work out a program for transitional justice to address the

5 PSA 2020 using the 2013 DENR-LMB master list sets the regional area at 36,650.95 sq.km, This serves as the basis for National Tax Allotments (NTAs), formerly known as the Internal Revenue Allotment (IRA), along with population and an equal sharing parameter. In contrast, the BDP 2020-2022 cites MENRE and 2013 NAMRIA data to set regional land area at 1,293,552 hectares, or 12,935.52 sq. km, using the 2015 DENR-ARMM cadastral results as the basis for its figures.

6 GPH-MILF Annex on Normalization of the 2012 Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro, signed on 25 January 2014.

legitimate grievances of the Bangsamoro People,⁷ correct historical injustices, and address human rights violations and marginalization through land dispossession.”⁸

Even as the policy and legal frameworks are still being threshed out, both national and BARMM governments must continue to deliver land tenure improvement investments, as well as socioeconomic programs and projects that have land tenure implications. An extensive peace architecture exists for delivery. The former negotiators are now the Peace Implementing Panels, but implementation is under the GPH-MILF Joint Normalization Committee (JNC) and its government component, the Inter-Cabinet Cluster Mechanism on Normalization (ICCMN).⁹ While the JNC was created by the peace deal in 2014, and the ICCMN convened under the Duterte administration in 2019, it was only in 2021 that the Joint Task Force on Camps Transformation (JTFACT) approved a six-year Plan to “transform” into “peaceful and productive communities” the six previously-acknowledged camps of (i) Camp Abubakar as-Siddique in Maguindanao del Norte; (ii) Camp Bilal in Lanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur; (iii) Camp Bushra Somiorang in Lanao del Sur; (iv) Camp Rajamuda, which straddles North Cotabato — now the Special Geographic Area¹⁰ — and Maguindanao (v) Camp Omar ibn al-Khattab, mostly in Maguindanao del Sur; and (vi) Camp Badre, mostly in Maguindanao del Norte.

As of 2024, the parties jointly agreed to prioritize investments in 36—previously 33—‘inner core’ sitios and barangays, without prejudice to municipalities defined as ‘outer core’ and ‘influence’ areas. The BARMM’s 1st Bangsamoro Development Plan (2020-2022) also identifies an additional 33 base camps “subscribed to the MILF’s

7 The word ‘Moro’ refers to the indigenous peoples of Mindanao and Sulu whose forebears chose to follow Islam prior to colonization. The 2012 Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro acknowledges ‘Bangsamoro identity’ as “those who at the time of conquest and colonization were considered natives or original inhabitants of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago and its adjacent islands including Palawan, and their descendants whether of mixed or of full blood shall have the right to identify themselves as Bangsamoro by ascription or self-ascription. Spouses and their descendants are classified as Bangsamoro. The freedom of choice of other indigenous peoples shall be respected.”

8 GPH-MILF Annex on Normalization. Section H, paragraph 1, Page 8. Components for delivery include: (a) decommissioning of former MILF combatants, (b) socioeconomic packages, (c) community policing, (d) trust-building measures and transformation of camps, (e) transitional justice and reconciliation, (f) disbandment of private armed groups, and (g) redeployment of state security forces.

9 Created by Executive Order No. 79 s. 2019.

10 The 63 barangays excised out of six municipalities of North Cotabato were converted into eight new municipalities in April 2024 under the Special Geographic Area. There are legislative efforts as of late 2024 to consolidate these municipalities into a new Moro Province despite the status of some of the 36 barangays as non-contiguous exclaves.

Central Committee” that are not included in the 36 inner core barangays but are nevertheless locations where combatants reside. While the Camps Transformation Plan (2020) is a public document, certain elements remain fuzzy. The Plan purports to transform three aspects of the camps: (i) the space, area, or territory associated with the Camp; (ii) the individuals and groups residing in them; and (iii) the natural resources in these sites, including ensuring that war materiel held by the MILF’s Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) is put beyond use. In contrast to typical military camps with hard boundaries and palisades, these sites are porous civilian communities. The MILF-BIAF and their Bangsamoro Islamic Women’s Auxiliary Brigade (BIWAB) is not a formal standing army. Its estimated 40,000 members¹¹ slated for decommissioning comprise networks of armed grassroots supporters and volunteers organized as base commands held together by ideological, ethnolinguistic, and kinship ties. Very few arms are owned by the MILF per se—most are personal or clan assets. Information on combatants and weaponry are held by a third-party Independent Decommissioning Body (IDB) and the Department of Social Welfare and Development with oversight from a Joint Task Force for Decommissioned Combatants (TFDCC). It was only in August 2025 that public statements were made regarding the estimated locations of the 26,145 decommissioned combatants, of which only 5 percent are said to reside or intend to reside within the camps; 37 percent reside outside BARMM (Arguillas 2025). More importantly, the scope of the camps themselves has been difficult to define.

Uncertainties around land ownership began to accelerate shortly after the 2014 peace deal was signed, long before the passage of its enabling law in 2018 and its popular ratification in 2019. With intensified expectations around high-value natural resource exploitation, peace process-related investments and peace dividends, fears began to circulate that inclusion in the coverage of the CTP means that the land is now “owned” by the MILF, meaning, that sites for housing projects related to normalization would be considered *terra nullius* with no existing occupants or claims, and that Christian settlers, for example, might be expelled despite the clear provision in the CAB that all vested tenurial rights would be respected.

Despite the assertion that “(f)rom the perspective of the Bangsamoro and indigenous people, land dispossession and the resulting marginalization of their communities is a form of historical injustice of such gravity that it will justify secession from the

11 Previous estimates have placed the true number as closer to 12,000.

Philippines,”(GPH-MILF TJRC 2016) limited joint or unilateral action on land issues have gained traction prior to 2025.¹² Limited time aside, given that the MILF-led Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) has been has been challenged to create the administrative structure of the new autonomous region, legislate new laws, and run the regional government until the first parliamentary elections—bottlenecks are attributed to the political and technical complexity of addressing land governance writ large,¹³ as well as the tensions between the Philippines’ colonial land administration and management system and the multiple customary land practices that endure on the ground (World Bank and International Organization for Migration 2017).

Historically, any delays in the implementation of political and socio-economic commitments and other political crises have been used by groups such as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), or those affiliated with the so-called Islamic State/Daesh such as the Maute Group or the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) to break away and question the value of engaging in the MILF peace process (Engelbrecht 2021). However, the Bangsamoro political experience has been characterized by an extended string of transitions, both before and after the passage of the 2014 peace deal. Some derailments are related to outbreaks of violence such as the Mamasapano misencounter in 2015 and the Marawi crisis in 2017; all are predicated by the short-term political imagination of whoever is in power in Malacañang at the time. It took four years and two administrations to pass the enabling law that created the BARMM in 2018. The tenure of the MILF-led BTA was originally set to end in May 2022, but was later extended by the Marcos II administration to May 2025, then to October 2025, and again to March 2026.¹⁴ The second extension in early 2025 also coincided with Malacañang’s replacement of MILF Chairman Ahod Balawag Ebrahim, nom-de-guerre Murad, with BIAF Chief of Staff Abduraof Macacua, nom-de-guerre Sammy Gambar or Sammy al-Mansoor, as the appointive Interim Chief Minister of the BARMM. This has essentially led to three political eras of the BTA: thus far the first from 2019 to 2022, which was appointed by the Duterte

12 A comprehensive parcellary inventory of statutory and customary land claims was included in the Transitional Justice and Reconciliation roadmap approved by the GPH and MILF peace panels in January 2025. The design for this inventory is based on the author’s work.

13 DENR Land Administration and Management Program II assessment cited in Fernandez (2021; 2023)

14 As of early October 2025, the Philippine Commission on Elections deemed it “legally and factually impossible” to conduct the first BARMM Parliamentary Elections on 13 October (Bosano 2025). It has now been reset to 31 March 2026.

administration and had a stronger cultural polarization between the MILF-led Government of the Day and non-MILF appointees; the second from 2022 to March 2025, appointed under Marcos II; and the so-called “BTA 2.5” from March 2025 to October 2025. It is presumed that a fourth batch of MPS will be appointed to cover the interregnum between October 2025 and March 2026.

Expectations of greater prosperity in the region post-CAB drive demand for land, particularly for agribusiness and extractive industries, undermining pre-colonial practices around environmental stewardship. Although skirmishes involving non-state armed groups and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) have lessened, clan feuds referred to in the vernacular as *rido* or *pagbanta* (Torres 2014) often triggered by land and resource contestation remain the dominant type of violence in the region (International Alert 2021). While the concept of peace dividends is often interpreted as access to political positions and patronage, many of the issues at community level are related to land conflicts and contestation—compelling a serious review of land and transitional justice commitments in the BARMM.

NAVIGATING THE PLURAL LAWSCAPE

With the BARMM, the land governance ecosystem expands beyond basic delineation and issuance of tenurial instruments to include spatial planning, investment, housing, post-disaster response and reconstruction, and implementation of public infrastructure requiring road-right-of-way and usufruct arrangements. These arrangements still mirror national-level structures, creating a thick ecosystem of at least 20 national bodies and 15 regional bodies with some role related to housing, land, and property rights (Fernandez 2021). The CAB's enabling law, Republic Act No. 11054, state that the enduring effects of historical land dispossession must be addressed using the 21 powers vested in the Bangsamoro Parliament and the BARMM's ministries elated to housing, land, and property reform,¹⁵ including providing "adequate reparation to the Bangsamoro people affected by unjust dispossession of territorial and proprietary rights or customary land tenure, which may include payment of just compensation to and relocation of such people,"¹⁶ although arrangements still mirror and must be coordinated with national counterparts. Umbrella national laws include Constitutional social justice provisions as well as national enabling laws including R.A. No. 8371, the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA), and the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) mandated by R.A. No. 6657 and R.A. No 9700, the legislation behind the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP). Given the unique context of the Bangsamoro, however, many national policies and guidelines may not be strictly applicable, or may omit elements that are crucial to BARMM. The BARMM has a plural justice system covering the traditional courts, Shari'ah courts, and Indigenous Peoples' (IP) justice mechanisms, not to mention conflict resolution bodies and informal mechanisms such as the pre-CAB Shari'ah courts administered by the MILF as a revolutionary organization.

15 RA No. 11045 Article V Section 2 includes: (i) Ancestral domain and natural resources; (ii) Classification of public lands; (iii) Creation, division, merger, abolition or alteration of boundaries of municipalities and barangays; (iv) Culture and language; (v) Customary laws; (vi) Disaster risk reduction and management; (vii) Ecological solid waste management and pollution control; (viii) Economic zones, industrial centers, and free ports; (ix) Eminent domain; (x) Environment, parks, forest management, wildlife, and nature reserves conservation; (xi) Fishery, marine, and aquatic resources; (xii) Housing and human settlements; (xiii) Humanitarian services and institutions; (xiv) Human rights; (xv) Indigenous peoples' rights; (xvi) Inland waters; (xvii) Inland waterways for navigation; (xviii) Libraries and museums, and historical, cultural and archaeological sites; (xix) Mechanisms for consultations for women and marginalized sectors; (xx) Urban and rural planning development; and (xi) Urban land reform and land use. Without the power sharing framework clarifying reserved, concurrent and exclusive powers, anything not included in the list of BTA powers is presumed to be the purview of Central Government.

16 RA No. 11054 Article IX Sec 2 on Reparation for Unjust Dispossession.

In the land sector, this has deadly implications. Previous studies have argued that conflict in Mindanao has agrarian roots (Vellema, Borras, and Lara 2011); that CARP is ahistorical and may even perpetuate historical injustice in Muslim Mindanao by not acknowledging prior claims (Gutierrez and Borras 2004). While the BOL guarantees that no land title issued by the National Government shall be invalidated, many locals perceive the Torrens title system as an external imposition that co-exists with forms of communal and customary or traditional ownership, occupation, and use-sharing, which are often verbal in nature. Beyond legality, established possession of land is tied to communal identity. Long before IPRA, concepts such as *pusaka* (alternatively spelled as *fusaka*, translating to ancestral assets or inheritance) and *timanan* (unity, communal ownership) hold sway in both Islamized and non-Islamized communities. Experiences in many places in Lanao, Sulu, and Maguindanao highlight how certain families have had decades, possibly centuries of established possession; many can identify themselves as belonging to specific *agama* (communities) and *inged* (municipality or towns). Claims towards traditional sultan or datu status are tied to specific tracts of land,¹⁷ often proven using the recitation of *tarsila/silsila* (oral genealogies), although these interact with colonial and post-Commonwealth period arrangements and land transactions. Thus, customary practices—tied to *kitab* (or Shari’ah law) and the *adat-betad* (customary law and traditions) comprising *igma*, *taritib*, and other vernacular knowledge-practices¹⁸—exist as one layer underneath many overlapping colonial and neo-colonial arrangements such as military reservations, agricultural plantations, resettlement sites, and timber licensing agreements, as well as legally-acknowledged land titles and free patents.

17 While the land within the purview of a particular traditional leader is subdivided amongst community members, the traditional leader takes responsibility over leadership and administration, as in recorded cases where datu or sultans have chosen to give or assign land parcels within their community to settlers.

18 Saber and Tamano (1986) describe *igma* (Arabic, *izma* or *ijma*) as ‘ordinance’ while *taritib* are ‘ordered ways’ or ‘established ways’. *igma* and *taritib* is more commonly used as a phrase by the Mëranaw; in Maguindanaon, *adat-btad* is preferred.

As various groups and institutions define and perceive concepts of representation, ownership, and indigeneity differently,¹⁹ explaining the concept of Non-Moro Indigenous Peoples (NMIPs) is challenging given that the usual tripeoples²⁰ framework of settlers-Moros-NMIPs²¹ (Paredes 2015; Rodil 1997; 1999) blur linguistic and religious lines. Contrary to popular belief, the Bangsamoro peoples themselves are indigenous, with the category allowing for self-identification whether by blood or self-ascription. The BOL states that “customs, beliefs, and traditions of the Bangsamoro people are hereby recognized, protected, and guaranteed.”²² In sites that are highly diverse, however, what customs, beliefs, and traditions should hold sway?

At the heart of the issue are tensions between at least three frameworks of ancestral domain—the Bangsamoro framework of a political homeland for the 13 Islamized groups of Southern Philippines and all those who might self-identify as Bangsamoro, whether by blood or self-ascription; the concept of ancestral domain for NMIPs, which is tied to existing Philippine laws governing Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous Cultural Communities (ICC/IPs); as well as local practices specific to the thirteen Islamized groups of the Bangsamoro. The first two are protected by the 1987 Philippine Constitution, which has explicit mention of IP/ICC ancestral land as well as provisions for an autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao, but there are no available government-acknowledged options for Mëranaws or Tausugs to secure

19 NCIP further lists the Erumanen ne Menuvu, Yakan, Badjao, Sama Bangingi, Jama Mapun, and Sama Dilaut as indigenous peoples within the BARMM. Another popular framework for NMIPs in Mindanao is the Cebuano antonym ‘lumad’, short for katawhang lumad (people of the soil). The term ‘lumad’ appears in Republic Act No. 6734, the law that created the ARMM. These issues are not a function of religion, but of political identity; it is generally understood that the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997 refers to non-Moro IPs although there are NMIPs who reverted to Islam, in the same way others practice Christianity or various versions of animism. Nevertheless various frameworks highlighting the kinship between Moro and lumad groups exist, including the Central Mindanao narrative of siblings Mamalu and Tabunaway, referring to the ancestors of the Tëduray-Lambangian and the Maguindanaons, respectively.

20 Generally, the thirteen Islamized ethnolinguistic groups comprising the Bangsamoro (“Moro Nation”) are the Iranun, Maguindanaon, Mëranaw, Tausug, Yakan, Badjao, Palawani, Jama Mapun, Molbog, Kalagan, Kalibugan, Sama, and Sangil.

21 The CAB specifically names the Tëduray, Lambangian, Dulangan Manobo, Higaonon, and Bla’an as the five NMIP ethnolinguistic groups of the BARMM. Although not explicitly named in the CAB and BOL, other relevant groups include: the Erumanen ne Manuvu, who already hold an NCIP-issued Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT) in the Special Geographic Area (SGA) formerly belonging to North Cotabato, and are explicitly named in the BARMM Electoral Code; approximately 17 various indigenous settler groups in Wao, Lanao del Sur; the Sama-Badjau and Sama Dilaut of BASULTA who are counted in the 13 Moro ethnolinguistic groups but identify themselves as a the “minority” (not represented) in the Tausug-dominated areas; and the Yakan of Basilan, who are also part of the 13 Moro groups but hold CADTs issued by NCIP Region IX.

22 R.A. No. 11054 Article IX, Section 4

their ancestral areas except through the Torrens system. From the MILF-led BARMM perspective, the accepted political formula is that the Bangsamoro is one united ancestral domain, but with plural ancestral lands within the region. The challenge lies in places where these various rights overlap. In recent years, this has been typified by the challenges around the unawarded Tëduray-Lambangian ancestral domain claim (TLADC), which spans 208,258.692 hectares over 91 municipalities in Maguindanao del Norte, Maguindanao del Sur, and Sultan Kudarat, as other sub-claims. The TLADC includes two of the six acknowledged MILF camps, namely Camp Badre and Camp Omar.²³

QUO VADIS?

To fulfil the BARMM’s goal of establishing “foundations of self-governance through moral governance” during the transition period and beyond,²⁴ the Bangsamoro Parliament must address land disputes and ensure stability by reconciling the different tenurial regimes at play—parcel by parcel, claim by claim—for each of the region’s 2,595 barangays, 124 municipalities, and three component cities. Ultimately, reconciling the BARMM’s statutory and customary use claims at the parcel level through a legally acknowledged dispute resolution process is not just a technocratic decision, but a political one, requiring the parties to decide on a working definition of post-agreement land justice that navigates evolving paradigms of collective and individual ownership and identity, power, and control. Thus, while the peace deal addresses the vertical relationship between the Central Government and the Bangsamoro people, actual implementation of the peace agreement must navigate horizontal, inter-communal, and inter-elite dynamics that exist at neighborhood scale.

As a starting point, there must be a firm recognition of the pluralistic nature of land, housing and property arrangements in the Bangsamoro, a certain level of “legal creativity” (Candelaria 2018) required to navigate these tensions, including balancing elite and non-elite perspectives (Gatmaytan 2017), and firm political commitment from the BARMM, Central Government, and local communities to address these

23 Survey plan submitted by TJG to NCIP as prepared by PAFID Inc, with corrections as of September 2024. Earlier versions, which included the now-separate Dulangan Manobo claim, spanned 289,268 hectares.

24 As of October 2025, TJG’s internal records state that at least 102 NMIPs, all Tëduray and Lambangian, have been killed from 2014 to 2025.

challenges in the coming decades. To operationalize this requires a unifying land governance framework for the Bangsamoro that can tie together the legal, institutional/administrative, spatial, and customary elements of the land question in the BARMM. Although many of these land issues are most prevalent in the newly-divided province of Maguindanao, a localized approach is necessary across areas. However, any legal issuance must be based on evidence, and allow for variations at the provincial level given the clear ethnocultural and geographic clusters of the BARMM, without imposing one group's framework and logic of operations over other groups. While international compacts provide useful touchstones, a land governance framework appropriate for the BARMM must go beyond aspirations. It will need to have enough technical and spatial specificity to inform local decision-making and conflict resolution as well as the basis for the Parliament's negotiations with Central powers through the Inter-Governmental Relations (IGR) mechanism, leading to the future National Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission on the Bangsamoro (NTJRCB) or a standalone Land Commission. At present, the BTA's ministries are mostly undergoing bilateral discussions with their national-level counterparts, but a more systematic sector-wide discussion on land will be required to ensure that efforts such as the ongoing review of agrarian reform policy and release of public land under Executive Order No. 75, Marawi reconstruction, discussions related to the IP code, approvals of mining and natural gas exploration permits, or the work between the JNC and the government's ICCMN are consistent and coherent.

