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■ STRATEGIC STUDIES PROGRAM

A MONOGRAPH ON THE 7TH KATIPUNAN CONFERENCE

Philippine Strategic Outlook 2025:

National Security and Economic Resilience
in a Changing Global Order



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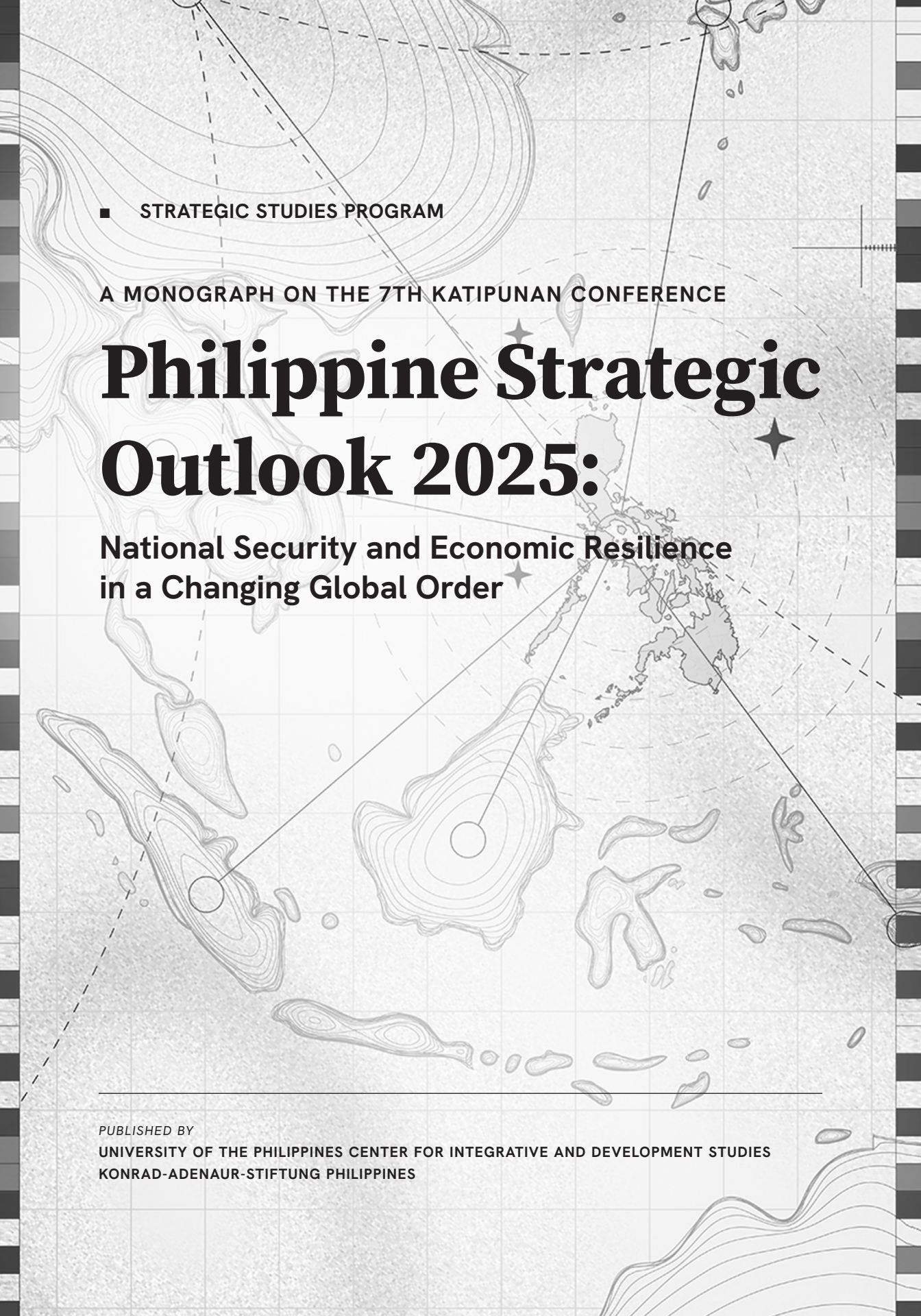
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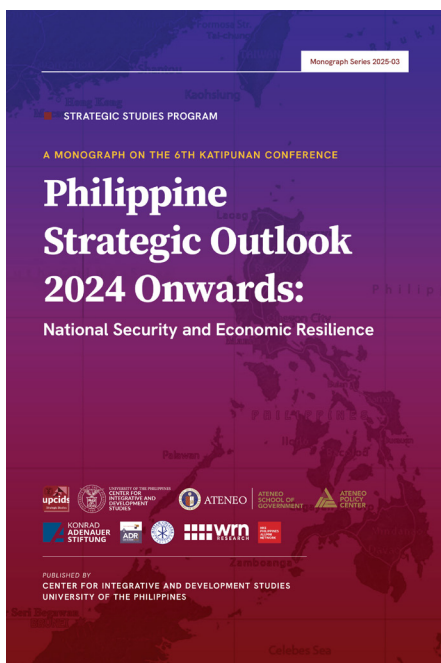
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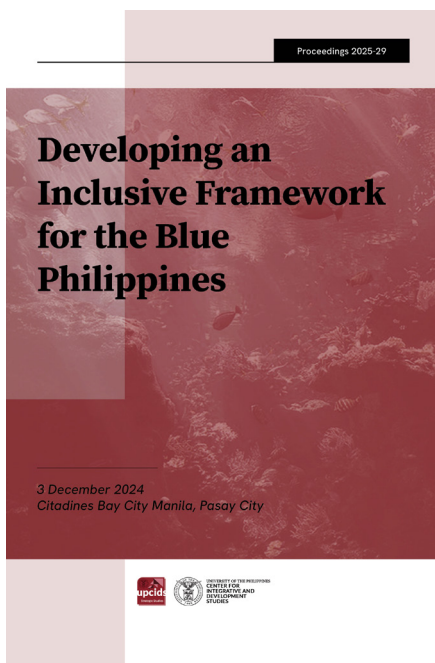
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About the Monograph

This monograph compiles a selection of papers from the Seventh Katipunan Conference, held on October 15–16 2025 at the Ignacio B. Gimenez KAL Theatre University of the Philippines Diliman. Organized with the support of esteemed institutions including the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies, Miriam College, Ateneo School of Government, and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung 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 2025: National Security and Economic Resilience in a Changing Global Order," 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. The Philippines' Strategic Role in the Indo-Pacific
2. Philippine Military Modernization Efforts
3. Alliances & Partnerships
4. Environmental and Maritime Security
5. Climate Change and Disaster Resilience
6. Information and Technology
7. Geopolitics and Economic Strategy
8. Domestic Economic Development

The essays analyze the challenges and opportunities for a small power like the Philippines in a transitional global period, marked by shifting power dynamics and significant economic risks. Specifically, this collection provides crucial, evidence-based insights into how the Philippines can strengthen its national security and economic development. A core focus is placed on the nation's strategic location adjacent to vital sea lanes for international trade and the Coral Triangle.

This monograph serves as an essential resource for policymakers, academics, and strategic thinkers seeking to effectively navigate the changing global order and support the long-term resilience and prosperity of the Philippines.

Foreword

Daniela Braun, PhD

Country Director, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Philippines

The Philippines today stands at a critical juncture in its security and foreign policy journey. The country operates in an increasingly complex strategic environment — one defined by intensifying great-power competition, shifting regional security architectures, and the growing interplay between defence, economics, and technology. Trade disputes, strategic supply chain vulnerabilities, climate pressures, energy transitions, and ongoing military conflicts are all reshaping what it means for a nation to be secure and resilient in the twenty-first century. These challenges not only redefine the Philippines' national interests but also call for fresh thinking, strategic foresight, and sustained dialogue among policymakers, scholars, and practitioners alike.

The questions confronting decision-makers and analysts are complex. How can the Philippines safeguard sovereignty and advance its national interests amid great-power rivalry? What strategies will strengthen maritime security, defense modernization, and economic competitiveness? And how can government institutions adapt to new challenges such as digital transformation, disinformation, and economic coercion? These are not abstract or theoretical issues — they cut to the very core of the Philippines' long-term strategic direction.

The challenges facing the country today resonate deeply in Europe and in Germany. Across our regions, democracies are grappling with disinformation, hybrid threats, economic dependencies, and the difficult task of balancing openness with resilience. Both Europe and the Indo-Pacific confront a world in which security and prosperity can no longer be treated as separate domains. It is therefore essential that we deepen the dialogue between our regions — to share lessons learned, exchange best practices, and jointly strengthen the democratic principles and cooperative frameworks that underpin peace and stability.

In this context, the Katipunan Conference, organized by the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (CIDS), has become a vital platform for rigorous academic exchange and constructive dialogue. Bringing together leading scholars, analysts, government officials, and members of the security community, the Katipunan Conference provides an intellectual space for

the exchange of ideas and the development of strategies to address the challenges of the twenty-first century.

This monograph, emerging from the 7th Katipunan Conference under the theme “National Security & Economic Resilience in a Changing Global Order”, captures that spirit of inquiry. The contributions gathered here explore a wide spectrum of issues — from the defence alliances, gray zone activities in the West Philippine Sea, the relations with China, disinformation and naval build-up. Together, they provide valuable insights into how the Philippines can counter pressing foreign and security challenges.

For the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), supporting such a platform is both timely and consistent with our long-standing mission. For decades, KAS has worked closely with Philippine partners to promote good governance, democratic institutions, inclusive economic development, and security and stability in the region. We believe that open and evidence-based policy discussions are essential to shaping effective responses to the multidimensional security challenges of our time.

I wish to extend my sincere appreciation to Dr. Rosalie Hall and her dedicated team at the UP CIDS, as well as to all the scholars and practitioners who contributed to this volume. Their expertise, and unwavering commitment exemplify the kind of collaborative scholarship that strengthens democratic societies and informs thoughtful policy-making. It is my hope that this publication will serve not only as a collection of academic ideas but also as a call to action — a call to engage with and address the complex challenges that lie ahead.

Introduction

Rosalie Arcala Hall, PhD

Executive Director

University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies

That we live in precarious times, is an understatement. US President Trump's tariff imposition disrupted global value chains and put additional pressure on the liberal international economic order already fraught from the tit-for-tat trade wars between US and China in previous years. The Philippine economy, long resilient from its steady Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) remittance flows and IT-BPO industry, is facing pressure from emerging technologies that continue to hollow out what little is left of the domestic manufacturing sector. In the region, China's escalating grey zone operations in West Philippine Sea, shifting from Second Thomas (Ayungin) to Scarborough and Sabina Shoals have seen Coast Guard personnel injured and local fishermen denied access. The rules-based order underpinned by United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and long-standing principles of territorial sovereignty is being eroded by ambitious China and Russia intent on expanding. Closer to home, revelations of online gaming havens operating as criminal networks with local government collusion has brought attention to the downside of opening the economy to malintended actors.

The Katipunan conference held on 15-16 October 2025, the 7th iteration, comes at a critical juncture. The Marcos Jr. administration is pursuing strategic legislation and diplomatic actions to reinforce the rules-based order anchored on the 2016 Arbitral Ruling and the principles of the UNCLOS. The urgent threats confronting the nation extend beyond traditional military concerns to include complex cybersecurity challenges, the non-traditional security implications of climate change and food security, and the need to diversify alliances amidst evolving geopolitical rivalry between US and China.

Building on the success of past iterations, the 7th Katipunan Conference brought together over 250 scholars, experts, and policymakers for a strategic discourse on the theme: National Security & Economic Resilience in a Changing Global Order. A niche in the Philippine academic conference circuit, the Katipunan conference showcases the work of junior scholars doing research on Philippine foreign policy and strategic studies. This premier forum, a collaboration between Katipunan higher education centers—UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies, Ateneo School of Government, and Miriam College Global Studies Program, is

designed to foster conversations between policymakers and established academics from Economics, Political Science, and International Relations disciplines. As conceptualized, the conference's core objective was two-fold: to engage in a sustained exploration of the intersection between national security and economic resilience, and to consolidate research findings into actionable, evidence-based policy recommendations. This volume is the direct product of that vision, forging a robust bridge between academic rigor and informed, participatory decision-making.

This monograph features seven (7) salient research papers covering a multi-domain struggle for Philippine sovereignty and stability. The analyses challenge reactive policymaking, pointing instead to the pervasive failure of governance to address deep-rooted structural issues. The volume is divided into two major thematic sections:

Geopolitical Strategy and Defense: These essays address the opportunities and risks inherent in the Philippines' strategic position within the US-China rivalry. Key studies interrogate the prospects and challenges of integrating with the US's Regional Sustainment Framework (RSF), the potential for a "small power trap" in foreign policy choices, and the nuanced dynamics of naval build-up in the Indo-Pacific.

Domestic Vulnerability, Resilience, and Governance: This section reveals that threats to national security are often amplified by internal fragility. Contributions cover diverse, critical areas, including the "resilience trap" in climate-induced flooding, the vulnerabilities of UNESCO World Heritage Sites due to a lack of heritage-specific disaster risk laws, and the corrosive effect of "silent colonialism" through POGO-linked digital influence operations.