Local consultations have surfaced commonly-desired principles. Although political discontent has grown with the MILF's initial rallying cry of moral governance, it still speaks to a core desire for reform. The BARMM is secular and diverse, but many stakeholders find it natural to frame reform discussions in relation to Islamic principles and jurisprudence, which in turn have equivalents in the different languages of the BARMM. More pragmatically, policy actions are primarily process-driven, and should be problem solving-oriented and conflict-sensitive. To be conflict-sensitive is to be culturally-sensitive and locally-led. A key recommendation of the TJRC is acknowledging community land rights clarification processes as legitimate and legally admissible. To do so, legislation codifying the role of local and traditional leaders, *ulama*, and civil society in triangulating and verifying claims can help reach workable solutions that are acceptable to residents and therefore will have a higher chance of not reverting to conflict.

Although formalization of rights is the ideal endgame, a locally-informed process can assuage fears and help ensure that cadastral surveys and titling will not take away established individual and communal rights held under customary and traditional regimes. Bangsamoro communities have expectations regarding consultation and dialogue (*mashwara*, *bityala*) and inclusivity (*langkap*) at all stages of planning and implementation, consistent with established principles of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) (Baraguir, Fernandez, and Bryant 2022). Community-level engagement is the entry point for ensuring inclusion, including gender inclusion. Women and girls in BARMM comprise a large proportion of agricultural labor but rarely own the land they work on and are often limited by traditional practices around marriage, divorce, and inheritance. An ethical and inclusive land governance framework should support equal property rights for all BARMM residents, male or female, regardless of social status. Sufficient support must be provided to ensure awareness and familiarity with the relevant laws and processes, including support for illiterate members of society, allowing for processes that are simplified, practical, and accessible.

Despite understandable skepticism on the power of evidence-based and data-driven measures in a politicized environment, any concrete reform will rely on the consolidation, digitization, validation, and interoperability of land record data, as well as the necessary research and analysis to inform decision-making. While the BARMM's land and planning ministries (namely MENRE or the Ministry of Environment, Natural Resources and Energy; MAFAR or the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Agrarian Reform; MIPA, or the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples Affairs; MHSD, the Ministry of Human Settlements and Development; and the BPDA, the Bangsamoro Planning and Development Authority) have separate initiatives and platforms for records management, land data reform work will have to be coordinated and available at the regional, provincial, down to the municipal and barangay level. Similarly, these will have to link to national datasets and systems held by the Department of Justice's Land Registration Authority (DOJ-LRA), National Mapping and Resource Information Authority (NAMRIA), and the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), particularly the LRA's Land Registration Systems (LARES), which is not devolved to BARMM. The BARMM will also have to set down clear objectives, indicators, and baseline data as part of ensuring that what was once invisible is made visible and measurable, and that customary and statutory systems are interoperable. For the purpose of transitional justice and reconciliation and dealing with the past, the reconstruction of land archives will be indispensable.

With growing tensions as the current transition comes to an end, there must be focus on the delivery of peace dividends, while deliberately addressing the relationship between land governance and the security components of normalization. There will be a need to map out high-value resource areas in relation to ongoing or potential conflicts, while considering hyperlocal, granular information and the narratives residents tell about these spaces to explore viable ways forward. This should include but not be limited to beachfront property, potential or ongoing mining and quarrying areas, prime agricultural lands, water resources, energy sources, and their overlaps with culturally-relevant places. Discussions on community security as part of the GPH-MILF normalization process will also need to expand beyond decommissioning and camps transformation, while working with the Central Government, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), MAFAR, the Ministry of Interior and Local Government (MILG), and the Office of the Chief Minister to finalize the BARMM cadastral survey and address ongoing contestation between and among LGUs. Efforts should go towards using conflict mediation and systematic adjudication to support land tenure stability whether or not within the context of the six camps. Regional security challenges and the existential threat of the climate crisis, not to mention shifting roles for donor presence and local civil society, creates space for these hybrid mechanisms to evolve further. One track involves enabling local, Bangsamoro-led customary, formal, and informal dialogue mechanisms and governance structures to deliver on their mandates by nurturing local talent. While the GPH and the MILF can have differing perspectives on the precise utility of continued international presence, the cyclical discussions around reviving the International Monitoring Team (IMT) and the current role of the Third Party Monitoring Team (TPMT) and the International Contact Group (ICG) indicate that there is space for constructive and calibrated presence beyond staying on merely to stay relevant. In the months leading up to and after the March 2026 parliamentary elections as well as the remaining years of the Marcos II administration, this will require expending all efforts and creativity to ensure that natural inter-communal and inter-elite dynamics will not spill over to full-blown splintering and factionalization—and that the current chapter of the long-running Bangsamoro story will find a dignified conclusion.

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Chinese labor migration to the Philippines: Gauging national interests under the Duterte Administration

Chelsea Nicole P. Pineda



"Chinese POGO workers composite image"

Philippine Daily Inquirer, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1961986/anti-pogo-claror-grows-for-presidents-action>

Chinese labor migration to the Philippines: Gauging national interests under the Duterte Administration

Chelsea Nicole P. Pineda¹

MAIN FINDINGS

- The Philippines under the Duterte Administration offers a unique case study on competing political interests within the government, which hinders a full-blown implementation of securitizing measures to minimize the “existing threats” brought by POGOs and increased migration of Chinese nationals.
- FPRRD’s consistency towards the pursuit of economic gains has laid the foundation for the growth of the POGO industry and its adverse effects on employment, domestic security, and public opinion towards Beijing.
- Chinese migrants in the Philippines are at a disadvantage due to the Filipino public's indifference, and lack of support and recognition from the Chinese government due to their employment in the gambling industry.

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ABSTRACT

The administration of Former President Rodrigo Roa Duterte (FPRRD) has primarily focused on economic cooperation as the center of renewed ties, wherein Manila has found a foreign market for its booming gambling industry. Gambling and betting activities in the country have traditionally been conducted in land-based establishments. However, in recent years, the trend toward digitalization to improve accessibility to online gambling platforms and raised the growth prospects of offshore gaming operations (Pelayo 2019). While the full potential and advantages of Philippine Offshore Gambling Operators (POGOs) are being realized, Camba and Li (2020) argue that the influx of Chinese nationals in gambling capitals like the Philippines reflect the low supply of workforce with Mandarin or Chinese language. In return, this generated employment opportunities for Chinese nationals to facilitate communication between gambling firms and customers. The Philippines, a traditionally migrant-sending society characterized by a saturated labor market, views the POGO phenomenon as a double-edged sword. This study aims to assess the impact of the labor migration of Chinese nationals to (1) the economic climate of the Philippines, (2) Filipino public opinion towards China; and (3) domestic security. Using secondary sources and application of securitization lens, this study finds that the Philippines offers a unique case study on competing political interests within the government which hinders a full-blown implementation of securitizing measures to minimize the “existing threats” brought by POGOs and increased migration of Chinese nationals. FPRRD’s consistency towards the pursuit of economic gains has laid the foundation for the growth of the POGO industry and its adverse effects on employment, domestic security, and public opinion towards Beijing. Furthermore, Chinese migrants in the Philippines are at a higher disadvantage due to the Filipino public's indifference towards them, and the lack of support and recognition from the Chinese government due to their employment in the gambling industry.

Keywords: Philippines-China relations, Securitization, Migration-Security nexus

INTRODUCTION

The bilateral relations between the Philippines and China have always been characterized by pursuit of mutual interest in economic growth, but diverges on matters relating to national territory. Manila recognizes the strategic value of its geographical location which draws the attention of extra-regional players whose geopolitical interests lay on the freedom of sealines of communication and preservation of hegemonic influence. Dependence on Western allies has, to some extent, corroded Manila's relationship with Beijing, thus leaving the former to experience foregone gains from the economic giant. Former President Rodrigo Roa Duterte (FPRRD) took a 180-degree diplomatic turn from his predecessor by adopting a policy of accommodation toward China despite tensions in the South China Sea and subsequent arbitral tribunal ruling awarded to the Philippines (Garcia 2020). In Duterte's foreign policy toolbox, the administration gave premium to economic diplomacy in repairing diplomatic relations with Beijing along with securing the support needed for Duterte's economic agenda. Beijing's Foreign Direct Investment flows to Manila drastically improved from USD 711.05 billion in 2015 to USD 830.02 billion in 2018 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2020). The value of goods exported by China, in the same time frame, increased from \$11.48 billion to 23.18 billion (ASEAN Statistics Division 2022).

Aside from these notable economic developments, Manila has found a foreign market for its booming gambling industry. Gambling and betting activities in the country have traditionally been conducted in land-based establishments but in recent years, the trend toward digitalization to improve accessibility and raise revenues has raised the growth prospects of offshore gaming operations (Pelayo 2019). Philippine Offshore Gambling Operators (POGO), regulated by the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation (PAGCOR), have been in existence since 2003. Its advantage as a supplementary avenue for raising revenue collection was only realized in 2016, along with taking steps to regulate and monitor POGOs and curb the rise of illegal online gambling activities (Manila Bulletin 2020). These gaming establishments only allow overseas-based foreigners, most of which are in China, above the age of 21 to participate in gambling activities while payments are made through electronic transactions through financial institutions (Manila Bulletin 2020). Pelayo (2019) recognizes the potential of catering to gaming operators as it attracts gamblers from East Asian markets and promotes the Philippines as a place to do business due to low operational costs, and highly skilled and competitive labor costs. While the full potential and advantages of POGOs are being realized, the

sudden influx of mainland Chinese nationals that came to work in POGOs has raised concerns among Filipinos (Cortez 2019). Camba and Li (2020) point out that most POGO's customers are from China despite the Chinese government's prohibition on gambling. The authors further argue that the influx of Chinese nationals in gambling capitals like the Philippines reflects the low supply of workforce who are proficient in Mandarin or other Chinese languages. This in return, generates employment opportunities for Chinese nationals in host states to work in gambling establishments to facilitate communication between firms and customers. Members of the Philippine government are divided into the advantages and disadvantages of POGO establishments along with the rise of Chinese nationals given that the West Philippine Sea (WPS) dispute is still an important agenda. On one hand, POGOs registered an income of PHP 3.9 billion from January to December 2017 (Congressional Policy and Budget Research Department House of Representatives 2019) thus helping the government in its revenue collection. On the other hand, Senator Joel Villanueva has also raised concerns about the employment of Filipino workers in POGO establishments since, among the reported 118,239 POGO workers in 2019, only 17.7 percent are employed (Senate of the Philippines 2020). Through a descriptive approach, the paper analyzes the impact of Chinese labor migration in the Philippines' (1) economic climate of the Philippines, (2) Filipino public opinion towards China; and (3) domestic security.

The paper is organized into six parts. The second section deals with a literature review of the migration flows between two countries, then explores the Chinese labor migration under the lens of securitization as introduced by Wæver (1995). The fourth section presents the empirical findings, followed by a discussion of findings and conclusion. This paper primarily argues that case of the Philippines through the securitization lens offers a unique case study on competing political interests within the government which hinders a full-blown implementation of securitizing measures to minimize the "existing threats." Furthermore, Chinese migrants are at a higher disadvantage due to the general Filipino public's indifference toward them, and the lack of support and recognition from the Chinese government due to their employment in the gambling industry.

OVERVIEW OF PHILIPPINES-CHINA RELATIONS

Economic cooperation and partnership towards development is integral to Philippine-China relations. Beijing's rise as an economic superpower has further provided the Chinese government more political leverage in attaining its foreign

policy goals and national interests in the international arena. The attitude of Manila towards Beijing has been temperamental since the end of the Cold War, as the country lacks consistency in its foreign policy due to the priorities laid out by a sitting president. Furthermore, contemporary geopolitical affairs had further constrained Manila to accommodate, if not cooperate, with Beijing on mutual interests. This economic relationship, however, has been viewed as a positive development by the Philippine government while its spillover effects have not been warmly welcomed by the Filipino public due to standing territorial dispute with Beijing.

Duterte's official state visit to China in October 2016 revealed the future of bilateral relations between the countries under his presidency. On the one hand, he declared his realignment with China and the categorical loss of the West. On the other hand, the arbitral award that ruled in favor of the Philippines will be sidelined in favor of rebuilding bilateral relations through economic cooperation and infrastructure development (Wong 2017). Duterte's pivot to China has drawn mixed reactions from public and foreign audiences, as well as different interpretations from scholars. Balboa (2020) observes the absence of economic repercussions from Duterte's bold foreign policy shift declaration due to the quick pronouncements of the economic team that Manila would continue business as usual and the diversification of economic partners doesn't equate to cutting ties. In the context of geopolitics, De Castro (2018) notes the absence of solid military support from the US if a military conflict in the disputed waters would occur. This compounded with the reality of Beijing's geographical proximity to Manila thus locking the latter to cooperate. Arugay (2018) takes a different approach on Duterte's pivot to China and investigates the president's performative populist politics. Duterte was able to harness political legitimacy from the masses through his charismatic leadership, anti-West rhetoric against a traditional ally, thus justifying his foreign policy realignment to China.

LABOR MIGRATION FLOWS BETWEEN MANILA AND BEIJING

Since the early 1990s, large concentrations of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in East Asia have been working in the special administrative regions: Hong Kong and Macau (Sayres 2005). The labor migration of OFWs in East Asia is primarily motivated by economic reasons due to the scarcity of available employment opportunities for low-skilled workers in the Philippine labor market. OFWs in Hong Kong and Macau are mostly engaged in domestic work, which are not stringent on

educational background and prior work experience (De Guzman 2014). According to Reden and Wolf (2014), the demand for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong lies not only in the need for an individual to do traditional housework and child-rearing while parents participate in the industrialized economy, but also because of the English language proficiency of OFWs, which has a significant impact on the language learning ability of children in Hong Kong. Students are able to practice their English language skills by communicating with their Filipino domestic helpers. Despite these, Filipino domestic helpers are still prone to illegal recruitment, employer abuse, exploitation, and human trafficking (Battistella and Asis 2011).

The improvement of diplomatic relations between China and the Philippines under FPRRD was followed by the gradual increase in demand for Filipino workers in mainland China. In 2018, the late Ambassador Chito Sta. Romana disclosed that Chinese president Xi Jin Ping and Duterte signed a labor agreement allowing around 100,000 Filipino English teachers to enter mainland China due to the shortage of language teachers (Garcia 2018). Demand for native English language teachers has risen over the past years in mainland China due to the inclusion of English language in the basic education curriculum and the rapid increase of college students across the country (Rao and Yuan 2015). Even during the pandemic where educational institutions have shifted to remote learning, the demand for English teachers from the Philippines did not cease. Cahiles-Magkilat (2020) reported that 20,000 Filipino teachers are registered in 51Talk in 2020, a China-based English education company, while the salary averaged around PHP 60,000.00.

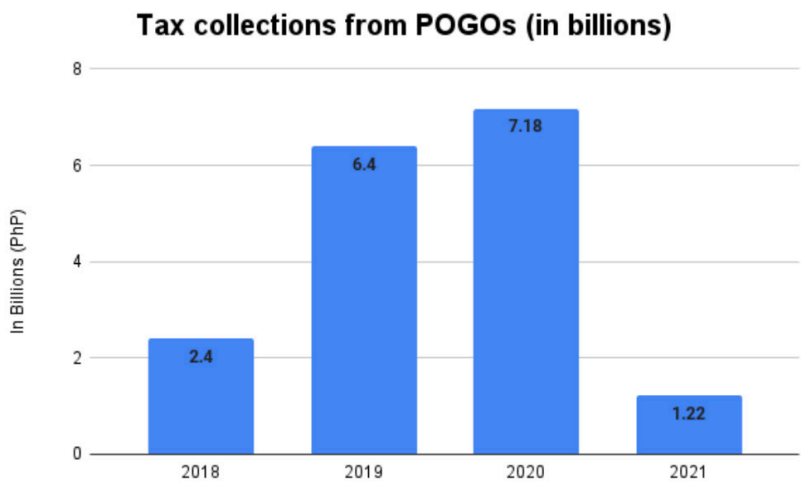
SECURITIZATION

The concept of security has evolved over time along with the growing interdependence of countries and increased transnational movement of persons. Ibrahim (2005) notes the renewed approach to security that places humans at the center of focus, thus resulting in the integration of migration in the security discourses. Furthermore, at the end of the Cold War, migration has become a contentious issue that is perceived to be a security threat to other countries. Waever (1995) coined the concept of securitization, a process where certain issues are potentially conceived as threats to security through speech acts. Such issues, whether politicized or non-politicized, have become socially constructed threats and thus are treated with the utmost attention and urgency thus bypassing institutional procedures (Williams 2003; van Munster 2012).

FINDINGS

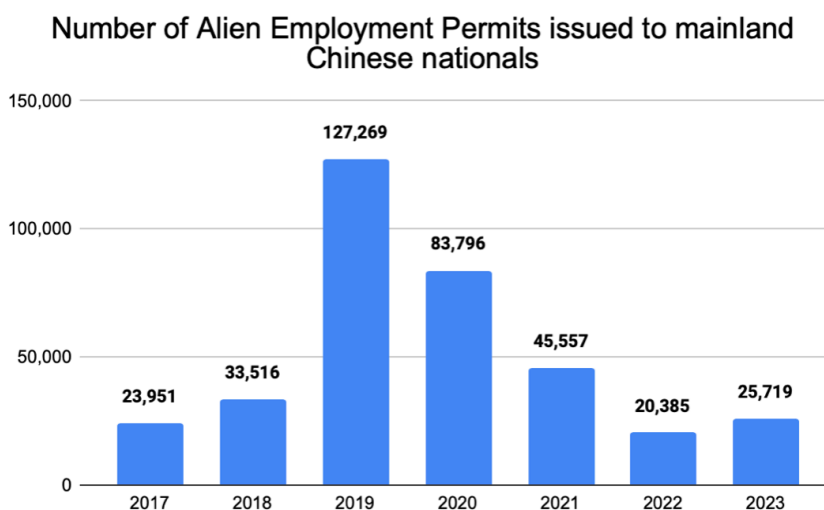
Economic climate

Tax Collection



■ **Table 1.** Tax collection revenues from POGOs in billion pesos. Data is sourced from Ibañez (2022), table is illustrated by the author.

Ibañez (2022) reported the steady increase in tax collection revenues of the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) among POGOs. In 2018, the BIR collected around PHP 2.4 billion, while collections for the succeeding year tripled to PHP 6.4 billion. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, PHP 7.18 billion were collected in 2020 among POGO institutions. Due to the amount collected among POGO service providers, FPRRD signed into law Republic Act No.11590 or an Act Taxing POGOs in September 2021 with hopes of raising revenue collection to recover economic losses incurred during the pandemic (Rosales 2021). De Vera (2021) points out that because of this law, POGOs will be obligated to pay around five percent of their gross gaming revenues while the non-gaming operations of POGO licensees will be subject to 25 percent annual income tax. The new tax regime for POGOs will pave the way for an estimated collection of PHP 76.2 billion in 2022 and 2023 thus aiding the future pandemic recovery programs of the government (Rosales 2021).



■ **Table 2.** Number of Alien Employment Permits issued to mainland Chinese nationals from 2017 to 2023. Data is sourced from DOLE-BLE (2019-2023), table is illustrated by author.

Table 2 illustrates the gradual increase of the Alien Employment Permits (AEPs) issued to Chinese mainland nationals which coincided with the sudden boom of the POGO industry. AEPs are issued to migrant workers which grants the latter the legal grounds to work in the Philippines, as stipulated in the DOLE Department Order (D.O.) 97-09 Series of 2009. Furthermore, according to the Department of Labor and Employment-Bureau of Local Employment (DOLE-BLE) (2022), the labor department issued around 23,951 permits to Chinese nationals in 2017—the lowest year where AEPs are issued to Chinese nationals which coincided with the onset of the POGO industry in the country. AEP issuances continued to pick up an upward trend until 2019 where the highest number of AEPs issued to Chinese nationals reached 127,269 (See Table 2). The COVID-19 pandemic has inevitably affected also the applications and issuances of AEPs. Because of this, issuances slid down to 83,796 and 45,557 at 2020 and 2021, respectively. AEP issuances in 2023 were slightly higher as compared to 2017, thus reflecting the decline of mainland Chinese workers in the country. Another significant effect of the influx of mainland Chinese nationals is the Revision of the Rules and Regulations for the Issuance of Employment Permit to Foreign Nationals through DOLE D.O. 221-Series of 2021. Although the aim of the DO is not primarily to curb the employment of foreign nationals in the country, the labor department has ensured that vacancies in private companies must be promulgated in general circulation to give priority to Filipino jobseekers while foreign talents

will be employed for the said position, if there is no Filipino jobseeker qualified. Furthermore, other salient features of the D.O. include (1) updated guidelines on the application, processing, renewal and revocation of AEPs, (2) provision of appeals from the migrant worker and/or employer; (3) penalties for the fraudulent filing of applications.