Collectively, the papers in this monograph interrogates Philippine responses to opportunities and risks presented by the global shifts mentioned above. Santiago Juditho Emmanuel L. Castillo examines the Philippines readiness to the US Regional Sustainment Framework and its emphasis on a resilient Maintenance, Repair, and Overhaul (MRO) ecosystem in the Indo-Pacific region. The paper maps gaps and pathways to leverage Philippine-US alliance to develop the country's defense industry along this RSF push. Andre Rafael N. Gonzales and Susan Nashra Kurdli's paper meanwhile argues that the Marcos Jr. administrations full balancing policy is counterproductive and risks further elevating tensions with China. Pointing to security dilemma as an outcome, the authors recommend a return to the Duterte-era heavy-hedging policy in order to maximize to offset risks and widen strategic autonomy. Jhon Mark Rosales, Lambert Yancy Garganta, and. Xavier Dwight

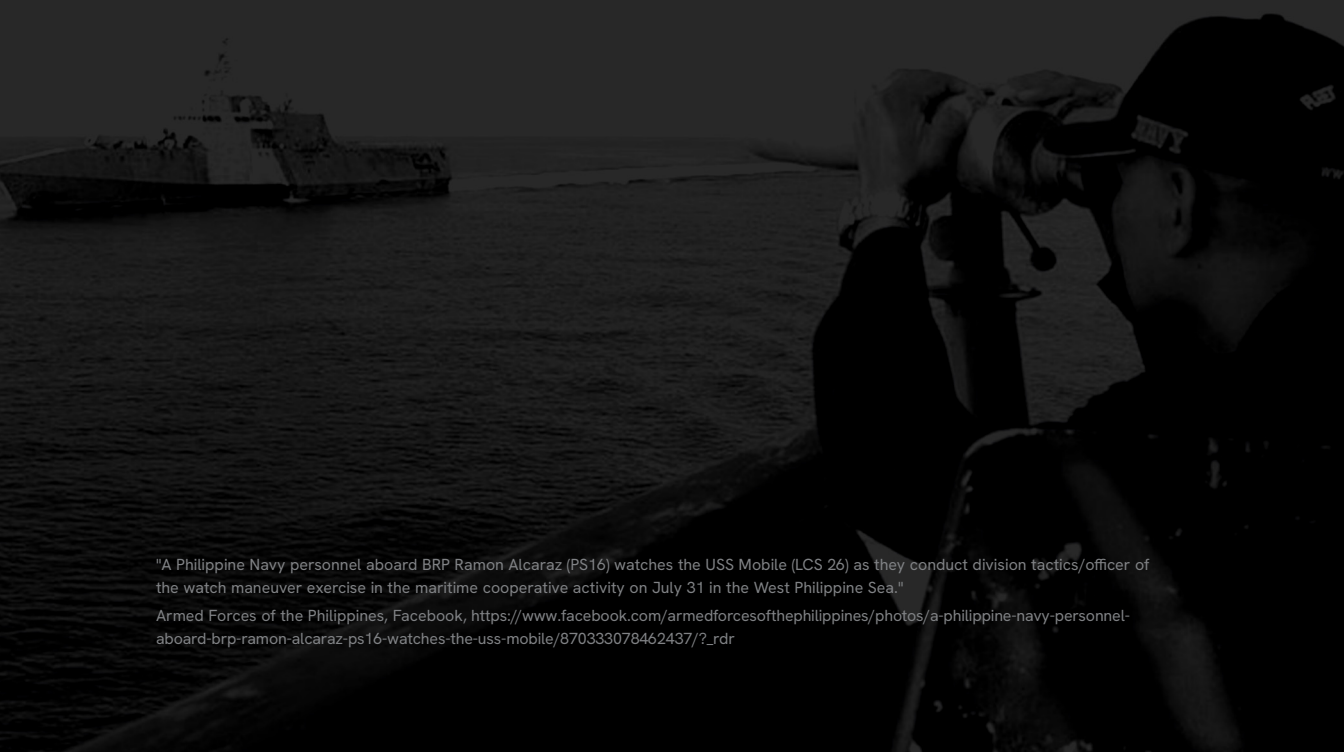
Gentalian's paper asserts Philippine geopolitical centrality arising from its win from the UNCLOS Arbitral Panel ruling and security cooperation agreements with US, Japan and Australia. Its persistence in challenging China's aggressive actions in the West Philippine Sea and proximity to Taiwan, however, makes the country a consequential target for China. Vincent Kyle Parada cautions against simplistic thinking that naval build up is inherently destabilizing for the region. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis, the authors point that military expenditure in Southeast Asian countries is driven by sustained regional economic growth and the exponentially rising cost of modern naval platforms. US-China rivalry, are skewing threat perceptions, framing routine modernization efforts as concerted preparations for armed conflict.

On the home front, the Philippines faces serious risks from climate change, criminal networks, and economic displacement. The paper of Alyssa Andrea P. Amatong, Heinz Herald S. Capati, Gabriel M. Gan, and Marc Justin P. Wong tracks the social and economic costs of flooding to residents of Antipolo, Rizal. They argue that these communities are caught in a "resilience trap," where reactive coping measures are continually undermined by persistent governance failures and unsustainable infrastructure interventions. The authors recommend implementing a local-national disaster risk reduction policy alignment audit, and establishing a local resilience fund for pre-disaster economic capacity. Ken Emmanuel Merluza similarly offers a critical examination of disaster laws in the Philippines pointing to their inadequacies in protecting cultural heritage edifices. While protection measures are in place involving cooperation between various government agencies, no such comparable measure is present under the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management law. Lastly, One Miguel B. Policarpio investigates the nexus between Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGO) networks and influence operations on social media, arguing that POGOs function as a platform for "disinformation-for-rent". He recommends framing the POGO menace as a cyber security threat, suggests revising the espionage laws, and fostering regional cooperation to dismantle this criminal network.

This compendium articulates a compelling case for an integrated, cross-sectoral strategic outlook that marries economic and economic concerns, and illustrates the inextricable link between the domestic and foreign. They provide a window into the state of scholarship on key issues, and the kind of questions junior scholars find most pressing. As with standard conference proceedings, this volume invites readers to imagine what coherent, adaptive, and resilient defense and economic development strategies might look like. We look forward to the 8th Katipunan conference to continue this vibrant debate.

Sustaining the Defense Alliance and Strategic Partnerships: The Prospects and Challenges for the Philippines in the United States' Regional Sustainment Framework

Santiago Juditho Emmanuel L. Castillo, KVG



"A Philippine Navy personnel aboard BRP Ramon Alcaraz (PS16) watches the USS Mobile (LCS 26) as they conduct division tactics/officer of the watch maneuver exercise in the maritime cooperative activity on July 31 in the West Philippine Sea."

Armed Forces of the Philippines, Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/armedforcesofthephilippines/photos/a-philippine-navy-personnel-aboard-brp-ramon-alcaraz-ps16-watches-the-uss-mobile/870333078462437/?_rdr

Sustaining the Defense Alliance and Strategic Partnerships: The Prospects and Challenges for the Philippines in the United States' Regional Sustainment Framework

Santiago Juditho Emmanuel L. Castillo, KVG

BACKGROUND

In 2024, the United States' Department of Defense (DoD) released its Regional Sustainment Framework (RSF) with the main goal of further developing and improving defense logistics capabilities and capacity for the US military and its allies/partners to significantly enhance readiness and interoperability. The RSF is a blueprint aimed at empowering a globally connected, distributed, and resilient Maintenance, Repair, and Overhaul (MRO) ecosystem from which a comprehensive Regional Sustainment Strategy (RSS) will originate the RSF. It also intends to bring existing and potential weapon system MRO capability and capacity closer to the forward point of need, and to augment traditional strategies improving readiness in a contested logistics environment (Defense Acquisition University 2024). Upon the public release of the RSF, US Defense Undersecretary Dr. William A. LaPlante stated: "The RSF leverages our strong partnerships throughout the global defense ecosystem to deliver enhanced sustainment capabilities in theater." He further added, "Doing so will create a distributed network of MRO facilities that is global in scale, but regionally aligned to the most relevant platforms and systems" (US Department of Defense 2024).

The RSF has three primary goals, such as prevailing in a contested logistics environment, enhancing military readiness, and strengthening regional partnerships.¹ The release of the RSF comes at a time when regional tensions in East and Southeast Asia have steadily increased geopolitical competition between

¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Regional Sustainment Framework* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2024), 2.

the United States and the People’s Republic of China. Regional partners and allies of the United States, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, are also affected by this with China’s continued military belligerency and gray zone strategy in the region prompting for greater defense coordination. At the same time, the United States also recognizes that it needs to coordinate and cooperate even further with regional allies and partners to sustain defense logistics and operational tempo of their respective military forces deployed and operation in the region. In addition, there is also the need to bolster beneficial engagement with defense-related industries and government sectors for the necessary support base to lessen the costs of MRO operations. The RSF provides explanations with its four key points:

FRAMEWORK		DESCRIPTION
I.	Regionalization and Prioritization	Prioritize and align MRO partnership lines of effort based on strategic importance and operational requirements. Key considerations for prioritization and alignment include: ■ Strategic Relevance: Align regional MRO efforts with the National Defense Strategy (NDS) priorities and support critical strategic objectives such as Operational Plans. ■ Threat Recognition: Recognize and respond to emerging threats to ensure MRO responsiveness to deliver capabilities in an evolving security landscape. ■ Geopolitical Sensitivity: Recognize and adapt to geopolitical shifts and the inherent challenges they pose to logistics and supply chain stability. This geopolitical component may drive the need for redundancy and a more distributed MRO network to ensure supply chain stability in a contested logistics environment. ■ Regional Focus: Leverage regional allies and partners with established industrial capabilities and infrastructure capacity to enhance sustainment operations.
II.	Strategic Partnership Alignment	MRO initiatives require collaboration with allies and partner nations to leverage strengths, exploit mutually beneficial opportunities, and foster a unified approach to regional co-sustainment initiatives for MRO which will include: ■ Deliberate Integration: Prioritize engagement with allies and partners having shared defense systems and the potential for collaborative development, production, and sustainment endeavors. ■ Enhance Shared Capability: Leverage existing capabilities and/or develop new partner capabilities to bolster the overall defense posture of U.S. Joint Forces and our regional allies and partners.

FRAMEWORK	DESCRIPTION
III. Platforms and Systems Approach	Implementation requires stakeholders to prioritize tailoring sustainment efforts for critical platforms, identify gaps in regional support solutions, and bridge shortfalls up-front to support contingency planning and execution. Targeted weapons systems will be selected based on relevance to operational plans, a comprehensive review of Foreign Military Sales (FMS) cases and other cooperative programs, and the potential for MRO collaboration, along with other criteria outlined below. ■ Strategic Importance: Identify the systems that need to be sustained in a contested logistics environment. ■ International Relevance: Assess the impact and opportunity for MRO capability development with highly capable allies and partners who are engaged or who are willing to engage in co-development, co-production, or co-sustainment programs. ■ Maintenance Needs: Determine platform, system, subsystem, and component organizational, intermediate, and depot-level maintenance requirements. ■ Security: Detect cybersecurity, intellectual property, and supply chain vulnerabilities. ■ Retrograde Considerations: Capture all relevant data for the organized movement of unserviceable assets back to the nearest repair facility (e.g., time, distance, size, weight, complexity, and criticality). ■ International Industry Capacity: Review the scope of accessible domestic and partner nation industrial support (e.g., workforce, and facilities).
IV. Industrial Base Integration	A regionally focused framework will promote partnerships with the global defense industry and align commercial capabilities with DoD sustainment needs, as directed in the National Defense Industrial Strategy. DoD and other Federal Departments will explore ways to encourage industry investments (e.g., policy, contractual, and political) by promoting the benefits of co-sustainment. Potential government efforts include: ■ Establish Predictable Demand: Consistent demand signal forecasting is crucial for planning, investment, and development of sustainment capabilities. Offer a predictable and consistent demand for MRO services to provide a stable market and opportunities for allies, partner nations, and the global defense industry.

FRAMEWORK	DESCRIPTION
	■ Accelerate Partnerships: Facilitate the swift establishment of partnerships between the defense sector and industry. ■ Integrate Product Support Strategies: Ensure that product support solutions incorporate U.S., allies, and partners desired capabilities and objectives. Focus on optimizing the allocation of available resources—including the capabilities of allies and ■ A regionally focused framework will promote partnerships with the global defense industry and align commercial capabilities with DoD sustainment needs, as directed in the National Defense Industrial Strategy. ■ DoD and other Federal Departments will explore ways to encourage industry investments (e.g., policy, contractual, and political) by promoting the benefits of co-sustainment. Potential government efforts include: ■ Establish Predictable Demand: Consistent demand signal forecasting is crucial for planning, investment, and development of sustainment capabilities. Offer a predictable and consistent demand for MRO services to provide a stable market and opportunities for allies, partner nations, and the global defense industry. ■ Accelerate Partnerships: Facilitate the swift establishment of partnerships between the defense sector and industry. ■ Integrate Product Support Strategies: Ensure that product support solutions incorporate U.S., allies, and partners desired capabilities and objectives. Focus on optimizing the allocation of available resources—to effectively meet the generated demand. Regional sustainment should be designed into product support strategies.

US DoD Regional Sustainment Framework²

In that regard, the RSF can be divided into two areas:

1. Enhanced MRO operational capabilities and interoperability. (Regionalization and Prioritization; Platforms and Systems Approach).
2. Industrial base capacity building for defense development and sustainment. (Strategic Partnership Alignment; Industrial Base Integration).

2 U.S. Department of Defense, *Regional Sustainment Framework*, 3-5.

The framework provides the Philippines, a treaty ally of the United States, a significant opportunity to gain essential logistics capabilities and capacity for the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and local defense sector while at the same time contribute to its alliance and strategic partnerships to ensure regional stability and the interests of national security. While the AFP defense modernization program is slowly but steadily gaining traction, the Philippines must further improve its capacity to support MRO operations and other defense logistics needs. This capability will help sustain the AFP's growing defense requirements and allow the Philippines the capacity to support allied and partner forces that will be operating in the country. Beyond the immediate security concerns, a strong logistics capability also ensures that the Philippines can sustain long-term modernization efforts, address capability gaps and ensuring that it remains resilient in the face of growing challenging area of operations.

Of note is the issue of contested logistics environments, which is the strategic concern the RSF seeks to address and that the Philippines is likely to be affected in light of regional and geopolitical tensions. According to the US Army, Title 10 of the US Code (10 USC § 2926) defines the contested logistics environment as “an environment in which the armed forces engage in conflict with an adversary that presents challenges in all domains and directly targets logistics operations, facilities, and activities in the United States, abroad, or in transit from one location to another.” Consequently, future sustainment forces must be prepared to effectively operate in this setting across the land, maritime, air, cyber, and space domains from a strategic distance where no sanctuaries exist, regardless of the location or proximity to the locus of conflict (Simerly et al. 2024). The assumption does not also necessarily mean that contested logistics occurs during a wartime. The US Army also understands that adversaries seek to create a contested logistics environment not only in conflict but also in the competition continuum's other broad categories. US adversaries are active in the competition and crisis categories to set conditions for success in future operations, deny US access, and create multiple dilemmas for U.S. military operations (King 2024). This takes into consideration the indirect strategies foreign adversaries have as options to disrupt even during peacetime, such as cyberattacks, commercial disruptions, and possible physical sabotage. Hardened or resilient infrastructure is essential to keep defense forces sustained to carry out their mission objectives and maintain operational tempo.