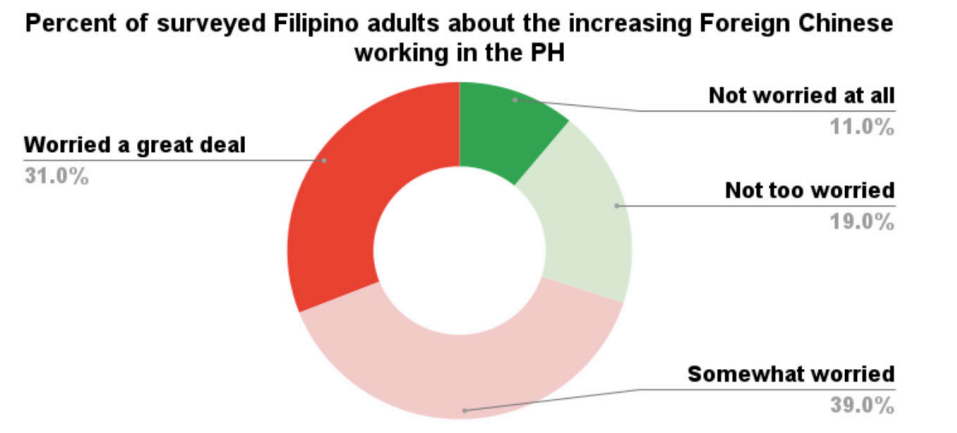
Public opinion

From September 27 to 30, 2019, the Social Weather Station (SWS) conducted a field survey among Filipino adults which included three questions about public attitude towards foreign Chinese nationals working in the country:

1. “How many are the foreign Chinese working in your locality?”
2. “How worried are you about the increasing number of foreign Chinese working here in the Philippines?”, and
3. “How much do you agree or disagree with this statement: ‘The increasing number of foreign Chinese working here in the Philippines is a threat to the country’s overall security.’”

For the purposes of this study, the results of the second and third questions will be presented and discussed. Firstly, Table 3 illustrates the published results of the survey: 39.0 percent of the respondents expressed “Somewhat worried” on the growing number of Chinese migrant workers. This is followed by respondents who answered “Worried a great deal” at 31.0 percent while 19.0 percent felt “Not too worried.” Only 11.0 percent of the respondents are “Not too worried” about the situation.

Worriedness and Perception as threat on Chinese migrant workers in the Philippines based from Social Weather Survey (SWS) on Chinese foreign workers



■ **Table 3.** Percent of surveyed Filipino adults about the increasing Foreign Chinese working in the Philippines conducted in 2019. Data is sourced from SWS (2019), data is tabulated by the author

	<u>Strongly agree</u>	<u>Somewhat agree</u>	<u>Undecided</u>	<u>Somewhat disagree</u>	<u>Strongly disagree</u>	<u>Net*</u>
Philippines	27	25	21	14	13	+25
NCR	39	20	19	12	10	+38
Balance Luzon	24	29	21	17	9	+27
Visayas	26	19	25	12	18	+15
Mindanao	27	24	18	13	17	+21

* Net agreement figures (% Agree minus % Disagree) are correctly rounded.

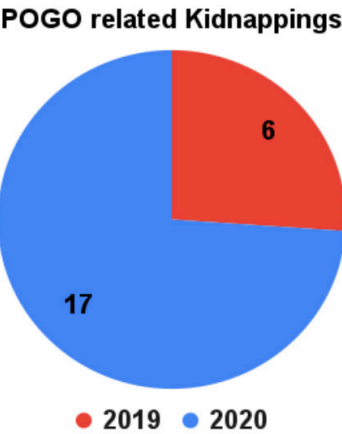
Q76. Gaano po kayo SUMASANG-AYON o HINDI SUMASANG-AYON sa pangungusap na ito: "Ang pagdami ng mga dayuhang Intsik na nagtatrabaho dito sa Pilipinas ay isang banta sa kabuuang seguridad ng bansa."

■ **Table 4.** Opinion on the statement “How much do you agree or disagree with this statement: “The increasing number of foreign Chinese working here in the Philippines is a threat to the country’s overall security?”. Table is directly lifted from the SWS report (2019).

Another question that was included in the SWS survey revealed the perception of Filipinos on the impact of Chinese workers in the Philippines to the overall security of the country. Out of the 27 percent that strongly agree with the opinion statement, 39 percent of the respondents came from the National Capital Region followed by Mindanaoan respondents. Meanwhile, 25 percent of the respondents “Somewhat agreed” with the statement, where 29 percent are from Balance Luzon. Twenty-five percent of the “Undecided” respondents came from Visayas, followed by 21 percent from Balance Luzon. Fourteen percent of the overall respondents “Somewhat Disagreed” with the opinion statement where the bulk of the answers came from Balance Luzon at 17 percent. Lastly, among the 13 percent of respondents that “Strongly Disagreed”, most of the answers came from Visayas (18 percent) and Mindanao (17 percent).

Domestic security

Rise in crime rates



■ **Table 5.** Data is sourced from Tupas (2019) and Caliwan (2021)

The Philippine National Police Anti-Kidnapping Group (PNP-AKG) spokesperson Maj. Ronaldo Lumactod reported the PNP has not received any complaints or reports on POGO-related kidnappings in 2016 to 2018 (Gonzales 2020). However, there was a sudden rise in kidnappings in 2019 with the PNP-AKG unit handling 17 cases. In the following year, only six (6) kidnapping incidents were reportedly linked to POGO workers. PNP Lt. General Guillermo Eleazar linked the influx of Chinese workers in POGOs to the sudden increase in crimes, such as kidnapping and prostitution among

others, committed against POGO workers and other foreign nationals (Rey 2020). Issuance of visa upon arrival (VUA) to qualified Chinese nationals by the Bureau of Immigration (BI) in 2017 has purposely led to the mass entry of Chinese thus the rise also of crime reports (Gonzales 2020). Apart from kidnapping incidents, Alipala (2020) reported that the PNP has also conducted raids in prostitution dens that led to the rescue of 140 foreigner victims while 55 individuals were arrested in 2019.

Corruption in the government

Because of these issues, a corrupt practice was also uncovered perpetrated by BI employees designated at the airports. Dubbed the “Pastillas Scheme,” BI officers gave preferential treatment to Chinese nationals that arrived in the Philippines where standard immigration procedures were bypassed in exchange for money (San Juan 2022). Senator Risa Hontiveros revealed in a senate hearing that BI officers have pocketed around PHP 30 billion from 3.8 million Chinese that arrived in the country since 2017 under the non-VUA entry while PHP 2 billion from 150,000 Chinese tourists under the VUA entry (Yap 2020). In 2020, around 44 immigration personnel were suspended for their participation in the Pastillas scheme (CNN Staff 2020), however, recent developments in the scandalous case in June 2022 resulted in the immediate dismissal from the service of 45 BI officers (Damicog 2022).

DISCUSSION

Bilateral relations between the Philippines and China have inevitably reached new heights under the Duterte administration. However, voids in the rekindled friendship went unnoticed. The tilt towards China was based on such premise that Manila should cease to heighten tensions in the disputed waters as Beijing stands as an economically powerful neighbor. Diverting from political-security affairs, the sitting administration focused on economic relations which the two countries share mutual interests. Rekindling the lost years of friendship through strengthening commercial relations, exploring other areas of cooperation, and pursuing programs in lieu of Manila’s economic priorities have sidelined bilateral discussions on the disputed waters, yet increased Chinese assertiveness over maritime claims.

From another perspective, influential Filipino industry players backed by the president undeniably capitalized on the renewed friendship with China and the country’s potential as a hub for offshore gaming operations since gambling is considered illegal in mainland China. The sudden boom of the POGO industry yielded high economic returns in official and underground channels, and has

subsequently facilitated the migration of migrant workers from an East Asian developed country to a Southeast Asian developing country.

Certainly, due to this reason, the growth of the POGO industry has also exposed areas lacking regulatory measures where fraudulent activities are rampant thus attracting the attention of concerned government authorities. Recent developments in the POGO industry and influx of Chinese workers suggest that both Filipinos, albeit private or in the public sector, and foreign nationals are manipulating the legal and illegal activities in the aforementioned industry for personal or economic gains.

In the case of the public sector, notwithstanding that there are other government agencies who have been exposed to under the table transactions, immigration officers assigned at the airport have engaged in corrupt practices amidst the growth of the POGO industry. Furthermore, the relaxed immigration regulations for inbound international tourists, compounded with the hiring of migrant workers in the gambling sector thus equated to the influx of Chinese workers in POGOs – despite some are in the process of applying for work permits while others are on tourist visa but their real purpose is for employment. To this end, it is thus logical to conclude that the eased entry of foreign nationals linked to POGOs have further led to the following: (1) industry growth, (2) formation of migrant communities and establishments that only cater to POGO workers, (3) increase in crimes committed against foreigners within the Philippine jurisdiction, (4) loss of potential employment opportunities for the local workforce, and (5) increased demand for translation services. Another critical theme that should not be overlooked in this current case is the alleged corruption within the lower ranks of the government that became the epitome of socio-political issues concerning Chinese migrant workers. The “Pastillas scam,” despite having already been resolved, undermines the quality of the Philippine civil service and the righteousness of institutions in carrying out their respective duties. The said controversy also exposes the gap within the Philippines’ overall migration infrastructure whereas, all mechanisms and regulations are in place to protect outbound Filipino workers but the regulatory areas for foreign workers in the Philippines is underdeveloped.

This grey area within the migration framework for foreign workers in the country may have possibly led to the uptick of organized crimes within POGO establishments. As the PNP reported, the surge of reported kidnapping incidents and prostitution dens within and among POGO workers coincided with the influx

of Chinese workers. Despite this assurance from law enforcement agencies, public opinion has ruled against Chinese migrant workers and are perceived as “a threat to overall security” as the rising incidence of crimes has affected public safety and security. Furthermore, the influx of Chinese workers was also framed in the context of employment where jobs were given to the Chinese instead of the local workforce thus further fuming public sentiment against Chinese migrant workers. This has led the DOLE to promulgate D.O. 221-Series of 2021 which intends to protect and ensure the interest of the Filipino workforce along with ensuring that Filipino jobseekers are prioritized in the employment process.

The Filipino public’s negative perception on Chinese POGO workers and rise in crimes has also extended to the Chinese government vis-a-vis the maritime dispute in the WPS. While this correlation further needs research and opinion polling from the public, the trust ratings of China under the Duterte administration remained low despite the fruitful economic engagements. The sitting administration, instead, laid foundation for the yearly ensured economic returns from POGOs through R.A. No. 11590.

As far as securitization is concerned, a unique feature in the case of the Philippines is the absence of a statement from the President or his political allies in the congress that views the influx of Chinese workers and subsequent infringement on the community peace as threats to domestic security. Members of the opposition are the main frontrunners in addressing and fuming public sentiment towards the socio-political issue concerning Chinese migrants as well as criticizing the Duterte administration for its warm relations with the Chinese government albeit the maritime dispute. Duterte has not provided any negative or harsh statements on the culprits of kidnapping cases but has expressed concerned on such events and claimed that the Chinese government will not interfere with the enforcement of laws against Chinese nationals found guilty of committing crimes (Gita-Carlos 2020). As of the time of this writing (June 2022), only the BI employees involved in the pastillas scam are held accountable for their actions, while the leaders of the organized crime within the POGO industry remain unnamed, if not protected.

CONCLUSION

Duterte’s newfound friendship with Beijing is only confined within the bounds of economic partnership and has not spilled over to people-to-people relations while diplomatic tensions are in a hot and cold situation. The Filipino public is

highly skeptical of Chinese good will but the sudden influx of Chinese migrants alongside with the uptick in crimes have not improved the image of Beijing in the Philippines. The Duterte administration has been consistent on the China policy and exploited the economic returns born out of mainland China's gambling players. The consistency towards the pursuit of economic gains has laid the foundation for the growth of the POGO industry and its adverse effects on employment, domestic security and public opinion towards Beijing. It also has exposed the longstanding issues within the Philippine bureaucracy such as the inclination towards political patronage and corrupt practices for personal gain which have undermine the credibility of select government agencies.

Considering the issues raised, other members of the Philippine government have ensured that the national interests of the Filipino people are secured and protected through a series of regulatory measures spanning from taxation, prioritizing the employment of the Filipino workforce, and increase in crackdown operations for illegal activities, among others. The absence of a strong statement against the socio-political issues due to the POGO industry from Duterte provides a unique case study of domestic politics and diplomatic alignments interplay within the securitization framework.

In the migration-security nexus, a critical aspect of the Chinese labor migration in the Philippines that should also be discussed is the readiness of the Philippine government and Filipino public to accept migrant workers with a different language. Furthermore, the Chinese migrants that fell victim to illegal recruitment, prostitution, and unfair labor practices are further burdened with their situation as they are perceived as threats by the Filipino public and lack of support from the Chinese government. It is also unclear if the victimized migrant workers have received adequate financial and legal support from the Philippine government due to lack of available data and official reports.

Although there is still a need to further investigate if the Filipino public opinion towards Chinese migrant workers is affected by the maritime dispute, Filipino society is not yet prepared to transition from a labor-sending country to a labor-receiving state. As such, the treatment towards migrant workers in the country warrants further research while a policy review on foreign nationals should also be conducted. The Philippines, as a country that champions the rights of migrant workers, should also protect and uphold the rights of migrant workers within the bounds of its jurisdiction—even if those migrants are from the country which Manila has territorial disputes with.

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Strengthening the Philippine Strategic Approach: The Case of the 2016 Arbitral Award and National Security

Jerome M. Inoc and Brian James Rodriguez



"A China Coast Guard (CCG) ship is spotted during a second civilian resupply mission of the Atin Ito Coalition to the Bajo de Masinloc or Panatag Shoal in the West Philippine Sea on May 15, 2024."

Maria Tan, ABS-CBN News, <https://www.abs-cbn.com/news/2024/9/10/207-chinese-ships-spotted-in-west-philippine-sea-in-new-record-high-navy-1315>

Strengthening the Philippine Strategic Approach: The Case of the 2016 Arbitral Award and National Security

Jerome M. Inoc¹ and Brian James Rodriguez²

ABSTRACT

This research examines the current conditions and strategy of the Philippine Government in approaching maritime and national security threats posed by the People's Republic of China's Maritime Militia and Coast Guard. Utilizing the Philippine Strategic Approach through the National Security Policy 2023-2028 and the National Security Strategy 2024, together with the enactment of the Maritime Zones Law and the Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act, the study analyzes the significance of the 2016 Arbitral Award of the current condition in the West Philippine Sea (WPS), particularly China's grey zone activities. Data was collected from historical case studies from 2022 to 2025, in-depth interviews, and recent journal news articles. The results indicate that there is a trend that China is constantly increasing its presence in the WPS. Furthermore, the study finds that the Philippine Strategic Approach, has significantly contributed to the enhancement of the 2016 Arbitral Award in terms of international, national and local scales. Lastly, the study contributes to a greater degree of understanding of maritime security challenges, especially the current condition in the WPS.

INTRODUCTION

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On February 25, 2011, while the Philippines commemorated the EDSA People Power Revolt, a Chinese frigate fired three shots at Philippine fishing vessels in the area of Quirino internationally known as Jackson Atoll. The incident began after the Chinese instructed the PH vessels to leave the area. After two months, military garrisons and outposts have been built by China in six reefs that are part of the Kalayaan Island Group (KIG) (Sanchez 2016). Further, this was also the year the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) began referring to the western sea of the Philippines as the West Philippine Sea (WPS).

When Duterte was elected as President, there has been a sudden shift of political stance in approaching the tension in the WPS. The same year the country received its official triumph against China vis-à-vis the 2016 Arbitral Ruling. Under the ruling, the Philippines has the official jurisdiction in the KIG following the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Despite the ruling, the presence of the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) and Maritime Militia continued to exist until the end of his term. Upon assuming office in 2022, the Marcos Jr. administration inherited these national security challenges from his predecessor. The on-going presence of the CCG and Maritime Militia in the WPS has been significantly increasing. As of January 2025, the Philippine Coast Guard has stated that China's "monster ship"³ continues to operate unlawfully near the Philippine territory (Gatchalian and Manahan 2023). Recently, China intentionally fired water cannons at Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) vessels near Bajo de Masinloc while delivering essential supplies to Filipino fisherfolks (Maralit 2025).

Below is the summary of the Chinese activities from 2022 to 2025.

3 Monster Ship is the largest Chinese Coast Guard Vessel and otherwise known as CCG 5901.

Table 1. Gray Zone Activities of China in the West Philippine Sea from 2022 to 2025

GRAY ZONE ACTIVITIES			
2022	2023	2024	2025
■ Chinese Vessels shadowed and warned PH boats at Ayungin Shoal on their way to resupply BRP Sierra Madre. ■ China's increasing construction of artificial islands in WPS.	■ The CCG's 5205 ship blocked the BRP Malapascua and shone a military laser at it twice.	■ China deliberately rammed and collided with the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) ship in Escoda Shoal, increasing presence of the CCG and Chinese Maritime Militias in contested islands in the WPS.	■ A CCG vessel blocked a PCG patrol ship near <i>Panatag</i> (Scarborough), leading to a nearby collision. ■ The Chinese Coast Guard's illegal incursion within the Philippine EEZ reached at least 13 days. Following China's claim over Sandy Cay, the PH deployed navy, coast guard, and maritime police forces to assert control. ■ China intentionally fired water cannons at Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) vessels near Bajo de Masinloc while delivering essential supplies to Filipino fisherfolks.

Despite that, the Philippines strongly expressed to uphold and implement the 2016 Arbitral Award. In 2023, The Philippines' National Security Council (NSC) initiated and published the National Security Policy 2023-2028. The document is a guiding

principle in security, peace, and stability within the country's territory. NSP's long-term vision is anchored by the Marcos Administration's Philippine Development Plan.

NSP 2023-2028 also acknowledges the 2016 Arbitral Ruling relevant to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In fact, the document states that

The Philippines shall remain steadfast in its commitment to UNCLOS and in upholding the final and binding South China Sea Arbitration Award of 12 July 2016.⁴

NSP 2023-2028 aligns with the study's objectives, ensuring the Philippine strategy in addressing national and maritime security challenges in the West Philippine Sea. The NSP 2023-2028 also sustains efforts in safeguarding the country's maritime zones and underscoring the two essential maritime spaces – the West Philippine Sea and the Philippine Rise.⁵ Further, it also recognizes the geopolitical risk and tension in the WPS as a primary national interest of the Philippine Government.

During his State of the Nation Address (SONA) in 2024, the President deliberately asserted that, “*Ang West Philippine Sea ay hindi kathang-isip natin lamang. Ito ay atin at ito ay mananatiling atin, hangga’t nag-aalab ang diwa ng ating minamahal na bansang Pilipinas*” (The West Philippine Sea is not a mere fiction invented by us. It is ours and will remain ours as long as our spirit continues to burn, fueled by our love for the country) (Marcos Jr. 2024). Aligned with the pronouncement of President Marcos Jr. in his SONA, the National Security Strategy (NSS) 2024 was adopted and implemented by the NSC along with its partners and stakeholders.

Aside from these key policy directives, the 19th Congress enacted the Philippine Maritime Zones Act (Republic Act No. 12064) which codifies the term “West Philippine Sea” and its features, and the Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act (Republic Act no. 12065) which prescribes the obligations of foreign ships and aircraft exercising their right of archipelagic sea lanes passage.

4 National Security Council, “National Security Policy 2023 – 2018”.

5 Ibid., 35.

METHODOLOGY AND ARGUMENT

The paper aims to determine the current conditions and strategies of the Philippine Government in addressing maritime and national security threats posed by external factors, such as the People's Republic of China's Maritime Militia and Coast Guard. In addition, it aims to determine the Philippines' current national security challenges regarding the West Philippine Sea issue and assess the Philippine Government's current approach to dealing with the abovementioned challenges in its maritime space, such as the Ayungin Shoal incident and the CCG's fishing ban on our fisherfolk in Bajo de Masinloc, internationally known as Scarborough Shoal.

This paper utilizes a qualitative research design that enables the study of the in-depth perspective of key informants who know what is happening in a particular community or issue. Moreover, the research employed case study as its methodology, since the only focus of this study is to determine the perception of the Philippine Government in dealing with external maritime threats. The case study design was utilized using qualitative method. The case study enables an empirical investigation that can be used to search for a contemporary phenomenon in its life context (Lim 2025).

The data sources came from an in-depth perspective of the local government of Masinloc, Zambales. The interview covered the assessment of the conditions in Masinloc and how they are affected by the continued gray zone activities of the CCG and the Chinese Militia. The study participants were Masinloc LGU personnel. Their perspectives provide understanding of the necessary policies to address the gap in relation to the implementation of the 2016 Arbitral Award and other relevant policy directives. In addition, we drew analysis from the perspectives of national government agencies based on available sources.

With the aforementioned, we argue that the recent publication of the National Security Policy and National Security Strategy addresses the operational realities of the key agencies of the national government, local government units, and uniformed personnel stationed in the West Philippine Sea aligned with the 2016 Arbitral Award. On the other hand, despite the implementation of these policy directives, the situation on the ground remains deeply problematic. For instance, the outright refusal of China to recognize the Arbitral Award and the continuous disregard to the rules-based international order. In fact, they become even more aggressive, and their presence has significantly increased in the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone. Hence, there is a need to enhance the implementation of these policy directives.

DISCUSSION

Advancing the National Security Policy and Strategy

The implementation of the NSP 2023-2028 and NSS 2024 in terms of the geopolitical conditions in the WPS has been a challenge for the NSC and other pertinent National Government Agencies and LGUs. However, realities on the ground brought by Grey zone⁶ activities by Chinese Coast Guards, and the swarming of its maritime militias has been continuously occurring. As provided in the discussion, effects of these activities must be addressed by the NSP 2023-2028 vision of the Philippine government in its national security agenda. As articulated in the national security interests and goals under the NSP 2023-2028,⁷

The Philippines shall remain steadfast in its commitment to UNCLOS and in upholding the final and binding South China Sea Arbitration Award...The Philippines shall sustain efforts in safeguarding the Philippine maritime zones especially in the West Philippine Sea.

In line with this, the Philippines is steadfast in its commitment to uphold international law, particularly the UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Award. Strengthening our maritime domain awareness through various efforts such as defense modernization, empowering and protecting fisherfolk rights, and enhancing strategic partnerships with like-minded states are vital in the country's national security goals. Furthermore, efforts must be supported by proactive legal and diplomatic initiatives, as well as integrated interagency coordination, to assert sovereignty, safeguard resources, and promote a rules-based order in the region.

Significance of the 2016 Arbitral Award to Philippine National Security

The victory of the Philippines over claim in the WPS in 2016 marks a significant milestone for middle power states in the Indo-Pacific Region. The 2016 Arbitral Award significantly contribute to the Philippines' national security status and

6 The "Grey Zone," according to the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, refers to as "activities designed to coerce countries in ways that seek to avoid military conflict... paramilitary forces, militarisation of disputed features, exploiting influence, interference operations and the coercive use of trade and economic levers."

7 Ibid., 34.

agenda pertinent to external defense and regional stability. By providing a legal framework and alignment with the rules-based international order, it clarified the country's maritime entitlements over its EEZ. In fact, the NSP 2023-2028 and NSS 2024 acknowledges the WPS as a vital national interest for the country and that the Philippines must exercise its maritime and sovereign rights.⁸

Despite the Philippines legal victory over China's historic claims and nine-dash line, and the international community's recognition of the 2016 Arbitral Award, the Chinese government dismissed and blatantly opposed the decision of the Tribunal. Hence resulting to the persistent Chinese maritime activities and aggressions towards Filipino uniformed personnel, civilians, and fisherfolk.

Actions for International Cooperation

Geopolitical tension is escalating in the South China Sea as claimant nations reinforce their positions. The Philippines, at this point, clings to the regional stability through calling for international cooperation across the ASEAN and like-minded states. This geostrategic cooperation is anchored from Pres. Marcos Jr.'s foreign policy and pronouncements. In his 2024 SONA, he provided a strategic direction on maintaining peace and cooperation in the region.⁹

We are now more conscious as a people, and strategic in heightening our aerial and maritime domain awareness. We are continuing to strengthen our defense posture, both through developing self-reliance and through partnerships with like-minded states.

In line with these directives, the Philippines engaged in Reciprocal Access Agreements (RAAs) with allied states. The goal of these RAAs is to strengthen the security and defense cooperation the Philippines with partner countries. Significant agreement is the Japan-Philippines RAA which provides an enhance interoperability between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Japanese Self-Defence Forces (JSDF) through strengthened joint military exercises (Sadongdong 2024), sharing of best practices, and expanded defense cooperation in the maritime domain (Senate of the Philippines 2024).

8 Ibid., 14.

9 2024 State of the Nation Address of President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr.

These RAAs could strengthen the country's defense forces through coordinated exercises and training programs (Ministry Foreign Affairs of Japan 2024), ensuring that this strategic approach is consistent with the NSP 2023-2028 and NSS 2024. Furthermore, these agreements contribute to regional stability and strategic partnerships in the South China Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

Actions from National Level

The NSP 2023-2028 and NSS 2024 serve as a policy directives and lines of efforts of the National Government in addressing various threats to national security in both internal and external affairs. In fact, the NSP states that the Philippines has primary interest in securing peace stability in the SCS by aligning with international law and UNCLOS.¹⁰

In parallel to the national security directives, defense framework was also established. Launched in 2024, the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept (CADC) is an architectural framework for the protection and securing the Philippine Archipelago including our EEZ. Department of National Defense (DND) Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr. stated that the CADC seeks to “address our vulnerabilities and enhance our capability to defend our national interest through certain long-term plans, which include upgrades in our facilities and deployment of personnel” (Naval 2024).

On the other hand, the legislative agenda that was mentioned in the first part of this paper was also under in the process of drafting the implementing rules and regulations (IRR). Enacted and signed by Pres. Marcos Jr. in November 2024, the Philippine Maritime Zones Law clarifies our maritime rights and entitlements aligned with the provisions under the UNCLOS and international rules-based order. Meanwhile, the Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act establishes a legal framework for designating and managing sea lanes within the waters of the Philippines.

These policy initiatives and legislative agenda collectively reinforces and enhance to the Philippine sovereignty, sovereign rights, and maritime security. These initiatives reaffirm our commitment to maintain regional peace and stability with the goal of strengthening the maritime security and domain awareness, protection of marine resources and biodiversity, and promote strategic posture.

¹⁰ Ibid., 14;34.

Localization Initiatives

On localization initiatives, we have interviewed the LGU of Masinloc and some fisherfolk. Operational realities pointed out that there has been a presence of the CCG and its militias at the Bajo de Masinloc (BDM), with concerns over their blockade and dangerous maneuvers in the area. The presence of the CCG and Maritime Militias was also confirmed last May 2025 by Philippine Navy Spokesperson for WPS Rear Admiral Roy Vincent Trinidad (Sadongdong 2025).

While these realities on the ground are ongoing, the NSC and other partners from the national government agencies and uniformed personnel remain steadfast in securing our sovereign rights in the BDM and EEZ likewise protecting the rights of Filipino fisherfolk. NSC Assistant Director General Jonathan Malaya made a pronouncement in a forum last May 2025 stating that

...we will continue to ramp up this presence by sending our ships regularly on maritime patrol, as well as air patrols just to fly the flag and send a very strong message that we will not be deterred in asserting our rights and jurisdiction in Bajo de Masinloc.

Following this pronouncement, tensions brought by the CCG's dangerous maneuvers and grey zone tactics continue to persist as previously discussed in the first part of this paper. Despite these realities, the LGU of Masinloc also localizing the implementation of national policy directives. The LGU proudly mentioned its ridge to reef strategy to protect its natural resources and to assist fisherfolk that are affected by CCG's blockade.¹¹ Furthermore, the LGU also clearly states that they are solely relying to the National Government when it comes to any activities related to WPS.¹²

11 Derived from Interview with the Local Government Unit of Masinloc, Zambales, April 27, 2025.

12 Ibid.

CONCLUSION

The Philippines' strategic approach to promote peace and stability in the WPS is significantly shaped by the 2016 Arbitral Award and other subsequent national policy directives and legislations. The NSP 2023-2028 and NSS 2024 have continuously addressed the challenges brought by CCG's grey zone activities and its maritime militia through its national security agenda and its lines of efforts. Parallel to this, the MZ Law solidifies our maritime rights and entitlements Bajo de Masinloc and EEZ.

The continuous presence of Chinese vessels, blockade, and dangerous maneuvers within our sovereign rights and territorial jurisdiction underscore the importance for enhanced enforcement and international cooperation. With Pres. Marcos Jr.'s foreign policy on international cooperation, the Philippine government has sought to strengthen its defense posture through RAAs with allied states, such as what we have done with Japan, which aim to improve interoperability and joint military exercises. These efforts are crucial in maintaining regional stability and asserting our sovereignty and maritime entitlements.

The country's commitment to a rules-based international order and its strategic partnerships are vital in addressing the complex security dynamics in the WPS. The NSP 2023-2028 and NSS 2024, along with the 19th Congress' legislative initiatives, reinforce the country's sovereignty and maritime security. As the geopolitical risks and tensions in the Indo-Pacific continue to escalate, it is with hope that the Philippines should maintain its stance for international cooperation and uphold its national interests to ensure peace and stability in the region.

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Lessons for Countering Foreign Influence Operations: The Case of Japan and the Philippines

Dara Janelle V. Eoy

"Philippines and Japan flags together textile cloth"

Oleksii Liskoni, iStock, <https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/philippines-and-japan-two-flags-together-textile-cloth-fabric-texture-gm1124450003-295187486>

Lessons for Countering Foreign Influence Operations: The Case of Japan and the Philippines

Dara Janelle V. Eoy¹

INTRODUCTION

In the Philippines, a poll conducted in February 2024 reported that majority of Filipinos (59 percent) consider Japan as a highly trusted country (Mateo 2024). Likewise, Japan (38 percent) is considered as the top travel destination among Filipinos, based on a survey released in January 2024 by digital payments company Visa (ABS-CBN News 2024). These survey results show that Filipinos have an overall favorable view towards Japan in present times. However, history shows that Japan had to exert much effort in rebuilding its image after numerous war atrocities during World War II. In mentioning this, the success of the “Cool Japan” campaign demonstrates the efforts that states try to shape the perception of other states in their favor.

Foreign Influence Operations (FIO)

Foreign influence operations (FIO) are defined as activities that are deployed by a state to exert influence on the domestic affairs of its target state, usually utilizing diplomatic, informational, military, and domestic mechanisms (Mansted 2021, 4). Moreover, influence is construed in three categories: (1) coercion, which includes the conduct of military aggression and the imposition of economic sanctions; (2)

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inducement, which involves accruing concessional loans or building up elites; and (3) persuasion, which covers both friendly and adversarial means, such as cultural exchanges and propaganda (Mansted 2021, 4). Out of all the aspects exploited in FIO, information possesses the most longstanding effect for its ability to leave a lasting memory to the target audience (Kushner 2017, 187). Within this context, it is imperative to establish the definitions for information operations and information warfare.

In general, states conduct an acceptable level of FIO to pursue their respective strategic objectives. Benign or legitimate influence operations are activities conducted with positive intent. These activities usually promote bilateral ties and dialogue (Stewart 2020, 12). The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace proposed an assessment framework to identify the extent of acceptable influence operations based on three criteria: transparency, quality of content, and call to action (Yadav et al. 2023, 2-3). Transparency refers to the clear indication of the source and target audience of the online content. Quality of Content pertains to the verifiable nature of the online material, which may include the platform where the post was uploaded as well as the post's accuracy and coherence with other related media. Finally, the criteria on Call to Action is concerned with the objective of the online content, which is usually peaceful.

Malign Influence Operations (MIO)

Contrary to benign influence operations, the concept of malign influence operations (MIO) is attributed to former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in 2017, who coined the three Cs of MIOs which are covert, corrupting, and coercive. He was an instrumental figure in the development of Australia's counter foreign interference (CFI) strategy. According to the three Cs of Turnbull (2017), covert refers to the distortion of the source of the media content. This can come in the form of a foreign actor pretending to be a domestic actor echoing a specific narrative but does not disclose its affiliations or funding source. Corrupting is the criteria concerned with the spread of irrelevant, misleading, and deceptive information. The last aspect of MIOs is coercive, which refers to calls that seek to divide or cause polarizing views among the target population which may eventually lead to conflict.

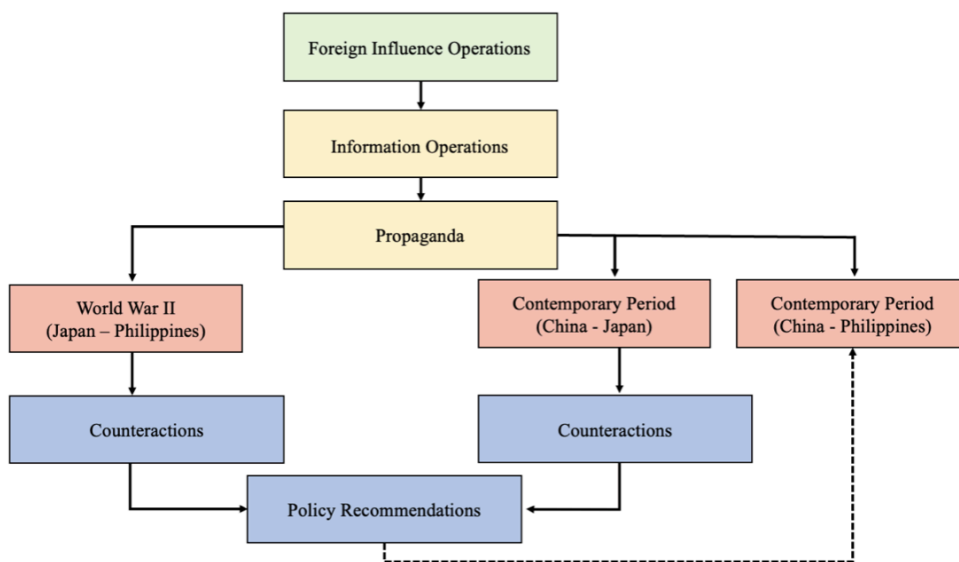
Information Operations

Information operations (IO) refer to actions that were conducted to affect enemy information environment while protecting one's own information. In times of war, IO becomes information warfare (IW) which performs the same functions, except that the actions are conducted to attain military objectives (Kuehl 2002, 36-37). Both concepts are concerned with the "need to dominate the information environment in order to collect, control, exploit, and defend information while denying the enemy to do the same" (Kuehl 2002, 37). New forms of technology have been developed to adapt to new forms of warfare, as postulated in the revolution in military affairs (RMA) (Kuehl 2002, 48). Hence, the emergence of new information technologies ushered in the use of information as a weapon or a tool to advance military objectives (Kuehl 2002, 49). Among the tactics that were used to conduct IO include disinformation, subversion, and propaganda (Mansted 2021, 9).

Propaganda is a collection of instruments used to influence public opinion to advance a desired action (Kushner 2006, 4). As a tool of FIO, propaganda exploits the emotions of individuals, which drive them to act (Kushner 2006, 4). In effect, analyzing propaganda can draw important insights on the formation of a group's social consciousness (Kushner 2006, 185). Moreover, propaganda can also be used as a deceptive effort to sow discord within a group resulting in domestic disorder and strife (Dery 2012, 302).

This paper compares FIO conducted by Japan during World War II and China during contemporary times. The paper draws lessons from the efforts of target countries to resist influence operations and protect their information environment, especially in the context of China's influence operations in the Philippines at present. Figure 1 represents how the paper is structured. Furthermore, the following questions are addressed in this paper:

1. What are the parallels of influence operations conducted by Japan during World War II and China during the contemporary period?
2. How did the target countries counter the influence operations in both periods?
3. What policy recommendations can be drawn to address China's influence operations in the Philippines during the contemporary period?



■ **Figure 1.** Analytical framework of foreign influence operations conducted in the Philippines and Japan

FOREIGN INFLUENCE OPERATIONS (FIO) BY JAPAN

Japanese Strategic Thought during World War II

Japan's war is the fight for modernity. Japanese propaganda has pushed the Japanese to keep on fighting because Japan sought to promote itself as a model of modernity and economic growth for the rest of the Asian region (Kushner 2006, 184-185). To assert its superiority and establish its sphere of influence in Asia, Japan needed to win over the areas occupied by Western powers (Dery 2012, 292, 295).

During World War II, Japan's foreign policy centered on the notion of "Asia for the Asiatics" (Yu-Jose 1996, 68). This slogan signified Japan's aim to erase Western influence in Asia and liberate Western colonies according to Japan's systems. In turn, Japanese planners assumed that the newly independent states would be encouraged to establish mutually beneficial ties with Japan (Dery 2012, 293). The desired end state for Japan was to establish a co-prosperity sphere, where all member-states create self-sufficient economic zones, led by Japan as the superior country in military, political, economic, and cultural aspects (Dery 2012, 294).

When the Japanese occupied the Philippines in 1941, the Japanese forces realized the need to win the Filipinos' support for their imperialist agenda and acceptance of Japan's Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (GEACPS). Coopting Filipinos to become enthusiastic about the Japanese presents a greater challenge for the Imperial forces, since the Americans had already forged a strong connection with the locals (Jose 2020, 251) to the point that Filipinos were known as "little brown Americans" (Dery 2012, 346). The concern for Japanese planners was developing programs that would undo American influence and influence subordination to the Japanese. Hence, Japanese deployed a special Japanese military unit designated to conduct cultural campaigns known as the *Sendubu* or the Propaganda Corps (Jose 2020, 256).

Japanese Propaganda Activities in the Philippines during World War II

Japanese administrators believed that education was the most important means to develop a GEACPS-oriented sentiment among Filipinos (Dery 2012, 313). The Japanese forces developed a learning curriculum that centered on the following principles: (1) an understanding of the Philippines' role as member of the GEACPS; (2) eliminate dependence on Western nations; (3) discourage materialism and raise the morals of the people; (4) teach Japanese in the Philippines, which would eventually replace English; (5) promote vocational education and raise the importance of basic education; and (6) inspire Filipinos to find satisfaction in labor (Jose 2020, 255; Dery 2012, 314). The Japanese sent Filipino teachers, students, and leaders to Japan to be trained under Japanese instruction and embrace Japan's vision for East Asiatic unity (Dery 2012, 293). Before classes resumed in schools, the Japanese Textbook Examining Committee conducted a thorough purge of learning materials that were pro-Western, leaving only the materials that tackled anti-Western, pro-Japanese, and pan-Asiatic topics (Jose 2020, 256).

Media was also an important tool exploited by Japanese forces. The Japanese imposed strict measures to control and censor various types of media, including radio, press, films, and theatre (Jose 2020, 256). The Japanese believed that a successful propaganda campaign involves the absolute control of mass media (Mateo 2006, 78). While most media forms have been under close monitoring by the Japanese administrators, there were media channels leveraged to disseminate pro-Japanese propaganda. The only radio station authorized to broadcast was KZRH, which aired the program called *Radio Taiso* to spread the notion that a population of healthy people was linked to a healthy nation (Dery 2012, 318).

For print media, Japanese forces allowed the *Tribune-La Vanguardia-Taliba* (T-V-T) chain to operate to reach Filipinos (Dery 2012, 318; Jose 2020, 258). The *Liwayway* magazine was used by the Japanese forces to promote the use of Japanese and Tagalog in place of Spanish and English (Dery 2012, 318). *The Tribune*, a daily newspaper, was dubbed a propaganda mouthpiece for the occupation forces (Jose 1990, 64). Accordingly, the Japanese forces overhauled Philippine newswriting at the time by imposing guidelines under their vision of a “New Order” in journalism, where journalists were no different from soldiers in the sense that the press must only publish news for the benefit of the state and avoid releasing articles that may endanger the nation and its people (Jose 2020, 55). In effect, some *Tribune* staff members were compelled to oblige to the terms of the Japanese administration by playing safe in their beats, while others got involved with the guerilla forces and were executed after they have been arrested (Jose 2020, 62-63).