The chapter therefore argues that proactive involvement Philippines in support and integration to the RSF can improve the country's strategic role and value in the Indo-Pacific region, while significantly mitigating capability limitations and building resilience in a contested logistics environment. Specifically, with the current state of the country's defense logistics capacity and defense industrial capabilities, the

prospects are initially promising for the Philippines when it comes to the line of effort to enhancing MRO operational capabilities and interoperability while the challenge lies in the industrial capacity building for defense development and sustainment. There are two research inquiries that this article seeks to examine:

1. Why is Philippine integration to the RSF significant in improving its strategic role in the region and its defense modernization?
2. How can the Philippines and the US partner in defense logistics capabilities to be interoperable with the RSF in addressing the challenges of contested logistics environment?

The current state of the AFP's limited infrastructure capacity to handle its own defense logistics, especially due to the archipelagic geography of the Philippines, poses a challenge in providing the needed sustainment support to the United States and strategic partner countries. This is even more crucial as the Philippines' growing defense cooperation commitments with key regional powers such as Australia and Japan, and the recent defense diplomacy initiatives of Western powers like Canada, France, and the United Kingdom, have brought more attention to the Philippines' already critical strategic position. Likewise, Philippine defense industries are still not on the same level of technical advancement and sophistication compared to regional neighbors, and initiatives/engagements from local private industries that contribute to the Philippine defense industry and technology development are still limited. Taking all these issues into account, this chapter seeks to expound further on how the Philippines can capitalize on its role and options to being an essential part of the RSF strategy of the US, and why it gives the Philippines added value as a strategic country in the region for itself and its partners. The chapter therefore argues that proactive participation Philippines in support of the RSF can improve the country's strategic role and value in the Indo-Pacific region while significantly mitigating capability limitations and building resilience in a contested logistics environment. Specifically, with the current state of the country's defense logistics capacity and defense industrial capabilities, the prospects are initially promising for the Philippines when it comes to the line of effort to enhancing MRO operational capabilities and interoperability while the challenge lies in the industrial capacity building for defense development and sustainment.

ENHANCING MRO OPERATIONAL CAPABILITIES AND INTEROPERABILITY: THE EDCA MILITARY SITES AND BEYOND

The RSF underscores the significance of resilient and interoperable logistics among US allies and partner countries. This is especially critical given China's continued belligerence in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. For the Philippines, a country strategically situated in the forefront of this, reliable and resilient defense logistics are vital to maintain its sovereignty and security. The aggressive and gray zone tactics employed by China in the South China Sea created a challenging security environment for countries on the receiving end of this belligerent behavior. These tactics include the use of maritime militia, coast guard vessels, and other non-military means to assert control over disputed waters. In this context, the Philippines' defense logistics must ensure that the AFP can respond swiftly and effectively to protect its territorial integrity and maritime interests. A well-developed logistics capability enables the AFP to maintain a high state of readiness, ensuring that personnel, equipment, and supplies can be rapidly deployed. This capability is crucial for responding to the dynamic tensions on the region. Additionally, it ensures that the Philippines can effectively collaborate and coordinate with allies and strategic partners in joint operations, enhancing its strategic posture and contributing to regional security.

The process of developing and improving the 12 various military sites identified by the EDCA between the Philippines and the United States is an ongoing line of effort that can align with the RSF's goals. The infrastructure projects in the EDCA military sites were meant to improve the support facilities for logistics, command and control, and transportation network. This was noted in a study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) - Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) stating that:

On November 15, 2022 the United States agreed to spend \$66.5 million to accelerate construction projects at the five Philippine military bases outlined under EDCA over the next two years. The projects include construction of training, warehouse, and other facilities at Basa Air Base, Fort Magsaysay, and Lumbia Air Base. On April 11, 2023, during the U.S.-Philippine 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in Washington, the U.S. Department of Defense also announced its intention to allocate an additional \$18 million on top of \$82 million it said had already been allocated toward infrastructure investments at the existing EDCA sites (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2023).

Some of these infrastructure projects, such as warehouses, were meant for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response (HADR) but they can also be re-purposed for storage of supplies, equipment, or materiel for other military operations. Likewise, the construction of aircraft hangars at Philippine military bases such as Basa Airbase at Pampanga and Fort Magsaysay in Nueva Ecija provide added capacity for aircraft storage and maintenance.

The logistical capability development of these military sites is both timely and crucial, as the scale of military exercises between the AFP and foreign counterparts are expected to increase. For context, the annual Balikatan military exercises involves thousands of military personnel from the Philippines, the United States, and other partner countries like Australia. This also includes the varying amounts and types of equipment and materiel being brought and utilized. With that in mind, all participating military and civilian personnel need to be properly accommodated through base life support (BLS), provisioning, and sanitation so that they can effectively execute their tasks and missions. The scale of the logistics capacity for these military sites is an important factor when considering the number of military personnel allied or partner countries should be able to deploy with reasonable ease.

Additionally, it is essential that military vehicles, platforms, and combat support equipment need to be properly housed/sheltered and maintained to avoid unnecessary wearing down due to the environmental elements, especially since a tropical country like the Philippines experiences intense humidity and adverse weather conditions that can have negative impact on military activities or operations. For context, the First Multi-Domain Task Force successfully deployed the Mid-Range Capability (MRC) missile system to Northern Luzon, Philippines, on April 11, 2024, as part of Exercise Salaknib 24 (U.S. Army 2024). Also known as the Typhon MRC, its deployment in the Philippines marked an unprecedented development in US-Philippine defense cooperation since it is the first time a ground-based long-range strike capability has been operating the country.³ In addition to the Typhon MRC, US Army soldiers from the First Multi-Domain Task Force's Fifth Battalion, Third Long Range Fires Battalion, working alongside the US Air Force's 374th Airlift Wing, Fifth Air Force, and the Philippine Navy successfully demonstrated the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) multi-modal

3 The Typhon Mid-Range Capability (MRC) is a land-based missile system that expands long-range strike options in multi-domain operations. The system is equipped to launch both the Standard Missile-6 (SM-6) and the Tomahawk Land Attack Missile (TLAM), giving it flexibility against air and surface targets. A complete MRC unit consists of a battery operations center, four launchers, transport vehicles, and modified transportation trailers, allowing for rapid deployment and sustained operations.

mobility throughout northern Luzon May 24–31, 2025 (Sandall 2025). Powerful and sophisticated military platforms such as the Typhon MRC and HIMARS need to be properly transported, handled, and stored whenever they are not being operated. MRO facilities such as sufficient motor pools for the transport vehicles would be needed to keep trucks in good condition, while storage bays and specialized heavy equipment are needed for the handling of more sensitive materiel such as advance ordnance and sensors/communications equipment. The improvement of logistics capabilities of the EDCA sites throughout the Philippines potentially allows the AFP the ability to provide even the basic MRO support.

While the EDCA military sites are still in the process of further development, the agreement has overlaps with the RSF, specifically when it comes to strategic partnership alignment. Article one of the EDCA itself states the following sections:⁴

(a) Supporting the Parties' shared goals of improving interoperability of the Parties' forces, and for the Armed Forces of the Philippines ("AFP"), addressing short-term capabilities gaps, promoting long-term modernization, and helping maintain and develop additional maritime security, maritime domain awareness, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief capabilities; and

3. The Parties agree that the United States may undertake the following types of activities in the territory of the Philippines in relation to its access and use of Agreed Locations: security cooperation exercises; joint and combined training activities; humanitarian assistance and disaster relief activities; and such other activities may be agreed upon by the Parties.

Continuity of proper policy implementation and increased defense cooperation between the Philippines and the US is necessary for enhanced MRO capabilities and development. The US military has a staggering experience regarding military logistics due to the US' strategic presence across the globe, and this is essential with the support of its regional allies and partners. It is through this partnership that Philippine defense planners can learn from the best practices the US military has on MRO operations and further familiarization of US defense capabilities through various military exercises.

With ongoing tensions in the region, specifically regarding Taiwan and the West Philippine Sea disputes, the recent additional military sites announced in 2023

4 U.S. Department of State, "Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA)," 28 April 2014, 2-3. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/14-625-Philippines-Defense-Cooperation.pdf>.

indicated a growing significance of Northern Luzon and the continued strategic value of Palawan. The choice of the new military sites is intentional. The addition of Philippine Naval Base Camilo Osias and La-lo Airport in the Cagayan province was considered due to the situation surrounding Taiwan and the East China Sea, while the addition of Balabac Island in Palawan could provide additional basing that cover approaches the West Philippine Sea and the South China Sea. These new EDCA military sites are still under development, alongside the ongoing EDCA infrastructure projects. With the RSF, there are opportunities that the EDCA military sites could have further infrastructure development that focuses on MRO capabilities for both the Philippines and the US. An important focus would be for MRO capabilities and facilities that are meant for sustaining naval and air force operations due to the highly technical demand for their combat platforms and equipment.

Alongside other annual large-scale military exercises such as Salaknib and Kamandag, the number of military personnel and materiel from the Philippines, the US, and other regional partner countries make MRO operations a tedious responsibility. This will be particularly evident as there is an expected possibility for expanded and/or new military exercises in the Philippines after 2025. There are ongoing proposals for other visiting forces agreements (VFA) or status of visiting forces agreement (SOVFA) in the pipeline with countries that have friendly diplomatic ties with the Philippines, but were initially less focused on defense and security issues. In 2024, both the Philippine and French governments started negotiations for a VFA. This was followed by the governments of New Zealand, Canada, and South Korea, respectively, in 2025. The most interesting and recent historic case in point is the unprecedented Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) between the Philippines and Japan. The agreement is formally titled “The Agreement Between Japan and the Republic of the Philippines Concerning the Facilitation of Reciprocal Access and Cooperation between the Self-Defense Forces of Japan and the Armed Forces of the Philippines.”⁵ It establishes the legal and administrative framework for the presence of one nation’s military forces within the territory of the other, granting defined rights and obligations to visiting forces, civilian components, vessels, aircraft, and related equipment. The exchange of diplomatic notes in Manila on August 12, 2025, signaled the completion of the ratification process, and the agreement officially entered into force on September 11, 2025 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2025). It can be determined that the RAA will either create new bilateral military exercises

5 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Agreement Between Japan and the Republic of the Philippines Concerning the Facilitation of Reciprocal Access and Cooperation between the Self-Defense Forces of Japan and the Armed Forces of the Philippines,” mofa.go.jp, July 8, 2024, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100694772.pdf>

between the Japan Self Defense Forces (JSDF) and the AFP, or the JSDF will have a larger role and participation with already established multilateral exercises in the country. Since Japan is also a treaty ally of the US, the JSDF's logistical requirements should be seriously considered by Philippine defense planners. As this would be the JSDF's first large-scale involvement in military exercise, it is an opportunity for the AFP to become familiarized with their Japanese counterpart's defense and logistical capabilities alongside the US military. This would enable improved integration of their defense capabilities and help bring a more seamless MRO integration of systems among them.

However, there are strategic concerns on the vulnerability of the EDCA military sites if tensions with China escalate further to armed military action, or even intensified hybrid warfare activities. Most of the Philippines' military bases are lacking in hardened infrastructure and defensive measures, incapable to counter any long-range strikes by the Chinese military unless US military presence in the country are deployed in force and have enough defensive counter units to minimize or mitigate long-range strikes from a foreign adversary. Likewise, even with the current level of tensions, Chinese hybrid warfare strategies can cripple logistics basing by disabling national power grid stations or by committing cyberattacks to degrade Philippine military activities and base operations. Contingencies must be set for scenarios which the EDCA military sites may not be properly operational for MRO and other logistics support capabilities. Defense planners from the Philippines, the US, and even strategic partners, can consider the option for more expeditionary logistics capabilities that can be easily and rapidly deployed and mobilized around the theater of operations. This can also fall under the RSF as it seeks to improve the different areas of defense logistics support among US allies and partners, and expeditionary logistics can be a viable option for alternative MRO operational spaces.

Expeditionary logistics capabilities are not meant to replace base-centered logistics, but for the former to complement the latter. Base-centered MRO and replenishment operations have more space and infrastructure for larger supply storage and equipment used in handling heavier equipment and materiel, making them more viable for deploying and staging larger force formations. At the same time, expeditionary logistics solutions provide a more flexible and mobile option that can accommodate smaller force formations and can be setup relatively quickly in the more remote and geographically difficult to access locations around the Philippines. These solutions can be modular supply solutions (freshwater, fuel, energy storage) or small scale or field kit advanced manufacturing capabilities (3D additive and subtractive manufacturing), to name a few. For example, Saudi-based aerospace company Saudia Technic unveiled its Mobile MRO Base at the World Defense Show 2024 held in Riyadh. The Mobile MRO Base is a fully-equipped unit

that offers maintenance services for helicopters, military aircraft, and advanced air mobility (Military & Aerospace Electronics 2024). Another example of a mobile MRO solution is the Configurable Armament/AAE/AME Repair Depot (CARD) by US-based Marvin Engineering Company.⁶ The CARD horizontal sustainment solution and concept, the Configurable Armament/AAE/AME Repair Depot (CARD) has been initially designed to support I-Level “plus” maintenance and sustainment of aircraft armament systems in a mobile, deployable footprint but is adaptable for other uses (Marvin Engineering n.d.). With the growing relevance of advanced manufacturing through 3D printing for military purpose, these are also solutions that can be utilized for more mobile MRO operations. By harnessing 3D additive and subtractive manufacturing solutions that can be easily deployed and mobilized, it helps lessen the time it takes for Philippine, the US, and partner forces to undergo the necessary facilities and materiel to keep them sustained. Outside the EDCA military sites, this expeditionary logistics solution can be an area which the Philippines and US can work more closely to develop under the RSF and extend the partnership/ collaboration and coordination with strategic partners like Japan and Australia.