Disinformation in Japan’s Wartime Narratives

Propaganda analysis of the materials distributed by the Japanese forces revealed three general themes: the benevolence and superiority of the Japanese, the weakness of the Americans, and the good fortune of the Philippines under the wing of the Rising Sun as part of the GEACPS (Mateo 2006, 82). Japanese forces claimed that the US and Great Britain are materialistic and cunning devils who wanted world domination (Jose 2020, 254-255). Likewise, Americans lacked the commitment to deliver their promises to the Filipinos (Mateo 2006, 82). These messages were aimed to sway the opinion of Filipinos away from the Americans and towards the Japanese (Jose 2020, 255). Japan’s wartime propaganda conveyed a narrative that Japan was the most modern country and race in Asia, making it most capable to lead the region in the twentieth century (Kushner 2006, 20). Similarly, Japanese propaganda was designed to keep Japan’s colonial influence in the Philippines. That is, the Japanese wanted Filipinos to remain dependent on their expertise (Yu-Jose 1996, 75).

Japanese propaganda centered on the promotion of the GEACPS, except for the likes of Kiyoshi Miki, the head of the planning section of the Propaganda Corps. Eventually, his unit was renamed as the 14th Army’s Department of Information in 1942 (Campoamor 2017, 11). Miki was among the Japanese military administrators who advocated for Philippine independence and called upon the Japanese forces to carefully study the Philippines and re-examine their war agenda in the country, often highlighting the ability of the Philippines to self-sustain their industries (Campoamor 2017, 11-13). Table 1 shows a summary of Japan’s FIO in the Philippines during World War II.

Table 1. FIO of Japan in the Philippines during World War II

TRANSPARENCY	
Influence Agent	■ Japan
Strategic Thought	■ Japan is a model of modernity and economic growth for the rest of the Asian region (Kushner 2006, 185-85)
Influence Target	■ Philippines
(QUALITY OF) CONTENT	
Overarching Strategy	■ Education and media censorship
Platforms	■ Mass media (television, print materials)
Target Population	■ Philippine government ■ Philippine population ■ United States and allies ■ International community
Narratives	■ Japan is most capable to lead Asia ■ The United States is an unreliable partner
CALL TO ACTION	
Intended Effects	■ Convince the Philippines to accept Japan's leadership through the GEACPS ■ Undermine the US-PH security ties

RESPONSE AND COUNTERACTIONS OF THE FILIPINOS AGAINST JAPANESE PROPAGANDA DURING WORLD WAR II

The general response of Filipinos to Japanese propaganda was fear and contempt (Dery 2012, 345). Despite Japanese efforts to portray themselves as the “protector of Asia,” Filipinos suffered from Japanese military abuses, torture, looting, rape, and discrimination (Dery 2012: 246; Jose 2020, 262). Undoubtedly, for many Filipinos, the crimes committed by the Japanese during World War II undid whatever positive outcomes that resulted from their propaganda campaigns (Jose 2020, 262).

While the propaganda efforts of the Japanese occupational forces were only slightly effective in winning the support of the Filipinos to Japan’s pan-Asiatic vision, the effects of propaganda in shaping social consciousness cannot be understated (Kushner 2006, 187). Propaganda, as a weapon of war, was leveraged by the Japanese

to justify their war efforts, gain support from the people in the areas they occupied, and undermine opposition to the policies that they imposed (Dery 2012, 344).

During World War II, Japan conveyed a narrative of itself leading a war of modernity in Asia, which pushed its troops to embrace an ultranationalist vision. The Japanese Propaganda Corps utilized various art forms, print and broadcast media channels for this aim. Japan's cultural resources promoted Japan's superiority to the West. Moreover, Japan focused on the military and informational activities during the war.

While the Japanese initially intended to befriend the Filipinos to solicit their support for the GEACPS, the discrimination and violent acts conducted by the Japanese Imperial Army upon the Filipinos have undermined the gains that would have been attained through Japan's propaganda efforts. The counterpropaganda efforts led by former media staff that joined the guerilla fighters reminded both the soldiers and the civilians of their common goal to fight the enemy until victory is attained. Thus, they must be wary of Japan's propaganda lines and remain hopeful that the war will end and the Allies would succeed. This is a critical observation, given that during this time, our national government was compromised so our leaders cannot decisively implement stringent measures to protect our information environment. In the end, Japanese propaganda in the Philippines during World War II resulted in antagonistic relations between the Philippines and Japan.

CHINA'S INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN JAPAN

Since China rose to power at the end of the Cold War, it positioned itself as a "responsible major power" that promotes a "harmonious world" via mutual respect for each other's "core national interests" (Shih and Huang 2015, 2). As it increased the living standards of the mainland Chinese people, China also sought to enhance its standing as a prosperous global power (Heath, Grossman, and Clark 2021: 17). With this, China intended to build a sphere of influence in Asia for international collectiveness, inclusiveness, and co-prosperity as espoused in its "Community of Shared Future for Mankind" (Rabena 2018, 685).

China's FIO are understood in terms of the Three Warfares, a three-pronged approach to the war-fighting process that includes war by other means (Gershaneck 2020, 17). Specifically, the Three Warfares consists of: (1) Media Warfare, which seeks to shape public opinion; (2) Psychological Warfare, which deploys psychological attacks through diplomatic pressure, false narratives, and harassment; and (3)

Legal Warfare, which weaponizes legal mechanisms in favor of China's interests (Gershaneck 2020, 19-20). For this paper, this section is only limited to Media Warfare and Psychological Warfare.

Japan has been a target for China's influence operations because of its geostrategic location, economic standing, and solid alliance with the United States (Newlin et al. 2020., 17). Hence, the Chinese government's objectives for conducting influence operations in Japan are to undermine Japan's adherence to the rules-based international order; encourage Japan to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); prevent Japan from amending its pacifist constitution; and undermine its alliance with the United States (Dreyer 2020 21; Newlin et al. 2020, 17). Likewise, the Philippines has been on the receiving end of China's growing aggression over tensions in the West Philippine Sea. The Philippines' 2016 arbitral award which legitimizes its maritime entitlements in the West Philippine Sea has garnered international support, however, China has deliberately dismissed the ruling as "null and void" (Voo 2024, 113). To assert its dominance in the South China Sea, China has conducted disinformation campaigns guided by the aims to criticize the United States' military presence in the Indo-Pacific; boost the accomplishments of China's naval forces in the South China Sea; and promote Philippine political figures who do not oppose China (Voo 2024, 113).

China strived to build a positive public image to the people of Japan through conference diplomacy, which includes the 2019 Beijing-Tokyo Forum (Newlin et al. 2020, 18). In this example, China packaged the event to show China and Japan as forging a new era of peace and development for Asia and the World. In reality, China has little influence in international forums (Newlin et al. 2020, 18).

China also took note of how the Japanese people consume their news. As such, China exploited Chinese-owned news outlets in Japan, such as the Chinese Central Television (CCTV) to spread disinformation and garner sympathy from the Japanese audience (Ichihara 2020; Dreyer 2020, 21). In terms of psychological warfare, one of China's activities to spur discord among the Japanese population is to refer to the Okinawa islands as "Ryukyu" to challenge Japanese sovereignty (Newlin et al. 2020, 19). These islands, under the administrative control of Japan, is of geostrategic importance to China due to its proximity to Taiwan. China has claimed these islands as theirs based on Chinese historical accounts that the Senkaku Islands were part of the Ryukyu Kingdom, a tributary state during the Ming Empire as early as 1372. China claimed that the US unilaterally transferred the islands to Japan in 1971 (Niquet 2023, 3). Table 2 summarizes China's FIO in Japan.

Table 2. FIO of China in Japan (1970s to Present)

TRANSPARENCY	
Influence Agent	■ China
Strategic Thought	■ China is a responsible global power that promotes a harmonious world in line with its vision of national rejuvenation or the <i>China Dream</i> (Shih and Huang 2014, 2; Heath, Grossman and Clark 2021, 17)
Influence Target	■ Japan
(QUALITY OF) CONTENT	
Overarching Strategy	Three Warfares
Platforms	■ Government pronouncements ■ Television, newspapers ■ Artificial Intelligence (AI), cyberattacks
Target Population	■ Chinese and Japanese domestic population ■ Japanese government ■ United States ■ International community
Narratives	■ Japan is infringing on China's territorial sovereignty in the Senkaku Islands ■ Japan is poisoning Pacific waters
CALL TO ACTION	
Intended Effects	■ Coerce Japan into yielding its territorial claims in the Senkaku Islands ■ Undermine US-Japan security ties

RESPONSE AND COUNTERACTIONS OF THE JAPANESE AGAINST CHINESE PROPAGANDA IN THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD

Japan's resistance to China's FIO is attributed to Japan's relative isolation. Besides that, Japan has been proactive in protecting its information environment against disinformation through several lines of effort. The Japanese government also exercises caution in acquiring Chinese hardware.

On its territorial claims in the Senkaku Islands, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has released public information bulletins on its official websites and channels. Moreover, the Japanese government exercises tight control of its media environment. Based on the report by Stewart (2020), Japan's media landscape is centered on only five major conglomerates which all cater to the greater Japanese skepticism towards China. When it comes to equipment, the Japanese government has banned the procurement of telecommunications equipment from Huawei and ZTE over fears surrounding possible data breaches and cyberattacks (Shida and Takemoto 2018). In a very rare occurrence, Japan has co-sponsored a workshop to combat disinformation in Taipei. This activity was conducted in partnership with Taiwan, the United States, and Sweden (Dreyer 2020, 19).

CHINA'S FIO IN THE PHILIPPINES

Among China's latest disinformation efforts in the Philippines is the claim that President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. was bound by a gentleman's agreement, which was inherited from the previous Duterte administration, stating that China will allow the Philippines to conduct resupply missions in the Ayungin Shoal, provided that the Philippine troops will not repair the BRP Sierra Madre (Patton 2024). Moreover, China has used the likes of Filipino pro-China groups, such as Integrated Development Studies Institute (IDSI) and the Asian Century Philippines Strategic Studies Institute (ACPSSI) (Elemia 2023) and individuals to drum up China's disinformation activities in the West Philippine Sea.

The propaganda analysis on China's FIO in the Philippines shows that China's approach when it comes to transparency and content are mostly similar to its efforts in contemporary Japan. The difference in the Philippines' case is that China focuses its narratives towards downplaying the Philippines' stance and efforts to assert its maritime entitlements in the West Philippine Sea.

Using media and psychological warfare, China utilizes its government platforms, media channels, and uses artificial intelligence (AI) and cyberattacks to launch IO against the Philippines. China exacerbates the divisions of Philippine society, particularly on the personalities at the top leadership positions. Furthermore, China exploits Filipino influencers to convey messages, through social media posts, that undermine the Philippines' 2016 award. Table 3 summarizes China's FIO in the Philippines.

Table 3. FIO of China in the Philippines

TRANSPARENCY	
Influence Agent	■ China
Strategic Thought	■ China is a responsible global power that promotes a harmonious world in line with its vision of national rejuvenation or the <i>China Dream</i> (Shih and Huang 2014, 2; Heath, Grossman and Clark 2021, 17)
Influence Target	■ Philippines
(QUALITY OF) CONTENT	
Overarching Strategy	Three Warfares
Platforms	■ Government pronouncements ■ Television, newspapers ■ Artificial Intelligence (AI), cyberattacks
Target Population	■ Philippine government ■ Philippine population ■ United States ■ International community
Narratives	■ National government's stand in the West Philippine Sea is detrimental to the PH ■ The Philippines is a pawn to the United States
CALL TO ACTION	
Intended Effects	■ Exacerbate existing polarizations in PH society ■ Challenge the PH's arbitral award ■ Undermine US-PH security ties

LESSONS IN COUNTERING FIOs

Countering FIOs as demonstrated by the Philippines against Japan during World War 2 and Japan against China in contemporary times show that a strong need to align the efforts by the government, civil society, and the media. The counteractions by the targets can be assessed based on the general impression of the public, the measures taken, and the key implementors. Results of the study are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Lessons in Countering FIO

	COUNTERACTIONS	
	Japan-Philippines	China-Japan
Influence Target	■ Philippines	■ Japan
General Impression	■ Fear and contempt towards the Japanese, especially having suffered through Japanese military abuses (Dery 2012, 345)	■ Skepticism towards China from accumulated events in the past few decades (Stewart 2020, 19)
Specific Measures	■ Underground media (newspapers, radio broadcasts, leaflets, speeches) (Mateo 2006, 113)	■ Public information campaigns through official government channels ■ Strict media regulations ■ Procurement bans on Chinese telecoms equipment ■ Multilateral workshops to counter Chinese disinformation
Key Implementors	■ Filipino civil society ■ Alternative press	■ Japanese government ■ Japanese media industry ■ Japanese civil society

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

First among the measures to be taken to address China's influence operations is to conduct studies on Chinese media campaigns to draw insights on the extent to which China manipulates information (Ichihara 2020). Additionally, in response to China's disinformation, there is a need to curate more comprehensive digital literacy programs which will equip internet users with the skills necessary for distinguishing facts from disinformation (Voo 2024, 119). Finally, a coordinated effort from the national governments of both the Philippines and Japan, their civil society groups, as well as internet and media platforms can be especially critical in building a resilient information environment that is able to effectively counter China's IO (Ichihara 2020). Moreover, international allies and partners must also provide support mechanisms and share best practices on countering malicious information activities by China (Patton 2024).

CONCLUSION

This paper looked into the informational aspect of influence operations as an instrument of FIO. Mainly, this paper gave attention to the utility of propaganda in shaping public opinion. The case of Japan's influence operations revealed that propaganda activities can influence the minds of the target population to action to the extent that the information being fed to them serves a purpose that aligns with their interests and needs. During the war, Filipinos resisted the complete acceptance of Japan's pan-Asiatic mindset because the Japanese administrators used brute force in introducing their ideas to the Filipinos, instead of soft-selling or using indirect and cordial methods which would have made Filipinos more receptive to the Japanese mindset.

Against the backdrop of the China's propaganda campaigns in the Indo-Pacific region, the Philippines and Japan can cooperate in terms of conducting stronger research efforts to analyze Chinese media and influence operations, building digital literacy, and forging stronger mechanisms to synergize efforts among the national governments, civil society, international partners, as well as media and internet platforms.

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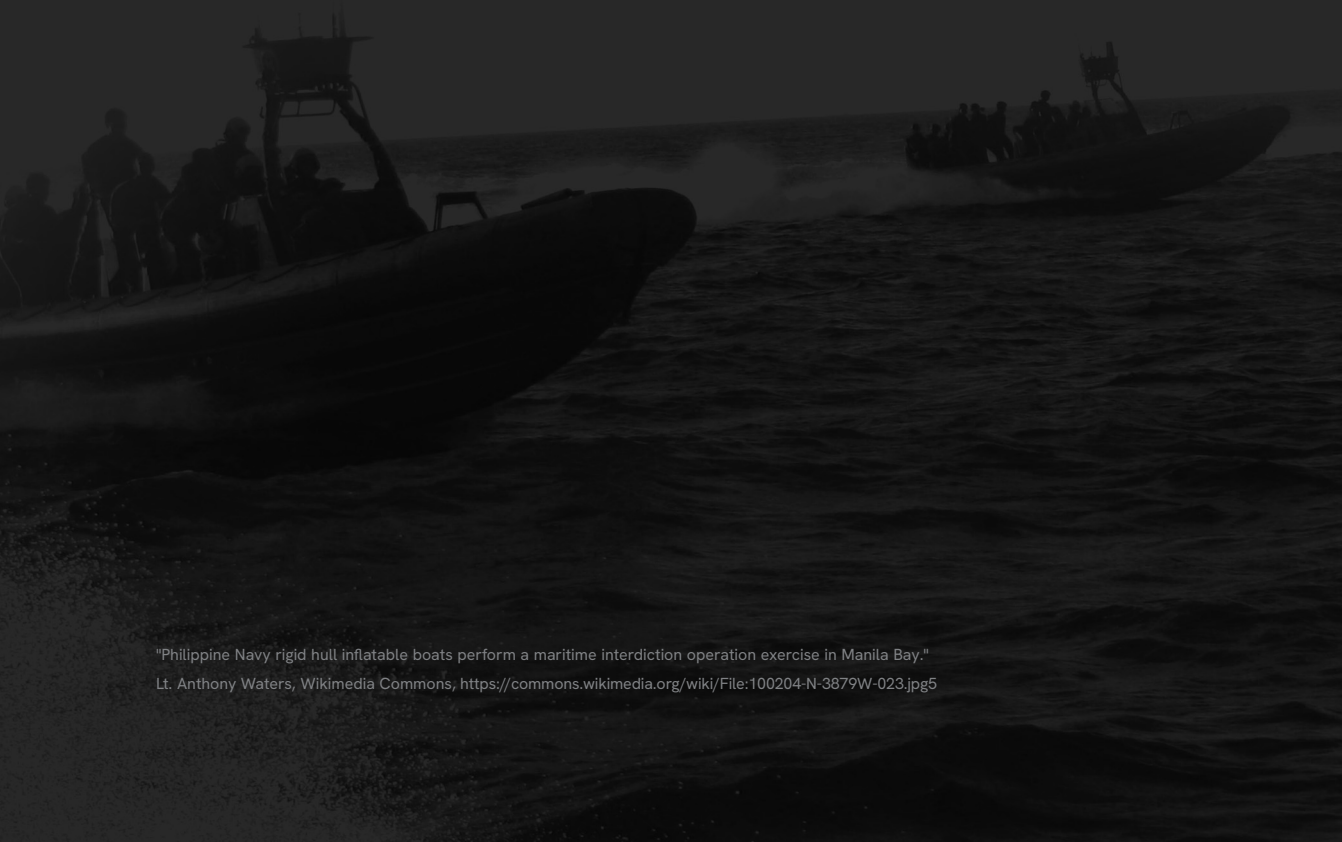
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Power Projection or Offshore Defense? Nuancing Statecraft of Naval Diplomacy for the Philippines

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"Philippine Navy rigid hull inflatable boats perform a maritime interdiction operation exercise in Manila Bay."

Lt. Anthony Waters, Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:100204-N-3879W-023.jpg5>

Power Projection or Offshore Defense? Nuancing Statecraft of Naval Diplomacy for the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

The Philippine Navy is called to do more for external defense, but its current capability overstretches more than the policymakers intend; it is subpar compared to its foreign counterparts, thus complicating a theory of victory in the seas. Naval diplomacy, the utility of naval, and maritime assets as communicative instruments of international power relationships to further the interests of the actors involved (Rowlands 2019)—can guide statecraft toward a more nuanced comprehensive security of its archipelago. Conventional wisdom suggests that naval diplomacy connotes power projection of what it can do to deter adversaries at sea. However, this comes at the cost of overstretching its limited resources and potential punishment from stronger adversaries, especially to relatively small navies. This paper argues that it is in the Philippines' strategic interests to calibrate the logic of naval diplomacy as a mode for offshore defense than it is about power projection against adversaries given its limited means. To achieve offshore defense, the Philippines must hone the concept of joint operations for archipelagic defense rather than stretching its limited resources for sea control and denial while having the allied and partner naval counterparts operate with the Philippine military in defense beyond the archipelagic area of concern. The challenge is how naval counterparts can contribute more. Nevertheless, the benefits outweigh the costs as it creates a sustainable archipelagic defense and communicates more realistic tasks with its allies and partners toward integrated deterrence. Naval diplomacy's logic enables military tools to strategically perform their mandates given the identified operational challenge of overstretch.

Keywords: naval diplomacy, offshore defense, power projection, joint operations, archipelagic defense

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INTRODUCTION

The Philippine Navy (PN) is called to do more for external defense. In 2012, the Philippine government—in extending the objectives of the lapsed 1995 Armed Forces of the Philippines Modernization Law or Republic Act No. 7898—signed Republic Act No. 10349 or the Revised Armed Forces of the Philippines Modernization Program (RAFPMP) Act. This law intends to have the AFP double down on various components such as (a) Force Restructuring and Organization Development; (b) Capability, Materiel, and Technology Development; (c) Bases/Support System Development; (d) Human Resource Development; (e) Doctrines Development over three horizons in 15 years phase. (R.A. No. 10349; Supreme Court E-Library 2013).

In line with this 15-year phase, Manila expressed its need of about PHP 500 billion for its 2012 Fleet Desired Force Mix to upgrade the PN's force structure with modern principal surface vessels like frigates, smaller vessels like corvettes and patrol boats, mine and countermine vessels, naval fixed and rotary wing capabilities, auxiliary ships like amphibious ships, landing ship tanks, oil tankers, supply and hospital ships, and most notably, diesel-electric submarines (Philippine Star 2012). Under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., Manila boldly commits to this long project. In the National Security Policy (NSP) 2023-2028, the Marcos government sets defense and military security as the country's top security agenda by integrating all domains of warfare, such as naval capabilities, in an integrated system in the order of battle (National Security Council 2023). This implies the intent for consistency of the Philippine establishment's commitment across administrations. Moreover, there is a trend among pundits and observers that the Philippine policymakers are expecting the PN to take the bulk of external defense (Chang 2019; Wu 2020; Cabalza 2021).

However, much of the RAFPMP's second horizon is still unmet due to financial and budgetary concerns. Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro said that as of September 2023, only 10 percent of Horizon 1 (2013-2018) and about 53 percent of Horizon 2 (2018-2022) are complete (Defense News 2023). Manila was only able to complete 60 projects worth P121.2 billion under the first two horizons and at least 91 more projects worth PHP 245 billion yet to be completed (Mogato 2024). This exacerbates the uncertainty over plausibility of Horizon 3, where it is expected for the AFP to acquire next-generation assets. Moreover, the consideration of the Philippine Army's about three times larger share in annual defense budgets for personnel services allocation compared to the Philippine Air Force and PN also adds complexity to the notion of priority to modernize the PN

(Amador and Baladjay 2021; Ong et al. 2023). To make things worse, there needs to be an account of regional developments. As the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies' (IISS) Military Balance 2024 points out, the PN is subpar compared to its regional naval counterparts in terms of real commitment to defense spending for adding modern naval tonnage with their aging platforms (IISS 2024). The Philippines' USD 6.22 billion may be catching up in figures with Singapore's USD 13.40 billion, Vietnam's estimated USD 7.40 billion, Indonesia's 8.80 billion, or Malaysia's 4.01 billion (IISS, 2024). However, taken into perspective, each of these regional counterparts has at least a small fleet of diesel-electric and stealthy submarines, a good quantity of stealthy frigates, and a bigger mass of patrol boats and corvettes (IISS 2024). Thus, despite increases or decreases of defense budgets due to various reasons, the figures do not suggest an encouraging picture for the Philippines in confronting regional geopolitical challenges. While it remains theoretical, the future order of battle in the naval dimension of the Indo-Pacific may not be friendly to the Philippines' theory of victory in the seas.

Consequently, Secretary Teodoro said that the Philippine government ordered the AFP to re-horizon the AFP Modernization Program to make sure that the military has what it needs to achieve interoperability of all its services (Daily Tribune 2023). In this case, while there is no debate over how the PN should move upward or even modernize, the expectation over the said major service must be taken into perspective, at least, on how the country should employ it. So far, Manila has set its eyes on employing the PN through the operational concept of the Active Archipelagic Defense Strategy (AADS), which is currently implemented even at the political level by the name of Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept (CADC). While AADS has no complete public document, online and unclassified sources from the PN suggest that its key pillars are 1) maritime operations, 2) maritime situational awareness, and 3) maritime cooperation. For the first pillar, the PN mentions that the key components are naval deterrence, naval presence, sea denial, and force projection. To enable that pillar, the PN argues that the second pillar underpins components of all-source information systems, common maritime operating picture, secured network support, and collaborative assessment, while the third pillar hinges on service interoperability, interagency coordination, and multi-stakeholder coordination, and strategic partnerships and alliances (Philippine Navy 2017). Even so, what the naval force provider say they are going to do, what the policy establishment is doing to support the force provider, and what the force provider is up against in the broader regional geopolitical environment to satisfy the establishment's policy objectives do not add up.

Against this backdrop, this paper argues that naval diplomacy, a known but elusive term in international relations (IR) and security/strategic studies literature, maybe a useful guide to Philippine statecraft toward a more nuanced comprehensive security of its archipelago. Specifically, it argues that it is in the Philippines' strategic interests to calibrate the logic of naval diplomacy as a mode for offshore defense than it is about power projection against adversaries given the country's limited means. To unpack this argument, the paper will be composed of several parts. The first section will define naval diplomacy to provide clarity to the argument—readers will find that the literature's epistemological bias firms on the power projection based on Western naval experiences but there is a need to reformulate this for nuance to accommodate the Philippine context. This latter point is the business of the second section; the author intersects the reformulated definition of naval diplomacy with the environmental scanning surrounding the Philippines's external defense priorities and the place of the PN's dilemma of fulfilling its mandate. It shall argue how naval diplomacy can provide a perspective on the offshore defense-power projection balance. The last section offers a conclusion for policymakers, defense/naval planners, pundits, and scholars to ponder on how this nuancing offers a viable scenario for the Philippines.

This paper's methodology adopted a qualitative single case study approach for its research design, focusing on naval diplomacy's nuance for offshore defense as its unit of analysis, and located at the state level of analysis. For its data-collection method, the author solely relied on secondary sources, primarily books, journal articles, government materials, press releases, news articles, and opinion editorials to develop his argument. The arrival of his insights into policy recommendations, therefore, are solely based on this effort and whatever errors incurred here are his alone.

NAVAL DIPLOMACY—DEFINING FOR NUANCE

Naval diplomacy is an old practice, as scholars like to say. According to Hedley Bull (2012), it is not only dignitaries from foreign ministries that can carry out diplomacy in international society but also other entities, and in this case—navies. Indeed, the scholarly view on this concept evolved from its coercive roots to noncoercive ones, eventually conceding that naval diplomacy can espouse cooperation and coercion depending on the objective of their operations. Since naval operations are operationally sustainable and politically acceptable in peacetime compared to those of armies and air forces, they are considered as the “Swiss Army Knife” of states that could perform tasks from benign to coercive forms (Haydon 2007; Kruse and

Bruns 2016; Till 2018; Speller 2023). These tasks include joint exercises, port visits, exhibitions, defense sales, encounters at sea, or demonstrations (Till 2018).

Meanwhile, Kevin Rowlands (2019) defined naval diplomacy as “the utility of naval and maritime assets as communicative assets of international power relationships to further the interests of the actors involved.” Consequently, one may consider that navies can “represent force without its necessary application” by becoming a “floating embassy” and tailoring their activities into a “political package” to its target countries (Haydon 2007; Till 2018, Speller 2023). Ken Booth’s concept of trinitarian naval roles serve as most navies’ seminal manual regarding their *raison d'être*. Accordingly, navies have three roles: the military, constabulary, and diplomatic roles, but the first role cements the other two. (Booth 1975).

While it is so, the literature on naval diplomacy is wrought with epistemological bias—most pieces understand naval diplomacy as major power-centric, their objective behind the conduct of naval diplomacy is to coerce or coopt weaker ones into arrangements that overly favor them (or at least project to others that they can do so), and much of the records that formulated understanding of naval diplomacy derived from Western experience. This observation is apt when one regards the historical record, such were the U.S. Navy’s role in coercing Shogunate Japan’s elites into opening its ports in 1853-4, the British, German and Italian blockade of Venezuela in 1902–1903 to coerce the latter to pay its debts, the US Navy’s role in parading the Great White Fleet global expedition from 1907 to 1909, the German Navy’s port visit to Morocco during the Second Moroccan Crisis in 1911, the British Royal Navy’s employment to Kuwait in 1961 to send a message to Iraqi elites of its influence over the former protectorate, and the direct faceoff between the U.S. Navy with its Soviet counterpart short of war during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War (McGruther 1974; Till 2018; Speller 2023). Far from colonial or Cold War legacies, the post-Cold War period is no different. Instances include the US Naval noncombatant evacuation operations in Somalia during its bloody civil war in 1991, British and Italian naval stationing off the coasts of Libya to intimidate Muammar Gaddafi, French naval operation to assist South African patrol boats on fish poaching on the latter’s coasts in 1997, or the British-French naval operations in Indian Ocean as part of the latter’s regular power projection conducted since 2001 (Rowlands 2019).

While non-Western and non-major power navies also conduct naval diplomacy, these records are limited in the sense that it has no advanced understanding. Take, for instance, Till’s (2018) point that naval diplomacy is materially demanding as naval

diplomatic operations connote power projection across regions not of their own. Moreover, it can also be advanced that while colonialism is a bygone era, the rise of the rule-based international order has made liberal, industrialized democracies embedded into that global system, which makes their role in the intellectual history of naval diplomacy difficult to discount. The critique of Western naval diplomacy is beyond the paper's scope. However, without emancipating the concept from their experience, it is impossible to push the discussion of naval diplomacy forward in terms of its usefulness within the Philippine experience. As Booth (1975) himself said, only major powers can practice naval diplomacy. While Rowlands (2019) intends to push it back by clearing the canvas of historical and contemporary cases, the epistemological bias sticks without reflexiveness. It is within this paper's interest to reformulate epistemology to create a criterion for naval diplomacy's ontology suited to the Philippine geostrategic context for policy purposes.

In this case, the author points out that the nuance of naval diplomacy can be turned to offshore defense than power projection for the Philippines. For the record, any state can attempt power projection; even offshore defense can result in such, albeit, in limited degrees depending on the adversary's reaction and one's counteraction. However, a country like the Philippines cannot attempt power projection given how the previous sections manifested the financial budgetary concerns for the PN and AFP writ large. The Philippines may be getting big diplomatically in the region, but the PN remains small in terms of capabilities. Naval diplomacy, if understood largely as power projection, comes at the cost of overstretching its limited resources and potential punishment from stronger adversaries, especially to relatively small navies.

Yet, tagging the PN's smallness is not pejorative; it is rather instructive for naval defense planners in getting the strategy right. Strategy is about aligning "potentially unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities" (Gaddis 2019). The post-Cold War order advances the potential for small navies to become 'big' as they form coalitions similar to navies that address common threats (Germond 2024). It is not about the fleet size—but the impact of what it does on the international order at sea.

That said, naval diplomacy is as nuanced as offshore defense. This paper operationally defines offshore defense as the "strategic, operational, tactical, and logistical employment of partner and allied navies to one's area of operations for an agreed and definite amount of time, scale, and tempo to carry out mutual defense mission objectives." Currently, there is a normative take that the Philippines utilizes naval diplomacy for power projection. However, those who simply view this as

such will be risky in policy and presumptuous in theory. This paper argues that the Philippines has opportunities in naval diplomacy if understood through offshore defense, and hence a strong pull for Manila to communicate its power relationships in furthering its interests.

OFFSHORE DEFENSE OR POWER PROJECTION?

To make sense of the nuance, it is apt to place it against the backdrop of the Philippines' geostrategic environment of external defense. A team of researchers from the PN wrote about the future of warfare for the said service, and accordingly, the historical anecdote that it has never been in any considerable naval battle "stunted" its warfare capabilities, with the increasing multidomain and hybrid threats made that capability even more complicated to wield to harm and deny enemies (Paculba et al. 2021). Even while the Philippines enjoys the United States' extended deterrence as an assumption, for no enemies might come against the archipelago, the said researchers pointed out that planners must not discount such an absolute war scenario, and thus the case to think about self-reliant external defense seriously, based on the fact that such a swift attack by China, for instance, might not allow any strategic partner or the US ally a chance to aid the Philippines for such a shock (Paculba et al. 2021). While it should not be discounted, planners must not also discount a scenario that would make such an absolutist scenario unthinkable for any rational adversary—actual or imagined.

The PN also accounts that the future of naval warfare must account for a theory of victory (Philippine Navy 2022). It assumes that the said major service should be an "output" of sea power, defined as "...the capacity to influence the behavior of other people or things by what one does at or from the sea" (Till, cited by Philippine Navy 2022). This paper agrees that the naval theory of victory should run similarly into the PN as an output. However, the paper overlaps immaterial aspirations with material capabilities by asserting that the PN needs to be a strong navy with its near-peer neighbors first before it can do something consequential. Unfortunately, adversaries will not wait past a certain point before they can attack; uncertainty and surprise remain central concerns of strategy.

In this case, reconsiderations must be made, and naval diplomacy—understood in the form of offshore defense—can guide statecraft toward a comprehensive security of the archipelago. Understood this way, it suits short-term needs and augments them with the long-term needs for comprehensive archipelagic defense. To achieve

offshore defense, the Philippines must aim to focus on honing the concept of joint operations for archipelagic defense rather than stretching its limited resources for sea control and denial while having the allied and partner naval counterparts operate with the Philippine military in defense beyond the archipelagic area of concern. At this point, this is where the country's AFP Joint Operating Concept must be able to manage its force providers—such as the navies—well to accomplish mission objectives while also keeping resources intact. This implies that going beyond the archipelagic bounds may cause the PN to overstretch. In November 2024, the President Marcos signed the Philippine Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act and the Maritime Zones Act, which enables Manila to control transit to protect its security interests in and clarify its jurisdictional boundaries, respectively. In line with this policy evolution, there is an increasing need to collectively realize the designation of where the PN should and can operate, especially at the mercy of a relatively better-armed adversary like the People's Liberation Army-Navy in the West Philippine Sea and beyond.

Naval diplomacy, in this case, can serve as an intervening variable in policy to encourage partners and allies to move and operate within the archipelago to accomplish mutually agreed defense mission objectives in one's area of operations for an agreed and definite amount of time, scale, and tempo. Of course, the challenge is how naval counterparts can contribute more, which the diplomatic and informational components of national power can help to complement the military arm of statecraft. Nevertheless, the benefits outweigh the costs as it creates a sustainable archipelagic defense and communicates more realistic tasks with its allies and partners toward integrated deterrence. This points to a steady trend going on with Manila's upgrades of its relations with South Korea, Japan, New Zealand, and others as strategic partners, as well as deepening ties with Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, the European Union, and Brazil relating to defense cooperation (PCO2024a; PCO 2024b; PCO 2024c; Reuters 2024; PNA 2024). These talks should cap on the opportunity to communicate their stakes on the rules-based order by doubling down on logistics and logistical arrangements, presence missions, and defense industrial linkage. As of late April 2025, the AFP announced the creation of the AFP Strategic Defense Command to oversee joint exercises with the allies and partners (Mangosing 2025). Except for the U.S., these partners' best military service to link with the AFP is arguably their navies. In this case, it breaks the notion of path dependency towards the US alliance commitments, but more flexibly on grounds of naval diplomacy. In this way, it nuances a scenario of a more comprehensive security for the Philippine archipelago.

CONCLUSION

Naval diplomacy is an old practice and will continually evolve with the test of time. In the case of the Philippines, emancipating its concept from epistemological bias in the established literature is imperative to give way to the understanding that it is not a power projection tool, but an offshore defense option for Manila to consider. The paper concludes that there is a chance for the Philippines to offset the limits of its naval power with its diplomatic clout in naval affairs. A flexible arrangement with partners and allies provides a clearer messaging of what the Philippines' key role in the rule-based order should look like, and hence, a steppingstone for clarifying a scenario of a theory of victory in the seas: the Philippines able to rally other stakeholder navies to socialize and create an naval order of battle for deterrent, defense, and diplomatic effect. In the end, naval diplomacy's logic enables military tools to strategically perform their mandates given the identified operational challenge of overstretch.

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Foreign Interference in the Philippines: A Policy Analysis of Legislative Evolution and Reform Imperatives (1979-2024)

Maria Corazon C. Reyes

"Gavel On Philippines Flag: Philippines Constitution and Justice Concept"

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Foreign Interference in the Philippines: A Policy Analysis of Legislative Evolution and Reform Imperatives (1979-2024)

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ABSTRACT

The Philippines faces escalating foreign interference threats that exploit legislative gaps and institutional fragmentation, undermining national security and democratic governance. This policy analysis examines Philippine legal responses to foreign interference from 1979 to 2024, revealing how legislative frameworks have evolved from Cold War-era concerns to contemporary digital threats while maintaining strategic ambiguity that both preserves sovereignty and enables adversary exploitation. Through systematic textual analysis of key legislations; Foreign Agents Act of 1979, the 1987 Constitution, the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012 and the National Cybersecurity Plan 2023-2028, this study identifies critical policy gaps requiring urgent legislative reform. The analysis demonstrates that Philippine legal frameworks suffer from definitional ambiguity, institutional fragmentation, and reactive governance that collectively undermine effective response to sophisticated state-sponsored influence operations. The central argument advances that Philippine legal frameworks inherently embody “strategic ambiguity” which is deliberately imprecise definitions and institutional arrangements that preserve policy flexibility while inadvertently creating vulnerabilities that sophisticated adversaries exploit. Key policy recommendations include comprehensive legislative modernization through targeted statutory amendments, institutional coordination through enhanced inter-agency cooperation, and robust democratic safeguards ensuring security measures do not compromise constitutional freedoms.

Keywords: foreign interference, Philippine national security, cybersecurity legislation, policy reform, legislative analysis, strategic ambiguity

INTRODUCTION

Foreign interference represents one of the most complex and urgent threats to Philippine national security in the digital age. Unlike traditional security challenges involving overt military action or clear territorial violations, contemporary foreign interference operates through sophisticated, multi-domain campaigns that blur the boundaries between legitimate international engagement and malicious influence operations. These operations may encompass covert financing of political activities, coordinated disinformation campaigns, cyber espionage against critical infrastructure, and social media manipulation designed to shape public opinion on critical national issues.

This evolution has created what this analysis identifies as a “governance gap”—the disconnect between the sophistication of contemporary threats and the capacity of existing legal frameworks to address them effectively. Modern foreign interference challenges traditional legal categories and institutional boundaries, operating across domains previously governed by separate regulatory regimes. State-sponsored actors now employ hybrid tactics combining cyber operations with information warfare, economic leverage with political manipulation, creating complex influence campaigns that exploit institutional seams and regulatory blind spots.

The nature of these threats has fundamentally changed the notion of security. Where previous generations of foreign interference relied primarily on human intelligence networks and traditional propaganda channels, contemporary operations leverage digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and data analytics to achieve unprecedented scale and precision in targeting specific audiences. These operations can simultaneously operate across multiple platforms, languages, and demographic groups, creating cascading effects that amplify their strategic impact while maintaining plausible deniability for the sponsoring actors.

As such, the urgency of addressing this gap has intensified as the Philippines navigates heightened geopolitical competition, particularly in the West Philippine Sea, while managing complex relationships with major powers including China, the United States, and regional neighbors. Recent incidents demonstrate these challenges’ multifaceted nature for example the coordinated disinformation campaigns targeting Philippine territorial claims through sophisticated bot networks and artificial amplification, cyber espionage operations against critical infrastructure attributed to state-linked advanced persistent threat groups, economic pressure campaigns leveraging trade relationships and investment dependencies to

influence policy decisions, and information operations. All of these are attempting to exacerbate social divisions and undermine confidence in democratic institutions through targeted misinformation and polarizing content. These examples, therefore, illustrate how contemporary foreign interference exploits the interconnected nature of modern societies, using economic interdependence, technological vulnerabilities, and social media ecosystems as vectors for influence operations. The challenge is compounded by the fact that many of these operations operate in legal grey zones, employing tactics that may be technically lawful but strategically harmful to national interests and democratic governance.