INDUSTRIAL CAPACITY BUILDING FOR DEFENSE DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINMENT: BUILDING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR INDUSTRIES

The RSF acknowledges that the development of defense logistics capabilities requires not only the effort of a country’s government defense and security sectors, but also the significant and critical role and contribution of private sector industries. The US alone maintains one of the most complex and technologically advanced defense industry ecosystems in the world, integrating government institutions, private industry, and research organizations into a single network that supports national security objectives and defense policy. A great deal of this system comes with a highly collaborative public-private partnership in which the DoD sets capability requirements and budget allocations, while private sector industries design, manufacture, and sustain military platforms. While globally known US defense industry names such as Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, L3Harris, Bell, and General Dynamics are staggering in scale and portfolio, there are a myriad of smaller size defense companies that tend to focus on more niche capabilities who also provide the needs of their clientele. It is for that reason that the US

6 Aircraft Armament Equipment (AAE) and Alternate Mission Equipment (AME).

defense industry sector is still among the leading in the world when it comes to innovation and development. However, across the US alliance system, countries in NATO, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia are seeking ways to better partner—and produce—the types of missiles, artillery shells, and other items they need in case of a war. Yet, officials from many of these countries identify, privately, the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) as a major hurdle slowing the alliance’s ability to restock equipment donated to Ukraine, or to prepare for a possible future conflict in the Indo-Pacific (Schaus and Hoffman 2023). This is a significant barrier to expanding defense industrial cooperation with allies such as the Philippines. Strict control mechanisms, licensing processes, limitations on technology sharing, and compliance requirements makes integration of capabilities within the broader US Indo-Pacific defense strategy difficult. For the Philippines, the effect of the ITAR extends beyond procurement and affects strategic capacity-building.

The case is different in the Philippines, as its homegrown defense industries are still in the early stages of development. Initial structural limitations and low prioritization of budget allocations towards national defense significantly stifled defense industry innovation and capacity. Budget constraints, procurement delays, and inefficiencies, have been the primary factors for the slow growth of defense modernization and defense industry development. Case in point, the preliminary or planning stage of procurement is especially problematic, with government agencies struggling to generate accurate cost estimates or ceiling prices, and with insufficient technical knowledge among procurement teams regarding relevant laws, such as Republic Act No. 9184 or the Government Procurement Reform Act (PIDS 2017). R.A. No. 12009 or the New Government Procurement Act (NGPA) adopted from R.A. No. 9184 the Government Procurement Reform Act (GPRA) a significant provision for Negotiated Procurement on Defense Cooperation Agreements and Inventory-Based Items. This allows the Secretary of National Defense to directly negotiate with foreign agencies or instrumentalities for major defense equipment or consultancy services, under specific conditions (GPPB-TSO 2024):

1. National Interest: Procurement is necessary to protect the country’s interests.
2. Expertise: The required expertise or capability is not available locally.
3. Modernization Program: The items are part of the Armed Forces of the Philippines Modernization Program approved by the President.

Other major shortcomings for defense industrial capacity in the Philippines are skills shortages, technical capacity gaps, low economies of scale, and a weak

industrial base. There are insufficient engineers, technicians, and specialists capable of developing, maintaining, or integrating complex systems—whether in shipbuilding, aerospace, electronics, or ordnance (Angelo 2024). Furthermore, there is a deepened brain-drain, since many highly skilled Filipino workers migrate overseas or move into more profitable professions outside defense/security sectors where bureaucratic or regulatory obstructions are fewer. Likewise, there are less interest and appetite by technology and industrial private sectors in the Philippines to be involved in defense development due to market uncertainty from the delays and irregularities in government defense spending initiatives like the AFP's modernization program.

This is perhaps the most pressing challenge for the Philippines when it comes to the RSF's expectations by being able to have a defense industrial base that has sufficient capabilities and capacity for maintaining and sustaining defense operations of the AFP, US forces, and strategic partners. Even if the Philippines manages to establish sufficient MRO and replenishment facilities, these will require machinery, equipment, and components that are outside the current capabilities of the Philippine government-owned defense industries. This would resort to the current setup of foreign partners sourcing their needed supplies and MRO operations from their nearest forward operating bases or their home bases, which is costly in terms of both time and resources. The Philippine government has been making some earnest effort to address these shortcomings by developing policies that can alleviate this problem, most notably the Self-Reliant Defense Posture (SRDP) Revitalization Act of 2024, or R.A. No. 12024. The SRDP is designed to cultivate a robust and sustainable National Defense Industry by establishing a structured approach to defense development (Presidential Communications Office 2024). To achieve this, the Philippine government plans to incentivize public-private partnership regarding defense capability and industry development in areas like R&D, production, and innovation. The SRDP also allows foreign industry partnership with local Philippine industry entities to help jump-start defense industry development in the country.

The Philippines' SRDP objectives appear to align with the US RSF, and this gives policy justification for both countries to deepen partnerships specifically on industry base development. On one hand, both the SRDP and RSF allow Philippine defense industries the opportunities to gain valuable technical familiarization and expertise from potential US partner industries and giving them the needed push for growth. Defense industry development does not also need to start with high-cost production scale of advanced combat platforms like modern combat aircraft and/or warships. Philippine defense industries can focus on industry capabilities that can provide the necessary and reliable logistic solutions and capacity for Philippine, US, and partner forces that will be deployed and operating in the

country. On the side of the US, the RSF encourages partnerships with the defense sector and industries, where even smaller-scale US-based defense companies in that ecosystem have opportunities to expand outside the US. Usually, these types of companies tend to focus on a particular or specific capability product or solution that does not require a large capital base and facilities. Such companies can partner with Philippine counterpart entities, as allowed by the SRDP, to develop the needed defense industrial base with the objective of having sufficient production and service capabilities locally. This could set the foundational steps for the Philippines to become a strategic logistical base for the US and strategic partners in the region, while also improving the country's defense logistics capabilities and its local defense industries to try catching up with the growing defense sustainment needs of the AFP and foreign partners.

WAYS FORWARD AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Philippines' defense sector and local defense industries cannot hope to quickly integrate the full gamut of defense capabilities compared to the US, and the US cannot simply expect its Philippine counterpart to make an effective quantum leap in defense development. A viable approach for both countries is to help create a defense industry ecosystem in the Philippines that can match the current scale of capabilities and production of local industries. Partnerships with US companies can enable Philippine counterparts, through technology transfer cooperation, to have the needed technical knowledge and training of human resources. In that regard, emphasis should start with capabilities and capacity building towards improving MRO operations and interoperability by harnessing emerging technologies such as 3D advanced manufacturing and supply chain solutions that are highly modular and scalable. This gives the AFP and Philippine industries a better appreciation and knowledge for emerging technologies that can boost their capability development, while at the same time building deeper partnerships with the US and strategic partners.

Likewise, there are industry sectors that the Philippines has experience and years of development. The Philippines' shipbuilding sector is recognized as among the top ten globally. A study made by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicated that the Philippines ranked as the world's fourth-largest shipbuilding nation in 2022, with growth in Shipbuilding and ship repair (SBSR) activity largely driven by foreign-owned shipyards—such as Tsuneishi (Japan) and Seatrium (Singapore)—as well as sustained international investment. While domestic, non-foreign-owned yards remain primarily focused on ship repair, the broader sector continues to evolve in response to changing global demand (OECD 2025). A report from Marine Insights stated that the Philippines was recognized as

one of the top five shipbuilding nations in 2023, with 805,938 GT production output, per UNCTAD Review of Maritime Transport Report 2024, with Philippine shipyards constructed 4 percent more vessels than in 2023, totaling 506 locally constructed ships (Ahmed 2025). This makes the Philippines potentially capable to provide MRO operations when it comes to naval vessels, under the conditions that private sector SBSR companies can cater to both the defense and civilian clientele.

Another area where the Philippines can highlight its industry development is its Information Technology sector. There is a healthy appreciation for IT trends and development with the Philippines maintaining a modest IT production base, but still with a lot of room for innovation and development. Combined with the growing interest in drone technology for both defense and civilian use, development of both drone development and IT capabilities can also bolster their applications for defense purposes, whether it is for production or sustainment of drone warfare capabilities of the AFP, the US, and strategic partner forces.

In the case of the US, for the RSF to work more seamlessly, it has to make a serious reexamination of its ITAR processes that limit defense industrial partnerships between the US with its allies and partners. Without an integrated defense industrial base, the United States and its allies will be less effective in the development, production, and sustainment of critical military capabilities—and will ultimately struggle to fight together (Cook and Aldisert 2025). It is therefore critical that diplomatic and industrial relations between the Philippines, the US, Japan, Australia, and other strategic partner countries promote and facilitate policy development towards stronger partnerships for industrial base capacity building. This could benefit both the defense and private industry sectors of these respective countries, while also strengthening their defense/security relations amid growing Chinese aggression in the region.

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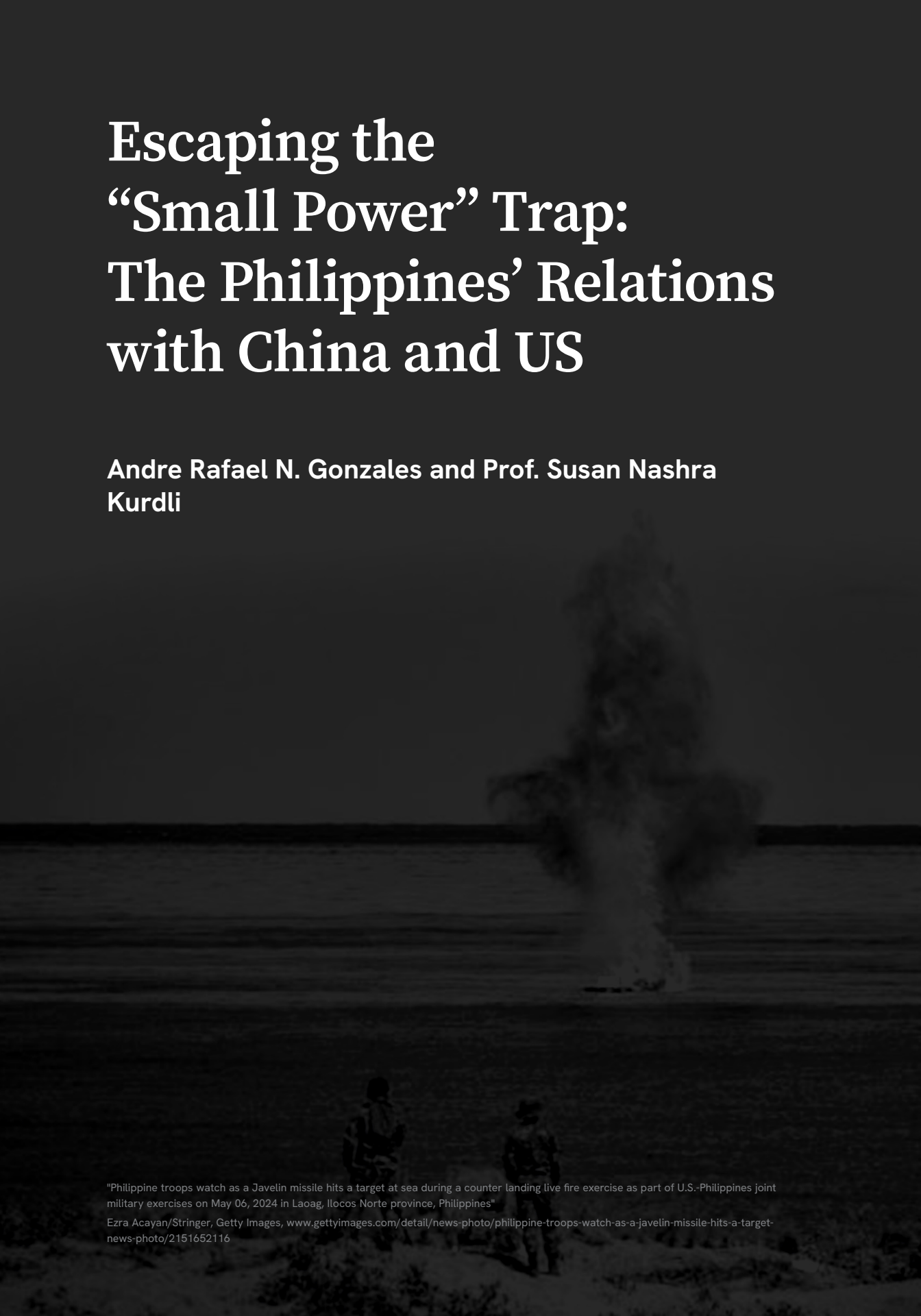
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Escaping the “Small Power” Trap: The Philippines’ Relations with China and US

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"Philippine troops watch as a Javelin missile hits a target at sea during a counter landing live fire exercise as part of U.S.-Philippines joint military exercises on May 06, 2024 in Laoag, Ilocos Norte province, Philippines"

Ezra Acayan/Stringer, Getty Images, www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/philippine-troops-watch-as-a-javelin-missile-hits-a-target-news-photo/2151652116

Escaping the “Small Power” Trap: The Philippines’ Relations with China and US

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ABSTRACT

The Philippines faces a twin horned challenge, both in its geostrategic interests and in taming its economic obstacles. The Philippines has abandoned its heavy-hedging policy pursued by the Duterte administration from 2016–2020, opting for a full balancing policy in the Ferdinand Marcos Jr. administration by aligning with the US against China’s aggression in the South China Sea (SCS). However, the Philippines’ full balancing strategy is counterproductive to its security and economic interests. Such a strategy risks entrapping the Philippines in a security dilemma between the US and China’s great power competition, causing the security interests of the archipelago and China to be perceived as more mutually exclusive. Economically, the Philippines exited the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and has lost the commitment of several Chinese funding pledges. Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and infrastructure funding remain crucial to the Philippine economy in the face of premature deindustrialization, growth led by consumption rather than FDI, and a weak per capita capital stock growth indicating insufficient infrastructure spending. The Philippines remains an anomaly as its Southeast Asian neighbors such as Malaysia and Vietnam hedge between the US and China. Through a methodology of process-tracing, historical analysis, and a comparative perspective especially with Vietnam, this chapter aims to analyze the potential opportunity costs of a balancing strategy over a hedging strategy.

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INTRODUCTION

Caught within the headwinds of the US and China's great power rivalry, the Philippines faces an arduous task of prudent alliance formation and middle-power statecraft. Historically, the Philippines has relied on its alliance with the US through the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) signed in 1951 and Mutual Bases Agreement signed in 1946. More recently, the Philippines relied on the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) in 1998, and the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) in 2014. Generally, it appears that throughout most Philippine administrations, a consistent reliance on US security ties is utilized to remedy Philippine geostrategic needs in the face of inadequate internal capabilities.

This paper zooms into the administrations of Rodrigo Duterte (2016–2022), and Ferdinand Marcos Jr. (2022–present). Due to the prevalence of neo-colonial norms and identities that prescribe a dependency on the US, the Philippines has generally preferred a one-sided alignment with Washington (Kurdli and Gonzales 2025, 18). However, many of the Philippines' Southeast Asian neighbors have instead opted for hedging strategies that do not side with one great power, but employ strategies of limited bandwagoning and indirect balancing, to extract benefits from economic and political ties with China, and set up contingency plans through security ties with the US (Kuik 2016, 503). While the Philippines embarked on a hedging strategy during the Duterte administration, most Philippine presidents in recent memory have adopted balancing strategies instead by aligning with the US against China. This provokes a question: given the Philippines' diverging foreign policy compared to its Southeast Asian neighbors, what are the potential opportunity costs of adopting a balancing policy rather than a hedging policy in relation to China and the US?

This presents a relatively novel contribution since scholars on Philippine hedging focus more on the positive effects of hedging, its causes, and its practice (Quintos 2020, 262; Gerstl 2022, 66–67; Tan 2025; 3–4). Instead, this chapter extends the argument by framing the debate in terms of the potential opportunity costs of pursuing balancing over hedging. It is argued that the Philippines' balancing policy is counterproductive to its security and economic interests. Security wise, the Philippines jettisons its strategic autonomy to the US, risking a security dilemma with China and stoking a cyclical great-power rivalry. These security implications flow to the Philippines' economic interests, as balancing with the US and repudiating China in the region precludes the Philippines' participation in the BRI and more beneficial Chinese investments. This is nuanced in terms of several unique economic challenges faced by the Philippines, such as premature deindustrialization, weak infrastructure spending, and weak attraction of FDI. In

starker terms, the Philippines' balancing strategy consigns it to a "small power trap," whose agency is diminished in the wake of a great power rivalry.

This chapter has several sections. The second section reviews conceptual frameworks on alliance formation, focusing on the concepts of hedging, balancing, and bandwagoning. It navigates dominant arguments by scholars on Philippine foreign policy, and excavates a literature gap. The third section looks at the security implications of balancing over hedging, utilizing the theoretical framework of the security dilemma to analyze Philippine-China relations. The fourth section argues for the economic benefits that may be accrued through a hedging policy with China, comparing Philippine foreign policy to Malaysian foreign policy. The final section provides some broad recommendations for policy and concluding thoughts.

PHILIPPINE HEDGING AND BALANCING

Generally, hedging remains a theoretical gap in scholarly discussion on Philippine foreign policy. Before proceeding, it would be worth revisiting conceptual frameworks on alliance formation to provide some theoretical groundwork. When faced with a principal threat, a state can either ally with the principal threat (bandwagoning), or it can band with other states to align against the principal threat (balancing) (Walt 1985, 4). Hedging is different as it seeks no visible one-sided alignment with any state, adopts opposite measures, and utilizes these opposite measures for the contradictory logics of maximizing gain, and cultivating contingency fallbacks (Kuik 2016, 504). Hedging in Southeast Asia has two main variations: light-hedging which involves open deference to China with selective defiance to assert sovereignty, and heavy-hedging which openly defies China but also selectively defers to maintain cordial relations (Lai and Kuik 2020, 280). An example of a light-hedger would be Malaysia, whereas Vietnam would demonstrate the case of a heavy-hedger. It is worth clarifying that a heavy hedger still does not openly side against China or any other power in the region. Under these terms, the Duterte administration largely took a heavy-hedging stance from 2016-2020, openly defying China through a continued military alliance with the US, though with some skepticism from the administration, with selective deference to China on economic and territorial issues to secure economic gains and reduce tensions.

One of the most recent works on Philippine hedging is that of Tan's (2025, 3-4) conceptualizing offensive hedging through middle power behavior as utilizing short term strategies and strategic ambiguity to benefit from great powers competing for influence over a middle power, regardless of the formal agreements which are in place. He argues that the Duterte administration, specifically from 2016-2020 deployed such a strategy to extract greater economic benefits from Sino-Philippine

ties and inclusion in the BRI, whilst simultaneously forcing the US to reaffirm its security commitments in the Philippines. This chapter takes a more defensive and long-term approach to hedging, arguing that should the Philippines remain in its balancing strategy, it risks running a security dilemma with China and forgoes important economic benefits. Another divergence is to conceptualize hedging as potentially involving medium to long-term strategies through limited bandwagoning and balancing strategies for maximizing returns whilst setting up risk offsetting contingencies.

Quintos (2020, 262) analyzes the case of the Duterte administration's foreign policy utilizing the framework of hedging. In essence, the Duterte administration attempted return-maximization by re-engaging friendlier relations with China to improve economic relations, and reduce strategic distrust. However, the administration capitalized on fallback measures to reduce risk, by diversifying security ties with Australia, Japan, and sustaining relations with the US without antagonizing China. Her paper concludes that hedging remains the optimal strategy of the Philippines, between a potential balancing strategy that relies on an unclear US commitment to Philippine sovereignty in the West Philippine Sea (WPS), and a bandwagoning strategy of complete alignment with China that subordinates Philippine interests to Chinese interests in the region.

This paper extends these arguments in several ways. In historical context, most especially during the Benigno Aquino administration (2010) and Marcos Jr. administration (2022–2028), the Philippines has consistently preferred a policy of balancing against China with US security ties, rather than hedging. Indeed, as Kuik (2016, 506) remarks, “none of the ASEAN states (perhaps with the exception of the Philippines under Benigno Aquino III and the partial exception of Vietnam) have openly and utterly balanced China militarily.” This is partly rooted in the Philippines' historical neo-colonial relationship with the US (Kurdli and Gonzales 2025, 19–20). This paper analyzes the potential opportunity costs of pursuing a policy of balancing rather than hedging. Breaking down this analysis into security and economic dimensions, this paper, (i) highlights the possibility of a security dilemma as a result of Philippine balancing, (ii) intertwines security with political economy, revealing how balancing forgoes more beneficial economic relations with China.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The claim that the Philippines runs a potential security dilemma with China is easily parsed out in theoretical terms, but lesser so in practice. To further advance this claim, it is necessary to construct some falsifiable indicators. The first indicator

is whether statements by China refer to heightened tensions or similar lines of rhetoric. While there may be a potential gap between China's public statements and the intentions of its foreign ministers and leaders, these public statements at least provide some signaling of intentions in the region. This indicator also provides evidence as to whether or not the security interests of China and the Philippines are mutually exclusive. The second indicator is to examine reactive cases of military build-up, if any. If this indicator is met, then it suggests that a security dilemma is occurring since a reactive military buildup means that an antecedent security capability risks the former state's security interests. This also provides some guidance on how states, especially China, distinguish between defense capabilities that do not threaten their interests, and offensive capabilities which are threats. On a preliminary level, these indicators are far likelier to be attached to the Philippines' external balancing since the Philippines carries limited capabilities for internal balancing.

The second claim that the Philippines foregoes potential economic benefits with China through a policy of balancing is relatively more straightforward since this can be achieved by comparing different administrations. Of course, no certainty can be reached in speculating as to whether China would have honored its investment and loan pledges in the Marcos Jr. administration had the administration utilized a hedging policy. For both claims, a comparative perspective, especially with Vietnam and Malaysia, clarifies the theory and evidence further.

SECURITY NEEDS: GREAT-POWER COMPETITION AND STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

This section explains the framework of a security dilemma, and why the Philippines-US alliance can lead to a security dilemma in the WPS region. A security dilemma occurs when the security requirements and interests of two states are mutually exclusive (Jervis 1978, 169–170). This means that a security gain for one state, is a security loss for the other state. For example, if India were to build up missiles with sufficient range to strike China's major cities, India's security may increase while China's security decreases. For China to bolster its security, it may choose to also build up missiles in a reciprocal fashion. A security dilemma only occurs if states are attempting to preserve the status quo, and therefore does not apply to expansionist states (Liff and Ikenberry 2014, 58). Security requirements for states become mutually exclusive, when states cannot differentiate between defensive and offensive capabilities (Jervis 1978, 186–187). A defensive capability is a means for security which does not harm the security of other states. An example would be static fortifications. However, offensive capabilities are means which can be

mobilized against the security of other states, such as missiles and bombers. If these capabilities can be distinguished, then states can serve their security through defensive capabilities without threatening the security of other states. However, if they are indistinguishable, then a security dilemma occurs.

A security dilemma is best illustrated by Game Theory through the Prisoner's Dilemma (Jervis 1978, 171–172). If two states pursue offensive capacities, then both have much to lose from an arms race, and a potential war. However, the trade-off is that, state A will be far worse off if it abstains from building up offensive capabilities out of a wish to cooperate, whereas state B exploits state A's momentary weakness in security, through a pursuit of offensive capability build-up. Thus, even if both states have more to gain from cooperation, states may “defect” or choose to build up capabilities, to prevent the possibility of being exploited. As such, uncertainty of other states' intentions significantly contributes to the security dilemma (Liff and Ikenberry 2014, 54). Under this framework, the Philippines is choosing “defecting,” through its US balancing strategy by building up offensive capabilities. China too has responded to “defect,” through heavy-handed intimidation in the South China Sea.

In the case of Philippines-US-China relations, the Philippine's reliance on the US military in the West Philippine Sea threatens the possibility of a security dilemma. This is because the US-Philippine military alliance makes it more difficult to distinguish between defensive and offensive capabilities. Radtke (2015, 313) contends that a security dilemma is brewing in the region because states subjectively perceive their security interests to be irreconcilable, whereas objectively, South China Sea claimants can reconcile their interests through regional cooperation. This misperception therefore, is key to the security dilemma in the region. China perceives their hold on the West Philippine Sea as part of their sovereignty, and not as part of an expansionist agenda (Liff and Ikenberry 2014, 66–68).

China has directly condemned the installation of US Typhon missiles in the Philippines, accusing the US and the Philippines of dragging the region into an arms race (Lema and McPherson, 2014). More recently, chief defense minister Gilbert Teodoro stated that the Philippines had a right to station US missiles, whereas China's embassy in Manila condemned the remarks as exhibiting a “cold war mentality,” (Reuters 2024). Indeed, China perceives US strategic partnerships and alliances in the region as products of the Cold War, seeking to contain China's influence (Liff and Ikenberry 2014, 66).

These missiles can strike China's mainland, containing a range of 1600 km. It is also a ‘historic first,’ for the US-Philippine alliance. Such missiles from the Philippine-

US view may be a form of defensive capability in national security. However, the existence of such missiles is incompatible with China's geostrategic interests due to their range covering China's major cities. Consequently, China's perceptions of the US military build-up in the Philippines are that of signaling offensive intentions.

More recently, in November 4, 2024, the Philippines and the US began joint military exercises known as *Balikatan* exercises, to simulate seizing an island in the West Philippine Sea (AP News, 2024). Marcos Jr. doubled down on his balancing alignment with the US, stating that, should Taiwan end up in conflict, the Philippines may be forced to join by virtue of geographical proximity. The Foreign Ministry of China condemned this as "playing with fire," (Aljazeera, 2025). By extending the Philippines' alignment with the US to Taiwan, the Philippines has signaled a willingness to interfere with China's core interests.

This is not to say that the Philippines is solely deserving of blame for the tensions in the region. To reframe this debate, many consider China's revisionist actions in the SCS as exogenous, or occurring on account of Chinese interests. This chapter challenges this idea by endogenizing Chinese policy in the SCS as also reactions to the policies of other SCS claimants, especially the Philippines and Vietnam. While China has many reasons to be aggressive such as to satisfy nationalism in its citizens, and further economic interest, China's perceived aggression in the region is partially due to a perception that other SCS claimants have defected and have not displayed goodwill (Radtke 2015, 326). The Philippines' filing to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in 2013, and the signing of EDCA fall under perceived acts of aggression in the region.

China perceives the US as containing their geopolitical influence, and infringing upon their territorial sovereignty (Liff and Ikenberry 2014, 67). By itself, the Philippine military does not contain capabilities which can significantly threaten China, largely because the military was designed against internal threats such as rebellions, but not against external threats to sovereignty (Ronas, 2006). It is in this context of power asymmetry between the Philippines and China that the Philippines relies on its military alliance with the US to balance. What makes the situation precarious in the West Philippine Sea is the geographical proximity between the Philippines and China. Geographical proximity power partly determines the degree of threat posed by one power to another (Walt 1985, 10–11). As such, any build-up of US military capabilities in the Philippines, will most likely threaten the security of China given the proximity. Indeed, the Philippines' geographic position is crucial to both China's strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific as the archipelago lies squarely in between the first and second island chains (Gerstl 2022, 68). The Philippines'

defensive alliance with Washington follows this hub-and-spoke system where the Philippines serves as a “spoke” for the US defense hub (De Castro 2022, 481).

This may be contrasted with Vietnam’s strategy of robust internal balancing through a significant upgrade of navy and air capabilities, based on the military strategy of delaying potential Chinese invasions till the US and its allies can mobilize to Vietnam’s aid (Gerstl 2022, 104–107). Such a policy relies more on defensive capabilities. Indeed, Vietnam’s policy provides a clean distinction between defensive capabilities and offensive capabilities. This is partially due to Vietnam’s “four no’s,” which forbid military bases by external powers, no military alliances, no aligning with other countries against another state, and no use of force in international affairs (Minh 2023). Vietnam engages in a limited and indirect balancing policy with the US but does not directly confront China (Gerstl 2022, 104–105). This policy includes a strategic partnership with the US which does not bind both parties to mutual defense, but does facilitate strategic consultations, capacity building, and policy coordination (De Castro 2022, 496). This policy permits Vietnam to resist China’s claims in the SCS, whilst simultaneously retaining strong economic relations with China. This hedging strategy is that of “heavy-hedging,” which openly defies China through Vietnamese military build-up, but demonstrates selective deference to not openly antagonize China (Lai and Kuik 2020, 278–281).