In this context, this paper attempts to provide an assessment of Philippine legal responses to foreign interference, examining how legislative frameworks have evolved from 1979 to 2024 and identifying critical reform imperatives. The central argument advanced is that Philippine legal frameworks currently embody “strategic ambiguity”—deliberately imprecise definitions and institutional arrangements that preserve policy flexibility while inadvertently creating vulnerabilities that sophisticated adversaries exploit. While this ambiguity serves certain diplomatic functions in managing great power relationships, it simultaneously undermines operational effectiveness and democratic accountability in ways that compromise national security and institutional integrity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contemporary scholarship on foreign interference has undergone significant evolution, moving from Cold War-era frameworks focused primarily on human intelligence and traditional espionage to digital-age paradigms encompassing cyber operations, information warfare, and hybrid influence campaigns. This conceptual evolution reflects the changing nature of the threat environment and the increasing sophistication of state-sponsored influence operations that exploit technological vulnerabilities and democratic openness.

Foreign interference is broadly defined as “deliberate actions by foreign entities to influence or disrupt the internal affairs of a sovereign nation” through coercive, deceptive, clandestine, or corrupting means (Istomin 2022). This definition captures the multidomain nature of contemporary interference, which can encompass political manipulation, economic coercion, information operations, and cyber activities. Dowling (2021) further argues that digitization has “revolutionized tactics of subversion,” enabling operations that are cheaper, faster, more deniable, and capable of exploiting cognitive vulnerabilities at unprecedented scale. The digital

transformation has fundamentally altered the cost-benefit calculus of influence operations, making sophisticated campaigns possible with relatively modest resources while maintaining plausible deniability.

Shires (2022) contributes to this understanding by introducing the concept of “interference assemblages”—networks of state agencies, private contractors, and unwitting amplifiers that execute influence operations while maintaining plausible deniability. This model helps explain how modern interference operations can achieve significant impact while avoiding clear attribution to state actors. These assemblages are particularly relevant for understanding contemporary interference operations involving complex networks that may include government agencies, private companies, civil society organizations, media entities, and individual influencers who may not be aware of their role in broader influence campaigns.

The assemblage model is especially pertinent in the Philippine context, where Chinese information operations have been observed to combine state media, diaspora networks, business interests, and social media manipulation to create comprehensive influence campaigns. These operations exploit the interconnected nature of modern information ecosystems, using multiple vectors simultaneously to amplify messages and create the appearance of organic support for particular positions or policies.

For Southeast Asian democracies specifically, scholars like Arugay (2020) and De Castro (2014 and 2024) analyze how middle powers (De Castro 2020) employ “hedging strategies” to navigate great power competition without definitive alignment with any single major power. These strategies involve maintaining strategic ambiguity about ultimate loyalties and commitments, preserving flexibility to adjust policies based on changing geopolitical circumstances and national interests. This hedging behavior is also pronounced in economic relationships, where Southeast Asian nations seek to maximize benefits from engagement with multiple major powers while avoiding excessive dependence on any single partner.

However, limited attention has been paid in the existing literature to how strategic ambiguity translates into domestic legal frameworks for addressing foreign interference, particularly in digital domains where technological complexity and jurisdictional challenges create additional layers of ambiguity. This represents a significant gap that this policy analysis seeks to address by examining how middle-power statecraft and legal framework design intersect in the specific context of foreign interference governance.

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper employs systematic textual analysis of Philippine constitutional provisions, cybersecurity legislation, and policy documents from 1979 to 2024, supplemented by historical contextualization of key cyber incidents and geopolitical developments. The methodology combines legal analysis techniques with policy evaluation frameworks to assess both formal legal provisions and their practical implementation effectiveness.

This paper's analysis is grounded in governance theory that conceptualizes legal frameworks as institutional responses to evolving threat environments, with particular attention to how middle powers manage asymmetric relationships through strategic ambiguity. This theoretical foundation recognizes that legal precision and strategic clarity may not always be optimal for states operating in complex geopolitical environments where flexibility and adaptability are essential for maintaining sovereignty and pursuing national interests.

The analysis employs a historical institutionalist perspective that examines how past policy choices create path dependencies that shape subsequent institutional development. This approach is particularly relevant for understanding how the Philippines' experience during the Cold War and martial law period continues to influence contemporary approaches to foreign interference, creating both institutional capabilities and constraints that affect current policy options.

For this study, "Foreign interference" encompasses deliberate actions by foreign entities to influence or disrupt Philippine internal affairs through coercive, deceptive, clandestine, or corrupting means, including but not limited to cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, economic leverage, political manipulation, and hybrid influence tactics. Consequently, "Strategic ambiguity" refers to deliberately maintaining imprecise legal definitions and institutional arrangements to preserve policy flexibility in managing great power relationships (Eisenberg 1984). Finally, "Governance gap" describes the disconnect between threat sophistication and institutional capacity to respond effectively (Kouliopoulos 2020).

Each legal instrument is systematically evaluated across four analytical dimensions that provide a comprehensive assessment of its adequacy for addressing contemporary foreign interference challenges. The first dimension examines definitional clarity and comprehensiveness, assessing whether the legal instrument provides clear, operationalizable definitions that encompass the full range of

contemporary interference tactics. The second dimension analyzes institutional authority and coordination mechanisms, evaluating how the instrument allocates responsibility across different agencies and establishes coordination protocols for complex, multi-domain operations. The third dimension assesses operational effectiveness in addressing contemporary threats, examining whether the instrument provides adequate tools and authorities for responding to sophisticated state-sponsored operations. And the fourth dimension evaluates democratic safeguards and abuse prevention mechanisms, ensuring that security measures do not compromise constitutional rights or democratic governance principles.

LEGISLATIVE EVOLUTION AND ANALYSIS

The Foreign Agents Act of 1979: Foundation and Limitations

The Foreign Agents Act of 1979 (Batas Pambansa Blg. 39) represents the Philippines' first systematic attempt to regulate foreign influence through legal mechanisms by establishing a registration requirement for individuals acting as agents of foreign principals. Individuals are required to declare their purpose as regulating "foreign agents and to require them to register and to disclose their political activities" for national security (BP 39, Section 2).

The conceptual foundation centers on identifiable human agents engaged in recognizable political activities on behalf of foreign principals. This framework made sense within 1970s threat perceptions, where foreign interference was understood in terms of human intelligence operations, propaganda activities, and direct political manipulation conducted through identifiable individuals with clear connections to foreign governments.

However, this Cold War-era framework embodies assumptions fundamentally misaligned with contemporary digital threats operating through automated systems, distributed networks, and sophisticated influence campaigns that avoid traditional agency relationships. The Act's definitional structure creates significant coverage gaps when applied to modern interference operations that often operate through informal networks, economic leverage, and technological platforms falling outside traditional registration requirements.

Contemporary influence campaigns may involve coordinated inauthentic behavior on social media platforms, hack-and-leak campaigns, economic coercion, or hybrid influence tactics combining multiple domains. The Act's focus on individual rather

than institutional actors represents another significant limitation, as modern foreign interference increasingly operates through complex networks including state agencies, private contractors, civil society organizations, and technology platforms working in coordination.

Thus, the Act provides no framework for addressing state-sponsored cyber operations or social media manipulation campaigns that have become central to contemporary interference strategies. The absence of enforcement mechanisms specifically designed for sophisticated state-sponsored operations compounds these limitations, leaving significant vulnerabilities that adversaries can exploit. Moreover, the Act's enforcement history reveals limited practical application, with few documented registrations or prosecutions, suggesting that even within its narrow scope, implementation has been inconsistent and potentially ineffective in achieving its transparency and accountability objectives.

The 1987 Constitution: Sovereignty Without Specificity

After the Marcos dictatorship, the 1987 Constitution embedded sovereignty as foundational while avoiding explicit foreign interference treatment. Article II, Section 7 declares: "The State shall pursue an independent foreign policy. In its relations with other states, the paramount consideration shall be national sovereignty, territorial integrity, national interest, and the right to self-determination."

The Constitution's approach to foreign influence is primarily structural rather than operational, establishing ownership and control restrictions in critical sectors such as mass media and public utilities that create barriers to direct foreign influence over essential national functions. However, the Constitution does not provide explicit definitions of foreign interference or specific guidance on how such threats should be addressed, reflecting the drafters' focus on establishing broad principles rather than detailed operational guidance.

The constitutional framework establishes important democratic safeguards through comprehensive rights protections, including freedom of speech, association, privacy rights, and due process guarantees. These provisions create essential constraints on government action that must be respected in any response to foreign interference. While these safeguards are crucial for maintaining democratic governance, they also create challenges for addressing sophisticated influence operations that may exploit democratic openness.

The Constitution's institutional design distributes authority across different branches and establishes checks and balances preventing unchecked power exercise. This has important implications for addressing foreign interference, requiring coordination across multiple institutions and creating opportunities for institutional fragmentation if coordination mechanisms are not effectively established.

The Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012: Digital Crimes Without Strategic Vision

In 2012, Republic Act No. 10175 officially marked the Philippines' entry into digital-age criminal law. It criminalized illegal access, data interference, and system interference (Section 4) but remained oriented toward individual criminal conduct rather than state-sponsored operations.

Also, the Act's approach focuses on discrete illegal actions such as unauthorized access to computer systems, data manipulation, and system disruption. While essential for addressing cybercrime, these provisions are not well-suited to addressing coordinated influence operations that may employ technically legal means to achieve strategic objectives. State-sponsored interference often operates through activities that, when examined individually, may not violate specific cybercrime provisions but collectively constitute sophisticated influence campaigns.

The paradigm underlying the Act assumes cyber threats primarily emanate from individual criminals or criminal organizations operating for financial gain. This assumption proves inadequate for addressing nation-state actors conducting sophisticated influence operations with strategic political objectives, such as coordinated inauthentic behavior on social media platforms, hack-and-leak operations designed to influence political processes, or persistent advanced threat campaigns operating over extended periods.

Moreover, state-sponsored interference often operates through technically legal means that achieve strategic objectives without violating specific cybercrime provisions which then exploit the Act's narrow focus on discrete illegal actions rather than cumulative strategic impact.

The National Cybersecurity Plan 2023-2028: Strategic Vision Without Statutory Authority

The National Cybersecurity Plan 2023-2028 (Executive Order No. 58) represents significant conceptual advances, acknowledging nation-state threats and adopting international best practices. The Plan’s vision encompasses three pillars—trust, security, and reliability—addressing technical, institutional, and social cybersecurity dimensions (DICT 2024).

The NCSP explicitly recognizes advanced persistent threats and nation-state actors, marking evolution from crime-focused earlier frameworks. It acknowledges that “nation-states and state-sponsored groups pose significant threats to national security through cyber espionage, sabotage, and influence operations” (DICT 2024, 15).

However, NCSP’s executive policy status fundamentally limits implementation authority. Without statutory foundation, the Plan cannot create binding private sector obligations, establish non-compliance penalties, or override existing frameworks. But, overall, it is a notable precursor or foundation to the plan of passing a Cybersecurity Act in the 20th Congress.

POLICY GAPS AND OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES

Definitional Vacuum and Legal Ambiguity

The most fundamental gap is the absence of clear and comprehensive definitions of foreign interference encompassing contemporary tactics across multiple domains. Existing instruments provide inadequate definitional clarity for operational implementation or democratic accountability.

This definitional vacuum creates cascading problems throughout the legal system. Law enforcement agencies lack clear standards for distinguishing foreign interference from legitimate international engagement, prosecutors face challenges building cases when underlying legal frameworks do not clearly define the conduct being addressed, and courts must interpret vague provisions that may conflict with constitutional protections.

The ambiguity also enables selective enforcement based on political considerations rather than objective threat assessments, creating risks for both democratic accountability and effective security responses.

Institutional Fragmentation and Coordination Gaps

Another area of concern is that multiple agencies possess overlapping yet incomplete mandates. The Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT) leads cybersecurity but lacks authority over non-cyber interference dimensions. The National Security Council addresses strategic threats but may lack operational cyber capabilities. Law enforcement investigates criminal activities but struggles with state-level attribution and jurisdictional limitations.

Because foreign interference operations deliberately blur boundaries between cyber and physical, criminal and political domains, it might overwhelm agencies with sector-specific mandates. The absence of designated lead agency means accountability remains diffused across institutions with competing priorities, enabling adversaries to exploit coordination gaps.

Reactive Governance and Strategic Lag

Evidently, Philippine responses exhibit consistently reactive patterns—the Foreign Agents Act responding to communist infiltration, the Cybercrime Prevention Act following hacking incidents, the NCSP responding to escalating nation-state activities. This reactive posture means frameworks perpetually lag behind evolving threats, creating persistent vulnerabilities.

Most importantly, political temporality creates additional vulnerabilities. The NCSP's five-year timeframe spans potential administration changes without policy continuity guarantees. Different administrations may maintain varying relationships with potential source countries, creating inconsistency undermining long-term strategy development.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Legislative Modernization and Definitional Clarity

The Philippines requires comprehensive legislative modernization providing clear definitions of foreign interference encompassing traditional and digital tactics. The definitional framework should include: (1) coercive interference using economic leverage or political pressure to influence policy; (2) deceptive interference using false identities or undisclosed funding; (3) clandestine interference through undisclosed operations violating sovereignty; and (4) corrupting interference involving improper payments to influence officials.

The framework should consider disclosure of foreign funding of political activities, transparency for media ownership, and reporting for cybersecurity incidents involving foreign actors. Regular review mechanisms must also be in place to ensure continued relevance as threats evolve.

Institutional Innovation and Coordination Enhancement

The Philippine government through the DICT's National Cybersecurity Plan have already laid out the establishment of a National Cyber Intelligence Network (Cyber fusion SOC) which is under the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency (NICA). It is said to provide integrated analysis, coordinate multi-agency responses, and facilitate international cooperation. Its specific role includes analytical capabilities spanning cyber, economic, political, and social domains; operational authorities for investigation; and public communication responsibilities.

International cooperation frameworks are also required to enhance and show alignment with regional powers through formal agreements with like-minded democracies for information sharing and capacity building. Regional cooperation through ASEAN should expand to include shared threat intelligence and coordinated responses.

Ideally, NICA should also coordinate with private sector entities through public-private partnerships balancing national security requirements with constitutional protections, including incident reporting mechanisms and joint threat assessment processes.

Educational Imperatives and Societal Resilience

At the minimum, since foreign interference may start with personal devices such as computers and cellphones, the masses should be aware of cyber threats. Mass education programs must encompass media literacy, critical thinking, and understanding of basic interference tactics. Programs should also be integrated into formal curricula, extended through community education, and amplified through public awareness campaigns. Professional development should target government officials, media personnel, and civil society leaders who may be particular targets.

Democratic Safeguards and Constitutional Protections

Legal frameworks must advocate for safeguards protecting constitutional rights while enabling security responses. These include precise legal definitions excluding legitimate expression, independent oversight mechanisms, transparent processes with appeal rights, and regular public reporting. Legislation should also protect whistleblowers while establishing penalties for false accusations. Congressional oversight should include regular hearings and bipartisan continuity across administrations. An independent commission that adheres to UN convention regarding cybersecurity should also be considered.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of Philippine legal responses to foreign interference from 1979 to 2024 reveals both institutional adaptability and persistent vulnerabilities that compromise national security and democratic governance. While conceptual understanding has advanced—from narrow registration requirements in the 1979 Foreign Agents Act to strategic vision encompassed in the National Cybersecurity Plan 2023-2028—implementation remains hampered by definitional ambiguities, institutional fragmentation, and reactive governance patterns that consistently lag behind threat evolution.

In addition, the strategic ambiguity identified in this analysis represents not governance failure but deliberate policy choice for navigating asymmetric power relationships while preserving sovereignty and policy flexibility. This challenges conventional wisdom that legal precision necessarily enhances security effectiveness, which affirms, that for middle powers like the Philippines, strategic ambiguity itself becomes a tool for managing great power competition. However, this approach must be balanced with operational clarity and democratic

accountability requirements that enable effective threat response while preventing authoritarian overreach.

The current historical moment presents both opportunity and urgency for comprehensive reform. Growing public awareness of foreign interference, particularly regarding activities in the South China Sea and social media manipulation, creates political space for legislative action that was previously lacking. International experience provides models for effective frameworks that balance security requirements with democratic values. Yet this window may be limited as technological evolution continues outpacing legal adaptation and geopolitical competition intensifies.

This paper, therefore, recommends advanced legislative modernization, institutional innovation, educational imperatives, and democratic safeguards to provide a comprehensive framework for addressing identified gaps while preserving constitutional protections. Implementation success will require sustained political commitment across multiple administrations, adequate resource allocation, and continued adaptation to evolving threat environments.

Moreover, the Philippines offers broader lessons for democracies confronting similar challenges: legal frameworks must evolve continuously rather than episodically; institutional responses must integrate across traditional bureaucratic boundaries; societal resilience provides the ultimate defense against foreign interference; and democratic values must be protected especially during, not despite, security challenges.

As the Philippines continues navigating between major powers while pursuing national development, the adequacy of legal frameworks for addressing foreign interference becomes increasingly critical for preserving sovereignty and democracy.

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Biodiversity Beyond Borders: The West Philippine Sea and Regional Strategies

Arianne Joy Fabregas

"Dr. Hazel Arceo conducting fish visual census at Rizal Reef"

Eena Nuevas, University of the Philippines Marine Science Institute, <https://msi.upd.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/WPS-Research-Tales-From-the-Sails-09v3.jpg>

Biodiversity Beyond Borders: The West Philippine Sea and Regional Strategies

Arianne Joy Fabregas¹

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- This paper believes that BBNJ has the potential to enhance Philippine marine governance through technology and capacity building.
- Localizing BBNJ can bolster fisheries and eco-tourism, and regional marine conservation in the West Philippine Sea.
- Regional cooperation among Southeast Asian nations is essential to address cross-border ecological threats and institutional fragmentation.
- Community engagement and stakeholder inclusion are vital to realizing the economic and environmental benefits of marine biodiversity governance.
- Aligning national implementation with international commitments like the UN Ocean Decade can attract funding, scientific collaboration, and innovation.

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ABSTRACT

The West Philippine Sea, a critical maritime region rich in biodiversity, holds immense ecological, economic, and strategic importance for the Philippines and the broader Southeast Asian region (Arceo et.al. 2024). However, the sustainable management and conservation of its marine resources face significant challenges due to overlapping territorial claims, overexploitation, and environmental degradation. The Marine Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement, a landmark international treaty, presents a unique opportunity to address these challenges through capacity building and technology transfer (2023 Agreement Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea Oon the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction 2023).

This research explores how the BBNJ Agreement can catalyze enhancing the Philippines' ability to protect and manage its marine biodiversity within the West Philippine Sea. It examines the mechanisms of the agreement that facilitate technology transfer, particularly in areas such as marine research, monitoring, and enforcement. By leveraging these mechanisms, the Philippines can develop the scientific and technical expertise to safeguard its aquatic ecosystems effectively.

Furthermore, this research highlights the potential for regional cooperation in implementing the BBNJ Agreement, emphasizing the role of capacity-building initiatives in fostering collaboration among Southeast Asian nations. Through joint efforts in scientific research, data sharing, and the development of sustainable practices, the region can strengthen its collective ability to conserve marine biodiversity and ensure the long-term sustainability of the West Philippine Sea.

Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of integrating the BBNJ Agreement into the national and regional strategies for the West Philippine Sea, advocating for a proactive approach that prioritizes capacity building and technology transfer. Such an approach not only enhances the Philippines' maritime governance but also contributes to the global effort to protect the world's oceans for future generations.

INTRODUCTION

The West Philippine Sea (WPS) is an area of exceptional marine biodiversity and economic significance, hosting 20 identified ecosystems and a diversified array of organisms such as seaweeds, fish, corals, and invertebrates (Ambal 2012). Importantly, 693 species of seaweeds—65 percent of the national total—are present here (Arceo et al. 2024). The WPS protects more than a third of the country's marine environment and supports fishing by 133 coastal communities, offering employment and sustenance to about 8 million individuals (PSA 2021). Being part of the Coral Triangle, it is regarded as the world's richest marine region in terms of species (Asaad et al. 2019; Ng and Tan 2000), and its biodiversity supports blue economies of surrounding nations, particularly fisheries and aquaculture (Azanza et al. 2022). Nevertheless, human actions and climate change increasingly endanger the area (Asaad et al. 2019). Geopolitically, the WPS is crucial for global trade and the transport of energy, but the overlapping claims to the area have caused conflicts that threaten the security and development of the region (Tran et al. 2010).