The Philippine-US alliance against China has begun to increase tensions in an already fragile region. A buildup of US military capabilities in the Philippines threatens China’s security. Conversely, an increase in China’s security capabilities to respond to this build up is a threat to Philippine sovereignty. The Philippines is an outlier in its foreign policy to balance with the US against China compared to its Southeast Asian neighbors. Unlike its Southeast Asian counterparts, the Philippines’ economic and security dependency on the US has inflamed risk by inducing a security dilemma with China. In this sense, the military alliance has instead become a Trojan Horse which only appears to improve Philippine security. This balancing with the US against China has not only left the Philippines to suffer the immediate consequences of tensions with China by virtue of its proximity, but has undercut the Philippines’ security autonomy, providing Washington with undue decision-making power over Philippine foreign policy. It is crucial for the Philippines to reduce its role in worsening the security dilemma in the region by ceasing its full balancing strategy. This chapter recommends a return to a heavy-hedging policy, where selective deference to China allows for breathing room to defuse tensions and reignite economic relations, and open defiance continues but without openly antagonizing China to maintain territorial sovereignty.

ECONOMIC INTERESTS

There is a robust case to be made that the Philippines has potential significant economic gains in seeking more nuanced relations with Beijing. Indeed, the Philippines economy has yet to confront the Goliath of premature deindustrialization, where manufacturing has lagged as a share of the economy and employment relative to the service sector. The Philippines faced a variety of causes for this premature deindustrialization, such as the Martial Law era, the protectionist policies of Import Industrialization pre-Martial Law, a conservative monetary policy which discouraged exports and encouraged imports of manufactured goods, and post-colonial policies under the US which discouraged manufacturing growth in favor of agricultural exports (Batalla 2018, 211–212; Felipe and Kurdli 2024, 4; Williamson and De Dios 2014, 50–52; Felipe et al. 2023, 15). It is only in recent decades that the Philippine state was able to achieve an accounts surplus from 2003 onwards with the two legs of the Philippine economy: remittances from Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), and an unexpected structural transformation to the service industry through the Business Process Outsourcing industry (BPO) (De Dios 2023, 322; Batalla 2016, 173–175).

Despite the free trade reforms of the 90s under Ramos and the subsequent healing of balance-of-payments problems, the Philippines is still primarily driven by domestic consumption rather than investment (De Dios 2023, 324–326). Thus, when it comes to foreign policy, it is urgent that the Philippines must secure more sources of FDI. The lack of exports of manufactured value-added goods has led to a binding constraint on economic growth in the Philippines (Felipe et al. 2023, 2). Thus, it is imperative for the Philippines to adopt policies to aid the manufacturing of complex tradable goods.

Here, it would be worth comparing the Philippines' balancing policy to Malaysia's hedging. Malaysia has security ties with both the US and China, relying on Chinese trade relations for economic growth to legitimize elite rule (Lai and Kuik 2020, 277–279). The effects of such a lopsided reliance on the US and distancing from China, has had negative effects on the Philippine economy. Rabena (2018, 693) notes that “at present, it is only the Philippines with which China has not yet established a strategic partnership in ASEAN.” To illustrate, economist Punongbayan notes that despite being one of the biggest trading partners with the Philippines, Chinese investments into the Philippines have yet to be substantial (Walker, 2023). For instance, data from 2016 indicates that China's share of investments into the Philippines is only 0.39 percent, a dwarf amount compared to the US's 30 percent, and Japan's 11 percent (Habito 2017 as cited in Rabena 2018, 689).

Under the Duterte administration, the BRI comprised a massive infrastructural investment into dams, irrigation, maritime ports, and rails in the Philippines (Garriga 2020, 2–3). In recent politico-economic history, it was highly difficult for the Philippines to invest into social provisions and infrastructure in the 90s since public spending was geared towards debt-servicing to restore investor confidence (De Dios and Hutchcroft 2003, 53). Moreover from 2000–2015, the Philippines capital stock growth rate or the total value of assets such as infrastructure per person, was the slowest in the Southeast Asian region registering an 18 percent growth rate compared to Vietnam's 260 percent growth rate (Hedrick-Wong, 2019). It appears relatively clear that insufficient spending on infrastructure in the Philippines has drastic implications for growth, and standard of living. Especially important for the Philippines is inclusion into the maritime aspects of the BRI, establishing shipping networks between Manila and various other Philippines cities, to major Chinese ports in cities such as Shanghai (Garriga 2020, 2).

In addition to increased infrastructure spending, the BRI aims to introduce policy coordination between the Philippines and China, increasing trade and Chinese investments into the Philippines (Habena, 2018). Camba and Magat (2021, 258) find that under Duterte's term, while Chinese FDI did not increase at a greater rate compared to previous presidents, Chinese firm creation increased significantly in the Philippines. Moreover, Chinese investors appear to be more willing to invest in corrupt countries as they face less competition with Western investors. The case of Duterte's foreign policy indeed demonstrates the possibility of a hedging policy. Duterte did not repeal any major security agreements with the US, but instead shifted to China on the basis of his rhetoric. This suggests that it may be possible for the Philippines to hedge between the US and China, aligning with the former to offset potential security risks, whilst seeking closer economic ties with China to maximize potential benefits. The reason why rhetoric is important, even if major security agreements are not revised, is that rhetoric signals the intentions of a particular state.

However, greater economic ties with China are not without potential pitfalls. Indeed, the Philippines may increase its vulnerability to the infamous debt trap as experienced by Sri Lanka (Garriga 2020, 1). Nevertheless, it is arguable that China also has incentives to avoid debt traps to safeguard the reputation of the BRI to incentivize greater opt-in (Rabena 2018, 693).

These potential economic benefits have evaporated due to the balancing strategy adopted in the Ferdinand Marcos Jr. administration. Under Marcos Jr.'s renewed alignment with Washington, the Philippines exited the Belt and Road Initiative in October 2023, forsaking an estimated USD 5 Billion pledges for infrastructure

projects (Walker, 2023). This partly illustrates the intertwined nature of security and economic relations. Given the structure of the Chinese economy as state-led, Chinese investors are largely sensitive to, and therefore responsive to geopolitical conflict (Camba and Magat 2021, 250–251).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Several recommendations are worth emphasizing for the Philippines to pursue a more nuanced relationship with China to reap potential economic benefits from friendlier relations, whilst offsetting potential security risks from inflamed tensions. Firstly, given that the security dilemma arises out of uncertainty of other states' intentions, the Philippines must be very clear about its intentions. This entails signaling willingness to de-escalate and differentiate between offensive and defensive capabilities. Changing Philippine state rhetoric to friendlier tones with China can signal to the Chinese state and investors a willingness for closer economic ties, as was the case under Duterte (Camba and Magat, 2021). This also means not openly antagonizing China in order to prevent further tensions from worsening.

Secondly, while it is beneficial for the Philippines to improve its military capabilities internally, it must refrain from shoring up offensive capabilities as this may trigger a security dilemma with China, jettisoning potential economic benefits and worsening tensions. Thirdly, the Philippines needs to re-engage with the BRI to reap economic benefits from Chinese investment and infrastructural funding. This must be paired with greater policy consistency throughout various administrations, as rapidly changing foreign policy with China has deterred complete fulfillment of China's funding promises, as was the case under the Marcos Jr. administration. Overall, this chapter recommends the Philippines to shift from a full balancing strategy, to a heavy-hedging strategy to maximize economic benefits from China, shore up risk-contingencies by defusing tension with China and maintaining some security ties with the US, and widen the strategic autonomy of the Philippines without overly relying on US military dominance.

In summary, the Philippines has diverged from its Southeast Asian counterparts in its lopsided reliance on the US. The opportunity costs of such a policy have led to self-exclusion from the BRI, forsaking pledged Chinese investments and loans. Such funding remains crucial for the Philippines, most especially in infrastructural spending to speed economic growth. A hedging policy is worth considering to reap economic benefits with China, whilst offsetting the power asymmetry with China with nuanced Philippine-US security ties. Moreover, Philippine balancing has contributed to a security dilemma in the region, rendering Philippine geo-security

more precarious. On both security and economic dimensions, the Philippines faces substantial opportunity costs in pursuing a balancing policy over a hedging policy. In order to advance both interests, it is crucial for Philippine statecraft to adopt a heavy hedging strategy between the US and China.

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Islands of Influence: How the Philippines Shapes the Indo-Pacific and Challenges China's Global Ambitions

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and Xavier Dwight Gentalian



"Members of the Philippine Coast Guard stand alert as a Chinese Coast Guard vessel blocks their way to a resupply mission at Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea, March 5, 2024."

REUTERS/Adrian Portugal, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-trying-gain-space-through-force-us-admiral-says-2024-04-09/>

Islands of Influence: How the Philippines Shapes the Indo-Pacific and Challenges China's Global Ambitions

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ABSTRACT

The Indo-Pacific is the core of great power competition, where maritime corridors, natural resources, and international law dictate regional stability and global influence. This paper argues that China's strategic calculus targets the Philippines due to its strategic location, control over vital maritime trade routes, legal assertiveness demonstrated by its 2016 arbitration victory, and military infrastructure supported by US defense agreements. China's nationalist rhetoric emphasizes Taiwan's reunification, but its pragmatic goals increasingly focus on dominating the West Philippine Sea, where over 50 percent of global maritime traffic passes. This paper uses John Mearsheimer's offensive realism to show that the Philippines is a key actor whose diversified strategic assets limit China's expansionist ambitions.

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INTRODUCTION

The US-China great-power rivalry is centered in the Indo-Pacific. Regional stability and global influence depend on marine corridor control, natural resource access, and international law enforcement. The Philippines is strategically important because it sits at the intersection of critical sea routes carrying a large portion of the world's marine traffic. The Indo-Pacific is becoming more competitive as major powers compete for economic and military advantages in a region that anchors global trade and energy.

This analysis suggests the Philippines is more than a spectator in this high-stakes scenario. Strategic relevance comes from geographic advantage, legal assertiveness, and strong military connections. Archipelago location gives the government control over maritime trade routes vital to regional connectivity and the global economy. This geographic strength is complemented by the country's legal position, as shown by its 2016 arbitration victory, which strengthened Manila's Western Philippine Sea claims and upheld international maritime law. The Philippines' longtime defense engagement with the US strengthens deterrence and maintains a regional balance of power by providing a military counterweight to emerging regional powers. As China shifts from ideological aims like Taiwan reunification, to pragmatic goals like dominating the West Philippine Sea, the Philippines becomes ever more important in restricting Beijing's expansionist agenda (Mearsheimer 2010; Heydarian 2025). By drawing on the lens of realism, especially John Mearsheimer's offensive realism (Mearsheimer 2010), this analysis demonstrates that the Philippines' strategic assets—maritime control, legal victories, and alliance-based military capacity—collectively form a bulwark against unchecked Chinese hegemony. Insights from contemporary scholarship reinforce how these factors interact in the broader geopolitical context, showing that Manila is actively shaping the future contours of the regional order rather than merely reacting to great-power moves (Beckley 2017; Heydarian 2025).

The following sections synthesize these elements to examine the Indo-Pacific strategic calculus and show how geographic, legal, and military factors position the Philippines as a linchpin that constrains and compels a rising China. This multidimensional realism approach helps us comprehend how growing middle powers might change power structures and global strategic paradigms in an era of intensifying competition.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: REALISM AND OFFENSIVE REALISM

Realism in international relations theory holds that the anarchic nature of the international system forces states to prioritize power and security for survival. In the absence of any higher authority, states must rely on self-help, which leads them to seek power advantages to deter or defend against potential adversaries (Waltz 2000). Offensive realism further argues that great powers are inherently driven to maximize their relative power and will opportunistically expand their influence to achieve regional dominance (Mearsheimer 2010). While offensive realism primarily concerns great-power behavior, its core insights are also applicable to mid-sized states like the Philippines. Even if not great powers themselves, such states can significantly shape the regional balance of power by leveraging strategic assets in ways that constrain larger aggressors (Beckley 2017).

Middle powers endowed with critical geographic positions or resources can play a disproportionate role in maintaining equilibrium in their regions (Beckley 2017; Heydarian 2025). In the Indo-Pacific, the Philippines' ability to control vital maritime corridors, assert its rights under international law, and host forward-deployed military forces illustrates how a smaller state can influence the calculations of a larger one. Each of these capabilities—geographic choke-point control, legal legitimacy, and alliance-based force projection—serve as a potential check on China's ambitions. A realist framework thus not only explains China's drive for regional primacy but also highlights the countervailing power of states like the Philippines acting in concert with allies. Ultimately, realism underscores a fundamental strategic logic: as states seek security in an anarchic environment, those with advantageous positions and partnerships can become linchpins of regional stability by deterring aggression and preventing any single power from achieving hegemony (Jervis 1978).

THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE PHILIPPINES

Geographic Positioning and Maritime Trade Corridors

The Philippines is strategically located at the intersection of Indo-Pacific shipping lines. Its strong ties with both the East and West stem from its role as a key strategic location for Western powers like Spain and the US to establish bases in Southeast Asia and a major traffic and control hub during World War II when Japan occupied it. The Philippines' geography is situated in a key position from both an economic and military perspective (Woods 2016).

Its western maritime sector, the West Philippine Sea, faces the sea, where over 50 percent of global trade flows. This location gives the Philippines economic and strategic power. Controlling marine chokepoints is essential for energy regulation, supply chain security, and timely military logistics. Countries like China, South Korea, and Japan rely on the West Philippine Sea for trade, communication, and maritime security, with about one-third of global commerce passing through these seas (Cole 2017).

Furthermore, the archipelagic nature of the country enables it to serve as a bridge between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. This unique geographic configuration not only facilitates the movement of goods and energy but also allows the Philippines to act as a buffer against unilateral control of the region, thereby enhancing the overall security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific (Buszynski 2013).

Many of the Philippines' features remain today. Its location makes it a key ASEAN security hub for territorial conflicts with China and commerce, supply chain, and shipping challenges. The Philippines' centrality in international and regional affairs, weak economy, and vulnerability to Chinese invasion have been described after the COVID-19 epidemic (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Asia Editorial Team 2021).

Economic Leverage: Trade, Energy Security, and Natural Resources

The economic stakes in the West Philippine Sea extend beyond mere trade flow. The region is rich in natural resources, including significant hydrocarbon deposits and abundant fisheries (Buszynski 2013). Tangible economic resources aside, potential energy resources have also been observed in the disputed area. Chinese surveys have identified about 2.5 billion cubic meters of gas and 105 billion barrels of oil in the continental shelf in the disputed area, although US surveys in turn have not been quite as optimistic (Cole 2017).

The West Philippine Sea benefits claims outside the Philippines and China. Counterclaimants including Vietnam, Brunei, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Indonesia focus on economic resources and maritime access. Other non-claimant states are also interested in the area economically because these resources affect trade, national development, and energy security (Severino 2010). This is especially vital, given the Philippines' tribunal victory hinged on the normative claims through the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Domingo-Almase 2017).

Legal and Normative Significance: The 2016 Arbitration Victory

Using international law to fight China's sweeping claims has been one of the Philippines' biggest contributions to regional balance. The Philippines' landmark arbitration action at The Hague (the Tribunal) invalidated China's "nine-dash line" claim to almost the entire West Philippine Sea in 2016. This judicial win strengthened the UNCLOS and showed that even a mid-sized country can use international law to restrain a major power. Importantly, the arbitral tribunal's decision strengthened the Philippines' marine rights and set a precedent for other littoral states to maintain their rights (Heydarian 2025). By affirming the principle that claims must adhere to international law rather than historic might, the ruling enhanced the legitimacy of smaller states in maritime disputes with regional hegemons.

Through its "nine-dash line," the Tribunal dismissed China's traditional West Philippine Sea rights. It explained that China's claim violates the UNCLOS maritime zone and rights allocation. The disputed "nine-dash line" partially overlaps with the Philippines' UNCLOS-established exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and (CS), which China ratified in 1996. The UNCLOS precludes the retention of historic rights, disproving the Chinese "nine-dash line" claim (Heydarian 2025, 108; 115). Furthermore, the Tribunal did not consider the claims by China on the Scarborough Shoal among others. This is premised on Article 121 of the UNCLOS which states that "rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own shall have no EEZ nor CS."² Hence, it cannot be classified as a feature attributable to China. With regards to the Spratly Islands, the Tribunal stated that the group of islands are legally "rocks" that cannot be subject to entitlement by China.

The Tribunal also sided with the Philippines on China's West Philippine Sea violations. Philippines' customary Scarborough Shoal fishing rights were violated by China in 2012. The Tribunal also found that China violated the 1972 Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea by repeatedly approaching Philippine vessels at high speed and trying to cross ahead of them, putting the Philippines at risk.³

2 Arbitration Case No. 2013-19, "Philippines v. China, Permanent Court of Arbitration Case No. 2013-19 Award on Merits," 12 July 2016, 2-3. <https://pca-cpa.org/cn/cases/7/>.

3 Ibid.

The normative impact of the 2016 award reverberated throughout the Indo-Pacific. It signaled that the rules-based order—however fragile in a realist world—can serve as a line of defense for weaker states. Although China rejected the Tribunal's findings, the Philippines' legal gambit constrained Beijing's freedom of action by rallying international support for the UNCLOS and spotlighting China's defiance of global norms. In realist terms, this legal maneuver can be seen as an instrument of soft balancing: Manila employed law and diplomacy to raise the political costs of Chinese expansion, complementing the hard balancing achieved through military means. The arbitration victory thus became more than a moral or legal win; it was a strategic move that reinforced a regional order where might does not automatically make right. By strengthening the concept of a rules-based maritime order, the Philippines helped create diplomatic conditions that make unilateral territorial revisionism more difficult to legitimize. In sum, the legal assertiveness demonstrated in 2016 has augmented the Philippines' strategic influence by galvanizing international normative pressure against China's maritime ambitions (Heydarian 2025).

Military Strategic Importance: EDCA Sites and Regional Security Architecture

The Philippines' value in the Indo-Pacific security architecture is further amplified by its role as a host to US military facilities under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) and related defense pacts. Strategically located installations—such as those in Pampanga and Zambales in Luzon, including access to former bases like Subic Bay and Clark—serve as forward operating positions for US forces. This geographic positioning, at the gateway between the Pacific and the West Philippine Sea, effectively creates a military bridge connecting American allies from Northeast Asia to Southeast Asia. The presence of US rotational forces and pre-positioned equipment on Philippine soil provides a powerful deterrent against unilateral aggression. From a realist perspective, these bases strengthen a multilayered defense posture that raises the risks and costs for China were it to contemplate expanding its maritime or air control in the West Philippine Sea. By enabling rapid deployment of US and allied forces in a crisis, the EDCA sites complicate China's strategic calculus, as any attempt to use force in the region could quickly trigger a wider military response (Beckley 2017). In effect, the Philippines, through its alliance with Washington, acts as the southeastern anchor of an Indo-Pacific balance-of-power coalition.

The EDCA, ratified in 2014, authorized the US military forces to have access to and conduct activities within certain agreed locations in the Philippines. By 2016, the Philippines and the US jointly determined the EDCA agreed locations and by 2023,

Manila and Washington expanded the EDCA, adding sites proximate to contested waters and critical sea lines thereby shortening response times, improving maritime domain awareness, and signaling resolve (De Castro 2024; Sicsican 2023). It should be noted that three sites are all situated in Northern Luzon, facing Taiwan, and the fourth one in Southern Luzon facing the West Philippine Sea (Ibarra 2024). This EDCA access enables rapid rotation of U.S. forces, prepositioning, and joint training that integrate denial capabilities—coastal defense missiles, air defense, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance, and expeditionary logistics—consistent with a strategy of complicating any fait accompli in the West Philippine Sea (Beckley 2017; Fuhrmann and Sechser 2014).

From a signaling perspective, basing access, frequent exercises, and clarified treaty interpretations are costly to reverse and therefore enhance alliance credibility (Beckley 2017). However, scholars still debate how reliably alliances deter; some evidence suggests alliances deter in general, while other studies find mixed or context-dependent effects (Kenwich, Vasquez, and Powers 2015). The Philippine-U.S. case lies on the stronger end of the credibility spectrum because basing, persistent presence, and high-visibility exercises tie Washington's reputation to Manila's defense—raising the expected costs of aggression (Fuhrmann and Sechser 2014; Sicsican 2023).

An expanded US presence effectively turns the Philippines into a “porcupine” that is hard to subdue without escalating conflict (Beckley 2017). This entrenched defense infrastructure means that Chinese plans to dominate the West Philippine Sea or coerce Taiwan cannot ignore the Philippine factor. Any attempt at regional military adventurism by Beijing would have to contend with the reality of US air and naval power operating from Philippine soil. Thus, the Philippines' alliance-enabled military significance acts as a force multiplier for regional stability: it helps to maintain a favorable balance of power by deterring Chinese expansion, assuring smaller neighbors, and signaling that efforts to unilaterally rewrite the regional order will meet with coordinated resistance.

Minilateralism with Japan and Australia as Force Multipliers

Minilateral formats—smaller, purpose-built coalitions—allow faster coordination on maritime security, defense technology, and capacity-building. Tokyo's security cooperation with Manila, including patrol vessels, radar, and proposed reciprocal access, strengthens domain awareness and constabulary reach, complementing US support (Yamazaki and Osawa 2021; De Castro 2024). With Australia, expanding exercises and interoperability add anti-submarine and maritime patrol strengths relevant to deterring gray-zone coercion and escalation (Barnes and Makinda 2022;

Sicsican 2023). These trilateral arrangements are consistent with realism's balancing logic: they aggregate denial capabilities while distributing risk, complicating an adversary's operational calculus (Mearsheimer 2010; Beckley 2017).

Japan and the Philippines signed a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) in 2024 to facilitate mutually beneficial defense cooperation. One goal is to deepen ties with Japan, a critical partner on Indo-Pacific water lanes. A Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with Australia signed in 2007 and ratified in 2012 benefits the Philippines.⁴ The VFA authorizes the Australian military to participate and conduct drills in the Philippines, as well as enables Australian ships to join patrols in the West Philippine Sea (Ng 2023).

Minilateralism also performs a signaling function—public communiqués, joint patrols, and cross-servicing agreements convey a shared willingness to bear costs for the status quo (Barnes and Makinda 2022; Sicsican 2023). Because these formats are modular and task-oriented, they avoid the collective-action problems that hobble broader multilateralism, yet remain flexible enough to de-escalate when conditions improve (Yamazaki and Osawa 2021; De Castro 2024).

CHINA'S STRATEGIC CALCULUS: IDEOLOGICAL RHETORIC VERSUS PRAGMATIC AMBITIONS

Taiwan Versus the Philippines: Ideological and Pragmatic Considerations

China's claim to Taiwan is anchored in nationalism and historical narrative, frequently described as a basic interest connected to the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party. Beijing's hierarchy of aims is also impacted by power and security payoffs, according to strategic realists. China values Taiwan symbolically, but the Philippines offers strategic advantages that may trump ideology. China would dominate Southeast Asia's maritime heart, including the West Philippine Sea's communication arteries, if it controlled the Philippines. Beijing could project military might to the Indo-Pacific, safeguard crucial resource zones, and block off or monitor a major amount of global maritime traffic with such control. Though significant, incorporating Taiwan would be risky and would not give

⁴ Agreement between the Government of Australia and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines Concerning the Status of Visiting Forces of Each State in the Territory of the Other State (31 May 2007). <https://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/other/dfat/treaties/ATS/2012/31.html>.

China geostrategic control of Southeast Asian waters. Offensive realism holds that large nations prioritize goals that boost their power and security. The Philippines is valued for its naval and air positioning, resource access, and influence over surrounding states, while Taiwan is valued for its ideology and reputation (though it is also strategic).

Securing influence or authority in the Philippines might transform regional security architecture in China's advantage more than seizing Taiwan, which would likely start a war with the US and its allies. China may damage a crucial pillar of the first-island-chain defensive network that limits its navy's maneuverability by undermining the US–Philippines alliance or obtaining basing footholds in the archipelago. It could also directly endanger Northeast Asian sea lanes to the Middle East and Europe, providing Beijing clout over regional and global economy.

While promising unification with Taiwan, China has spent significant resources building artificial island bases, deploying naval and coast guard assets, and courting or coercing Southeast Asian states to consolidate control over the Indo-Pacific maritime crossroads, analysts say. Even if Taiwan remains a priority, China's strategic focus appears to be shifting toward the West Philippine Sea, where power projection and resource security are more tangible. The Philippines is a strategic center of gravity for China in the Indo-Pacific, and its alliance or subjugation might upset the regional equilibrium. Beijing's mix of ideological rhetoric and pragmatic ambition places the Philippines at the center of its grand strategy, showing how strength often trumps symbolism in great power ambitions.

The Security Dilemma and Regional Military Dynamics

China's military expansion and territorial encroachments have created a classic regional security conundrum. In anarchic environments with ambiguous intents, a state's security initiatives, such as China's island fortifications or deployment of modern missiles, threaten neighboring governments, encouraging them to strengthen their military. This action–reaction loop is evident throughout the Indo-Pacific. Beijing has strengthened its naval and aviation capabilities and erected military installations on disputed features, forcing its neighbors—notably the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia—to reinforce their defenses and seek foreign security cooperation. The US has increased its military presence and collaboration with allies, seeing China's ascent as a regional threat. The region militarizes as each side justifies its actions as responses to the other: additional patrols, exercises, bases, and weaponry.

Philippines is at the forefront of this security issue. It hosts US EDCA sites and modernizes its military in response to China's growing influence in neighboring waters. However, Beijing views these U.S.–Philippine defense arrangements as an American plan to control China, increasing Chinese threat perceptions. The concentration of EDCA facilities in Luzon, the Philippines' northern island closest to Taiwan, raises Chinese concerns that the US could utilize Philippine territory to project force in Taiwan or box up the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy in the first island chain.

This shows how defensive measures by one side (e.g., the Philippines enabling US forward presence to deter China) can appear offensive to the other, rising tensions. Mistrust reigns, and each new deployment or capability (a radar system here, a missile battery there) is interpreted negatively by the other side. The Indo-Pacific security crisis deepens. Every Chinese naval exercise or maritime militia foray increases U.S. Freedom of Navigation Operations or allied drills. China intensifies military modernization and coercion with every US-Philippine alliance or basing agreement.

This spiral does not guarantee conflict, but it increases the risk of miscalculation. True to its need to protect itself, the Philippines will continue to build up defenses and work with allies, which China will view as provocations requiring countervailing moves. Regional peace is difficult because neither side can retreat without being exposed. In a true security dilemma, one party's defense preparations closely resemble the other's offense (Jervis 1978). The only exit would be robust confidence-building and arms control measures, which realism suggests are unlikely unless a stable balance or mutual vulnerability convinces both sides that restraint is in their interest. Until then, the Philippines will remain a flashpoint in US–China strategic competition, where military dynamics are caught in a feedback loop of mutual suspicion and power balancing.

Global Implications: Disrupting Trade and Eroding International Order

Should China succeed in substantially undermining the Philippines' strategic autonomy or, in the extreme, bringing the archipelago under its sway, the implications would extend far beyond Southeast Asia. Control over the Philippines and its surrounding waters would give Beijing the ability to regulate one of the world's most critical maritime corridors. Trillions of dollars in annual trade flow through the South China Sea; whoever holds sway over these sea lanes could, in theory, wield enormous economic leverage. In a crisis, China could disrupt shipping routes, impose blockades, or threaten energy supplies to countries dependent on

Middle Eastern oil that passes through the region. Such leverage would not only bolster China's regional dominance, but also give it a tool of economic coercion on a global scale. The mere possibility of a single power being able to choke off vital trade arteries would send ripples through international markets and could force other nations to acquiesce to that power's political demands. In effect, unfettered Chinese control in the South China Sea would mark a profound shift in the balance of global economic power and undermine the principle of freedom of the seas that underpins the liberal international trading order.