Despite treaties like UNCLOS (Druel et al. 2013), loopholes in protecting marine biodiversity still exist. To meet these, the United Nations General Assembly in 2023 adopted the BBNJ Agreement, with emphasis placed on marine genetic resources, area-based management tools, environmental impact assessments, and capacity building and technology transfer. The BBNJ has a strong institutional framework, which includes a Conference of the Parties and a Scientific and Technical Body (Friedman 2023). Regional leaders such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore emphasized the significance of the agreement in terms of access to marine resources, capacity building, and multilateralism (Dirhamsyah 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore 2023; United Nations 2023).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTION

This research explores how the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement can serve as a crucial instrument for the Philippines in strengthening its capacity to conserve and manage marine biodiversity in the West Philippine Sea. The study will specifically assess the benefits of technology transfer and capacity-building provisions in the agreement, which could enhance the country's ability to protect its rich marine ecosystems, particularly in the context of human security and sustainability.

Further, the study will also examine the potential socio-economic impacts of improved marine biodiversity management, including contributions to sustainable fisheries, eco-tourism, and the blue economy. These sectors are critical for the coastal communities reliant on the WPS, given the region's biodiversity and its economic significance. Furthermore, this research will explore how regional cooperation under the BBNJ framework could bolster marine conservation efforts and foster economic collaboration among Southeast Asian nations.

Therefore, the primary research question is: “How can the BBNJ Agreement enhance the Philippines' capacity to manage and conserve the marine biodiversity of the West Philippine Sea, and what are the potential economic and regional cooperation benefits of its implementation?”

LITERATURE REVIEW

Marine Biodiversity in the West Philippine Sea

The West Philippine Sea is a marine biodiversity hotspot, with 2,876 Chordata species inhabiting it, with higher richness off the Philippine, Taiwanese, and Japanese islands (Wang et al. 2021). There are 1,056 marine fish species in Palawan waters alone, with more off the Sulu Sea than the WPS (Balisco et al. 2023). Economically important macrobenthic invertebrates, including giant clams and echinoderms, occur in Pag-asa Island's reefs and seagrass beds (Balisco 2020). Upper mesophotic coral communities (30–40m) are analogous in habitat and fish assemblages with shallow reefs, and coral and fish richness are more affected by place than depth (Quimpo et al. 2019). Although all but a few species are listed as “Least Concern,” some, particularly elasmobranchs, are in jeopardy, emphasizing the necessity of sound conservation (Wang et al. 2021).

Several threats—unlawful fishing, pollution, coastal alteration, and climate change—present synergistic threats to WPS ecosystems (Malayang et al. 2023). These stressors perpetuate continuous habitat degradation (Devlin et al. 2021). Globally, the most important threats to marine life are increasing sea temperatures, destructive fishing, and organic pollution (Halpern et al. 2007). The most important human effects are overexploitation and loss of habitat, with the latter responsible for most of declining marine species (Worm and Lenihan 2013). The WPS's fisheries management areas contribute significant ecological and economic benefit to Filipinos and neighboring areas (Malayang et al. 2023), but these services are now

under ever-increasing threat. Limited resources and the nature of threats call for prioritization and strategic conservation (Halpern et al. 2007).

Existing Marine Conservation and Economic Efforts (Local and Regional)

The Philippines has been doing conservation of the sea for a long time and has formed community-based management and marine protected areas since the 1970s, which have enhanced fish productivity and protection of coral reefs (White et al. 2002). Devolution to local authorities in 1991 facilitated more localized management (White et al. 2002), but the institutional structure is fragmented and requires further sectoral integration (La Viña 2002). There are also blue economy projects that seek to connect poverty alleviation, equity, and conservation but can potentially prioritize economic growth over people's needs (Satizábal et al. 2020). The marine ecosystems of the country are of great worth, estimated at US\$966.6 billion (Azanza et al. 2017), which motivates national and regional agreements for sustainable management (Azanza et al. 2017).

Southeast Asian nations, such as the Philippines, see the blue economy's potential (Azanza et al. 2017). But the South China Sea area is rapidly suffering from ecosystem loss due to habitat destruction and overfishing (Sweden 2005). Global conventions such as UNCLOS 1982 establish sea boundaries and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), supporting harmonious relationships between nations such as Indonesia and the Philippines (Yulianti and Pardani 2022). Bilateral structures and common working groups take up maritime issues, but enforcement and the effect of global EEZs on far-water fishing pose difficulties (Marsh 1992).

Regardless of these initiatives, conservation results are ambiguous. Multifaceted conservation and development projects have tended to accrue to only a limited number of households, without achieving environmental objectives or widespread stakeholder involvement (Cagalan 2013). Local (inexperience, low conservation priority) and structural (weak policy formulation, poor support) barriers oppose community-based forest management (Cagalan 2015). Small-scale fisheries are facing population pressure, food insecurity, and unsustainable fishing practices, which call for sustainable financing and income diversification (Barboza et al. 2024). However, recent achievements indicate that intensified investment and attention can pay off (Posa et al. 2008). Closure of these gaps is essential to enhance conservation and realize economic opportunities.

The BBNJ Agreement

The BBNJ Agreement prioritizes capacity building and technology transfer (CB&TT) as essential components for protecting marine biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction. Definitions, a shared vision, and vehicles through which varied voices inform action form major provisions (Harden-Davies et al. 2024). The agreement focuses on filling knowledge gaps, promoting scientific cooperation, and reinforcing capacity through collaborative international engagement (Harden-Davies and Snelgrove 2020). It creates a system of technical and funding assistance to developing nations, which is critical for successful implementation (Park 2023). CB&TT initiatives as they exist today, including those undertaken by Japan, offer frameworks that may be used in BBNJ, though specifically designed BBNJ projects are scarce (Fujii et al. 2022). To assure its effective implementation, areas of focus include country-led needs assessments, quality monitoring of capacity building, assistance to key processes, sharing of information, and financing (Harden-Davies et al. 2024). The 2023 BBNJ Agreement is a historic milestone towards preserving marine biodiversity outside national jurisdiction, balancing environmental and economic concerns through compromises (Ricard 2024). This agreement has the potential to revolutionize stewardship of high seas, providing varied benefits in terms of enhanced multilateral institutions, improved ecosystem condition, and long-term economic growth (Santos et al. 2022). The Agreement takes on different approaches in its different components, adhering to the principle of “form follows function” (Tang 2024). Of particular note is the environmental impact assessment (EIA) process specified in the Agreement, which is indispensable for environmental protection, especially against highly susceptible zones like the West Philippine Sea.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research uses qualitative examination of major international and domestic policy papers, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea , the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Agreement, and pertinent Philippine maritime policies. A hierarchical network methodology is utilized to evaluate maritime policy options and their wider implications, specifically the interlinkages among maritime governance, national defense, and international cooperation (Sarjito and Azhar 2023). This approach, borrowed from shipping policy analysis (Frankel 1992), enhances sustainable management of marine resources by using

evidence-based, multidisciplinary decision-making (Shih 2024). Moreover, an economic valuation will calculate the worth of marine resources under enhanced conservation. This involves assessing eco-tourism, fisheries, and marine ecosystem services to create an economic argument for the application of BBNJ principles.

Data Collection

For data collection, case studies of nations where BBNJ-consistent strategies have been successfully applied will be explored, specifically those showing positive economic trends. These case studies will provide comparative analyses of effective governance models and how they may apply to the WPS.

Data Analysis

The gathered data will be thematically analyzed to identify common opportunities and challenges for the application of BBNJ principles in the WPS context on both ecological and economic sides. Sustainable use of marine resources is expected to bring some economic benefits, and economic impact analysis will evaluate potential gains from tourism and fisheries conservation. The analysis will quantify the benefits from ecosystems services to identify opportunities for conservation investment to yield concrete economic returns and collectively provide a robust assessment of the ecological and economic benefits of applying BBNJ approaches in the WPS.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

How the BBNJ Agreement Can Address Conservation and Economic Gaps in the WPS

The Agreement on BBNJ aims to improve marine biodiversity conservation in areas beyond national jurisdiction through four pillars: marine genetic resources, area-based management tools (ABMTs), environmental impact assessments (EIAs), and capacity building and technology transfer (Ricard 2024). Scientific research underpins capacity building, with technology transfer being crucial for minimizing knowledge gaps and ensuring inclusive participation in ocean science (Harden-Davies and Snelgrove 2020). The accord supports efforts such as the UN Decade of Ocean Science (Hoel 2021) and emphasizes dealing with ocean connectivity, institutional architecture, and digital tools in the negotiations (Tessnow-von Wysocki

and Vadrot 2020). Transformational change and enhanced science-policy interfaces are essential for effective implementation (Tessnow-von Wysocki and Vadrot 2020).

ABMTs play a central role in addressing illegal fishing and pollution (De Santo 2018), and the BBNJ strengthens cooperative structures by allowing states and non-state actors to serve local interests (Payne 2020). EIAs and ABMTs can be used for transboundary pollution like underwater noise (Reeve 2019), and integration between the BBNJ and the International Maritime Organization is vital for enforcing vessel pollution controls across high seas (Wang and Zhang 2024). The Conference of Parties to the BBNJ can suggest special areas to the IMO, whereas the IMO can facilitate implementation by making available relevant information (Wang and Zhang 2024).

Technology Transfer: Conservation and Economic Growth

Sophisticated technologies such as remote sensing and marine robotics can contribute to conservation as well as foster economic ventures such as fisheries and eco-tourism. With limitations due to economic and political factors, uptake has been low, for example, in the Caribbean (Specter and Gayle, 1990). BBNJ places much focus on technology transfer and capacity development in overcoming knowledge deficits and enabling inclusive marine science (Harden-Davies and Snelgrove 2020). Utilization of such technologies is central to the implementation of the goals of BBNJ.

Obstacles are financial constraints, administrative barriers, and Intellectual Property Rights problems (Corsi et al. 2021; Gunawansa and Kua 2011). Clean Development Mechanisms and policies favoring adoption of clean tech can ease its adoption (Corsi et al. 2021), and enhancing cooperation between North and South countries could prompt industrialized nations to transfer technologies safely (Gunawansa and Kua 2011). Foreign Direct Investment and innovations such as mini-technology transfer during recession can maintain pace (Glass et al. 2006; Ekholm 1988). A network model can link stakeholders—states, research centers, and industry—thus improving BBNJ provisions (Minas 2018).

Capacity Building and Local Expertise

The Philippines has a problem with marine conservation because of capacity deficiencies, whereas nations such as Japan have invested in suitable BBNJ programs (Fujii et al. 2022). The agreement offers a financial and legal framework for developing local expertise (Harden-Davies et al. 2022). With marine ecosystems

worth USD 966.6 billion (Azanza et al. 2017), enhanced conservation has obvious financial benefit. However, marine protected areas (MPAs) within the nation are lacking—just 0.5 percent of municipal waters and 2.7–3.4 percent of coral reefs are in no-take areas (Weeks et al. 2010). Community-based action aids but is not enough; more extensive no-take areas are required (Weeks et al. 2010).

BBNJ strengthens CBT, critical to empowering developing nations to exercise rights in national jurisdiction areas (Vierros and Harden-Davies 2020). Customized projects are still few (Fujii et al. 2022), although Japan's initiatives provide useful platforms. Subsequent initiatives need to align CBT within jurisdictions and priorities at the national level, empowering the UN Ocean Decade (Vierros and Harden-Davies 2020). The strategy facilitates integrated governance and bridges capacity gaps (Harden-Davies et al. 2022).

Aside from conservation, CBT fosters economic gains in the form of employment generation and industry growth (Santos et al. 2022). The BBNJ can enhance ecosystem well-being, enhance cooperation, and contribute to inclusive participation in marine science and technology (Harden-Davies and Snelgrove 2020; Hoel 2021).

Regional Cooperation in Southeast Asia

The BBNJ Agreement encourages regional cooperation in sea conservation through scientific collaboration and technology transfer (Harden-Davies and Snelgrove 2020), enhancing multilateralism and economic growth (Santos et al. 2022). It provides a framework for streamlining governance fragmentation and enhancing regime coherence (Novella 2022). Enhanced cooperation through institutional rules and ecosystem evaluations can enhance resilience (Gjerde and Yadav 2021).

Successful cooperation is represented by MPAs between local fishers and stakeholders (Weigel et al. 2014), with ecotourism enhancing sustainable governance and valuation of natural capital (Casimiro et al. 2023). Global cooperation can save fishery revenues of billions (Rinnan et al. 2021), and planned integration can determine areas for collaborative action (Levin et al. 2013).

ECONOMIC ENHANCEMENT THROUGH SUSTAINABLE MARINE MANAGEMENT

The Philippines, as an archipelago, holds promising blue economy possibilities within fisheries, transport, and tourism (Mendoza and Valenzuela 2021). However, it needs to deal with overfishing and habitat degradation (PIDS, 2016). The BBNJ might improve marine health, advance equity, and facilitate aquaculture, infrastructure, and sustainable financing (Santos et al., 2022; PIDS, 2016). Fisheries contribute importantly to the economy in terms of jobs and exports (Barut et al. 2003), but sustainable management must weigh habitat protection, equity, and conflict avoidance (Barut et al. 2003).

International partnerships and private financing can support marine sustainability. Science-industry collaboration is a potential solution, despite difficulties (Österblom et al. 2020). Case studies such as the Chumbe Island Coral Park demonstrate that private MPAs are cost-effective (Riedmiller and Chumbe Island, 2003). North-South alliances are new modes of governance (Visseren-Hamakers et al. 2007). A stable investment environment and marine insurance programs could help cushion tourism-related risks (Riedmiller and Chumbe Island 2003). Green economy frameworks may require policy reform and investments in transitioning marine fisheries (UN Environment Inclusive Green Economy Resources and Markets BranchText 2017).

Technology Transfer and Blue Economy Development

Emerging technologies present economic opportunities in ocean energy, marine biotechnology, and sustainable aquaculture, while supporting BBNJ implementation (Minas 2018; Uddin and Islam 2019). Genetic techniques and disease diagnostics can support aquaculture, while renewable energy provides viable alternatives (Uddin and Islam 2019). Technology transfer mechanisms within UNCLOS involve training and data-sharing (Harden-Davies 2021), but implementation is patchy (Hoel 2021). The UN Decade of Ocean Science offers a critical opportunity to ramp up action (Harden-Davies 2021; Hoel 2021).

The blue economy puts economic development on a sustainable path and favors industries such as fisheries, tourism, and shipping (Patil et al. 2018; Mussa et al. 2021; Hussain et al. 2017). To achieve its potential, policy mainstreaming, stakeholder involvement, and science are critical (Sarwat 2022; Mussa et al. 2021).

CONCLUSION

From all the findings of this research study, it is evident that the BBNJ Agreement offers a unique opportunity for the Philippines to enhance marine governance in the West Philippine Sea by addressing conservation and sustainable resource use. By incorporating BBNJ objectives into national policy, the Philippines can bridge gaps in ocean governance, support economic growth, and balance environmental and economic interests. Essential strategies include advancing the legal framework, fostering stakeholder engagement, and prioritizing capacity building and technology transfer for sustainable development.

As the BBNJ Agreement enables sustainable management of marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction while fostering economic opportunities for coastal communities. It provides tools such as area-based management, joint research, and community involvement, which can help address critical environmental issues like overfishing and habitat degradation. For the WPS, this integration could bolster eco-tourism, enhance fisheries management, and promote the blue economy, aligning conservation efforts with the livelihoods of local communities.

Further, locally, it strengthens the Philippines' position in regional marine conservation while supporting sustainable economic development. Regionally, the integration encourages Southeast Asian cooperation on marine protection and shared resources management, fostering ecosystem resilience. On a global scale, the BBNJ Agreement advances international conservation commitments, contributing to economic equity by enabling developing countries to access funding, capacity building, and marine research partnerships.

Future Research and Actions

Future research should explore WPS economic potential and financing innovations to enable inclusive, BBNJ-aligned, biodiversity-driven regional marine management.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Integrating BBNJ into National Policy

- **Incorporating BBNJ Objectives in National Legislation:** The Philippines needs to strengthen its legal framework and institutional arrangements for ocean governance (Narula 2016). This requires addressing existing gaps, enhancing international cooperation, and ensuring sustainable development of marine resources while balancing economic interests with conservation efforts (Narula 2016; Azanza et al. 2017).
- **Developing a National BBNJ Implementation Strategy.** Key steps include fast-tracking ratification, establishing a Preparatory Commission, and mobilizing resources (Gjerde et al. 2022). Regional frameworks can provide valuable lessons and best practices for global negotiations (Durussel et al. 2017). Implementation challenges for area-based management tools need to be addressed, focusing on improving the evidence basis, designing effective compliance mechanisms, and engaging stakeholders (De Santo 2018). Capacity building and technology transfer are crucial for developing countries to fulfill their obligations and realize their rights in areas beyond national jurisdiction. Synergies between initiatives for areas beyond and within national jurisdiction should be maximized, aligning with national sustainable development priorities (Vierros and Harden-Davies 2020).
- **Engaging Coastal Communities and Stakeholders:** Develop initiatives that engage local communities and stakeholders, especially those reliant on fisheries, eco-tourism, and related sectors. Their involvement can ensure that BBNJ-aligned policies meet environmental and economic needs, improving livelihood security for communities along the West Philippine Sea.

Fostering Regional Cooperation

- A polycentric approach to BBNJ governance is proposed. Emphasizing the need for overarching rules, conflict resolution mechanisms, and strengthened regional cooperation (Gjerde and Yadav 2021). The Southeast Pacific region faces institutional and legal challenges in implementing BBNJ elements, highlighting the importance of regional approaches in complementing global efforts (Durussel et al. 2017). To enhance cooperation, suggestions include developing shared frameworks, coordinated policy implementation, and

integrated ecosystem assessments at ecologically meaningful scales (Gogoi and Sarmah 2024; Gjerde and Yadav 2021).

- **Promoting Data Sharing and Joint Research.** Joint research projects and credible information production are emphasized as crucial for collaborative policy-making and dispute resolution (Mendoza and Siriban 2013). Reconciling economic development with conservation requires complex, consultative processes that consider local communities, ecosystems, and environmental impacts (Muir 2002). Financing mechanisms and burden-sharing are important for successful international cooperation in the blue economy (Mendoza and Siriban 2013).
- **Developing a Regional Marine Protection Strategy:** Developing a Regional Marine Protection Strategy: Integrating marine conservation with tourism through protected areas and zoning can help reduce conflicts between different stakeholders (Salm 1985). The Southeast Pacific region faces institutional and legal challenges in implementing BBNJ elements, highlighting the need for a strengthened framework (Durussel et al. 2017).

In Strengthening International Partnerships

- **Securing International Funding and Technical Support:** The BBNJ Agreement can strengthen the international legal framework for CBTT, addressing funding, information-sharing, and decision-making (Harden-Davies et al. 2022). A strong treaty could yield diverse benefits, including enhanced multilateral cooperation, sustainable ocean-based economic growth, and improved equity in global ocean governance (Santos et al. 2022). Synergies between the BBNJ Agreement and other international commitments, such as the UN Ocean Decade, offer opportunities to maximize the impact of CBTT initiatives (Vierros and Harden-Davies 2020).
- **Collaborating with the Global Scientific Community.** The BBNJ treaty has the potential to bolster international cooperation, enhance marine ecosystem health, drive sustainable economic growth, and address global ocean inequalities (Santos et al. 2022). Implementing science-based management approaches and resolving stakeholder conflicts is crucial for the treaty's success (Gäbel et al, 2020).

- Fostering Growth, an integrated development plan, and dedicated institutions (Mendoza and Valenzuela 2021). Opportunities for advancement within the region which includes optimizing aquaculture technology, implementing sustainable financing schemes, and investing in infrastructure that promotes sustainable practices (Sanchez-Escalona 2023). Additionally, developing human resources and tapping into ocean power potential could drive innovation (Sanchez-Escalona 2023).

Through these policy recommendations, gathered and analyzed from different research studies, the Philippines can integrate the BBNJ Agreement into its national agenda, support regional marine conservation efforts, and position itself as a forerunner in sustainable marine resource management in Southeast Asia.

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