Beyond trade, there is a deeper concern about the erosion of the international rules-based order. The Philippines' 2016 arbitral victory, and similar efforts by smaller states to use international law, are pillars of a system in which even great powers are expected to adhere to agreed rules and norms. If China were able to ignore such legal constraints and face no consequences – for instance, if it effectively negated the Philippines' legal win by imposing its will through *faits accomplis* – it would set a precedent that might make right in maritime disputes. Other revisionist powers could be emboldened to defy international law in pursuit of their own territorial or maritime claims, knowing that legal verdicts can be rendered moot by raw power.

From a realist standpoint, the decay of a rules-based order is unsurprising if the distribution of power shifts dramatically – international rules often reflect the interests of the dominant powers (Waltz 2000). But the potential disruption to global stability is nevertheless alarming. A China empowered to “write the rules” in its near seas might also seek to reshape norms in other domains, from airspace to cyberspace, in ways that favor authoritarian and mercantilist practices. Thus, the stakes transcend the Philippines and Indo-Pacific. They discuss global governance's future. The Philippines, US, and their partners' balancing measures contain China's regional ambitions, buy time for negotiation, and underline the principle that aggressive revisionism will be opposed. If those efforts fail, international norms and institutions that have supported peace and prosperity since World War II could crumble. The geopolitical conflict in the Philippines is a microcosm of the larger debate over the future of the international order—whether it will remain rules-based and multipolar or become hierarchically dominated by a single power.

IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL SECURITY AND GLOBAL ORDER

Balancing Power in an Anarchic System

From a realist perspective, the balance of power is essential to preventing any single state from dominating an anarchic international system. The strategic role

of the Philippines—as a controller of vital maritime trade routes, a defender of international legal norms, and a host to key military installations—acts as a crucial counterweight to Chinese expansionism (Mearsheimer 2010; Beckley 2017).

Mearsheimer's offensive realism thesis holds that international great powers aggressively collect power to protect themselves in an anarchic system where competing powers and interests strive to secure and prolong their own state. Thus, big powers act rationally to survive (Jalil 2019). This particular theory does present a pessimistic view that largely eschews other elements that ought to be considered in the conduct of international relations, focusing largely only on power dynamics especially among those considered great powers (Snyder 2002).

Several schools of thought attempt to explain the West Philippine Sea conflict. China's aggressive and defensive actions have been seen as realist. The moves to secure and push their claim over the area and its land, energy, and economic resources are offensive realist strategies: a great power asserting itself to ensure its survival and influence, especially in the current international community. The rise of China and US-China tensions are major concerns.

On the other hand, certain interpretations posit that China is exercising defensive realism: citing that rather than being an up-and-coming hegemonic power intent challenging the US, China's actions indicate it to be a status-quo power intent on survival and stability rather than upending the current international status. In this specific lens, China's actions are seen as a reaction towards increased and persistent US presence in neighboring regions. Waltz's theory is applicable in this regard, with the perspective that China's claims over the West Philippine Sea as nothing new nor revisionist, but more an attempt to maintain the status quo rather than asserting itself over the region and its opponent claimants (Jalil 2019).

The Philippines' tools limit its response to China's territorial dispute. Despite its small size, UNCLOS constructivist norms determine its West Philippine Sea rights. This is its sole defense without yielding to the US or alienating ASEAN countries with similar claims to the disputed area. Anarchic systems where powers, large and small, operate on interests and norms rather than realistic and rational methods established by nations require rethinking manufactured international meanings.

Reinforcing the International Rules-Based Order

The 2016 arbitration victory is not merely a legal milestone; it is a cornerstone for upholding the international rules-based order. By affirming the provisions of UNCLOS and invalidating expansive unilateral claims, the ruling reinforces a global

normative framework that deters aggressive state behavior and contends that such legal and normative victories are indispensable for maintaining regional stability and protecting the rights of smaller states in the face of hegemonic pressures.⁵

This is echoed in the Philippines' commitment to a rules-based international order in asserting the state's sovereign territorial rights in the West Philippine Sea (Tolentino 2024). It was also emphasized that the burden of responsibility is placed unto China to recognize the rule of law that is the 2016 arbitration victory (Tolentino 2024). This also entails that the Philippines shall reinforce a rules-based order through the defense cooperation and security partnerships it forged with other states in the Indo-Pacific Region, including those heavily involved in it. By partnering with the US, Australia and Japan through separate agreements, the Philippines can capitalize in forming another minilateral/ quadrilateral group similar to the Quad, AUKUS, and the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) to check and balance China's rampant disregard of international law (Martin and Wescott 2024).

Through an international rules-based order, China's aggression in the Indo-Pacific should be deterred and chastised. Even after the 2016 arbitration victory, China continuously escalated tensions in the West Philippine Sea which included firing water cannons and blocking and ramming Philippine ships.

Diplomatic Engagement and Strategic Autonomy

Beyond its geographic and military assets, the Philippines has consistently pursued a strategy of diplomatic autonomy by engaging with multilateral institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the East Asia Summit highlights that such engagement enhances the Philippines' international stature and contributes to a collective regional security framework.

CONCLUSION

The Philippines has emerged as a central geostrategic actor in the Indo-Pacific, endowed with a unique combination of geographic, economic, legal, and military assets that collectively constrain China's expansionist ambitions. While the reunification of Taiwan remains an important ideological objective for Beijing, the tangible benefits of controlling the West Philippine Sea—such as dominating vital maritime trade routes, securing natural resources, and shaping regional security dynamics—make the Philippines a far more consequential target.

5 Arbitration Case No. 2013-19.

Drawing on the insights of Mearsheimer, this paper has demonstrated that the Philippines is far from a passive bystander in regional affairs. Instead, it is a pivotal state whose strategic decisions reverberate throughout the Indo-Pacific and influence global economic and security architectures. Its 2016 arbitration victory, economic leverage over critical maritime corridors, and integration into a network of robust military alliances underscore its central role in maintaining regional stability. Recognizing and reinforcing the strategic autonomy of the Philippines is essential not only for deterring Chinese expansion but also for upholding the international rules-based order that underpins global peace and prosperity.

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Course or Curse: Examining the Arms Dynamics Behind the Naval Build-Up in the Indo-Pacific

Vincent Kyle Parada



"USS Ronald Reagan leads an American carrier strike group"

US Navy, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/display-news/Article/2344416/us-indo-pacific-command-forces-come-together-for-valiant-shield-2020/>

Course or Curse: Examining the Arms Dynamics Behind the Naval Build-Up in the Indo-Pacific

Vincent Kyle Parada¹

ABSTRACT

Indo-Pacific navies have undergone remarkable development over the last two decades. From guided missile cruisers, frigates, and offshore patrol vessels to anti-ship missiles, nuclear submarines, and pseudo-aircraft carriers, regional navies are not only expanding the size of their fleets but also the range of capabilities they can employ at any given moment. But the emergence of what Sam Bateman calls an “oceans era” where maritime security has become “the fundamental concern of most island and coastal states” has ushered in a wave of anxiety around a naval build-up. By examining capability development efforts across several case studies (i.e., ASEAN, Australia and Japan, and the United States and China), this paper goes against the notion that naval build-up is an inherently destabilising factor for the Indo-Pacific. Upon assessment, it finds little quantitative (i.e., military expenditure and acquisition) or qualitative (i.e., force design and structure) evidence to suggest that naval acquisitions were consistent with an arms race or prioritising more offensive capabilities. Instead, rather than seeing build-up as a response to geopolitical developments, this paper argues that existing tensions have instead framed build-up within the context of great power rivalries, skewing threat perceptions of routine efforts by states to update legacy systems, modernise their navies, and improve their defence posture as pro-active measures in preparation for armed conflict.

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INTRODUCTION

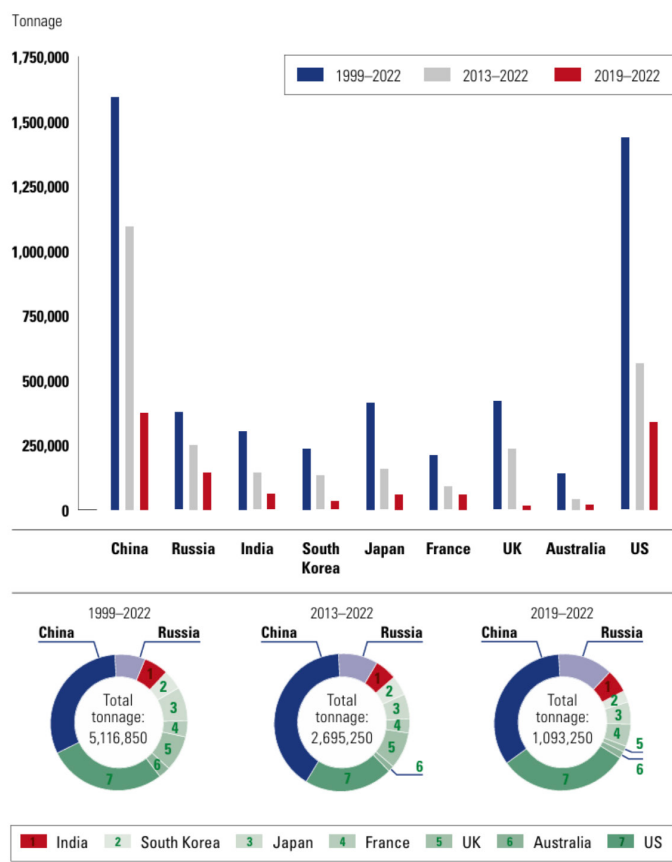
The Indo-Pacific is at a watershed. From guided missile cruisers, frigates, and offshore patrol vessels to nuclear submarines and pseudo-aircraft carriers, regional navies are not only expanding the size of their fleets but also the range of capabilities they can employ at any given moment. For decades, rhetorical assurances have usually justified these improvements as either a subset of the modernisation process or as an agnostic security policy. But for a region whose vastness is mitigated only by the interconnectedness of – and its prosperity linked to – the maritime commons, the emergence of an “oceans era” where maritime security has become “the fundamental concern of most island and coastal states” has ushered in a wave of anxiety around a naval build-up (Bateman 1993, 39–30).

Although the Indo-Pacific has been largely preoccupied with land rather than sea-based conflicts in the aftermath of World War II, the boom in ocean commerce; the emergence of contentious flashpoints; the decreasing barriers for many small and middle power states in the development of credible naval forces; and the fundamental geography of the region dictate that any future conflict will assuredly be a maritime one. The problem, however, is that naval build-ups are processes which generate intense scrutiny, even more so than their ground or air-based counterparts. The scale of regional acquisitions coupled with their versatility in function has made it incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish a platform’s purpose from the vantage point of policy elites. Without a window into the black box of decision-making, a state’s intent behind a naval build-up becomes secondary to another state’s perception of it, increasing the risk of miscalculation and confrontation with it.

While the discourse surrounding a naval build-up in the Indo-Pacific has usually fallen under one of two camps – either that they are independent of regional instability or have been the direct cause for it – this paper advocates for a more calibrated approach. It concedes to the role that naval expansion has played in heightening Indo-Pacific tensions, but falls short of any premature claims about an escalation spiral. Rather than seeing build-up as a response to geopolitical developments, it argues that existing tensions have instead framed build-up within the context of great power rivalries, skewing threat perceptions of otherwise routine capability development programmes into concerted and deliberate efforts motivated by strategic competition.

THE ARMS RACE MYTH

The extensive coverage of military modernisation efforts in the Indo-Pacific has tended to conflate the word “build-up” with the idea of an “arms race.” Given the rate at which countries were acquiring newer and bigger platforms, and the clear and present danger posed by certain revisionist states, the argument that an arms race was indeed taking place and contributing to regional instability seems plausible. Collectively, nine of the ten biggest navies in the Indo-Pacific were responsible for launching 5,116,850 tons’ worth of new warships between 1999 to 2022 (Figure 1). Of these, 1,093,250 tons were launched between 2019 to 2022 alone (Childs 2023, 65).



■ **Figure 1.** Major new naval tonnage launched for selected navies active in the Indo-Pacific (1999–2022). Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies.

However, the liberal use of the term belies the reality of the dynamics underpinning the naval build-up in the Indo-Pacific. Academically, the term “arms race” refers to a particular kind of strategic competition usually characterised – in Colin S. Gray’s (1971, 41) case – by four fundamental criteria: (1) a conscious antagonism between

two or more parties; (2) a force structure clearly designed to combat or deter the other parties; (3) quantitative and/or qualitative competition in the development of their armed forces; and (4) rapid increases in the quantitative and/or qualitative improvement of these forces. Historical examples of arms race dynamics included the Anglo-German naval arms race leading up to World War I and the US-Soviet nuclear arms race during the Cold War – both of which eventually would result in arms control regimes. Nevertheless, while several Indo-Pacific rivalries do exhibit “arms race-like” behaviours in capability development by meeting some of the criteria (e.g., the US and China, North and South Korea), the region as a whole does not sufficiently meet all the requisite conditions to qualify as an arms race.

To illustrate this point, we ought to examine the arms dynamics in one of the Indo-Pacific’s most active sub-regions in military development today – Southeast Asia. China’s growing military muscle has been a recurring theme in the literature covering Southeast Asia’s naval build-up. With Beijing rapidly modernising the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), and in particular, its growing Navy (PLAN), ASEAN states have been scrambling to increase defence spending and safeguard their borders – or so the argument goes. In reality, major maritime nations like Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam have been steadily expanding their fleets since at least the early 2000s (Figure 2) – well before the advent of a more belligerent PLA. That alone disproves the notion that they were primarily motivated by Chinese aggression. But has expansion intensified in the decades since?

Empirically, there are two ways of assessing whether the naval build-up in ASEAN qualifies as an arms race, and subsequently, a destabilising element in the Indo-Pacific. Quantitatively, we can look at the total tonnage and number of vessels as well as any increases in defence spending. Qualitatively, we can look at the type of platforms these countries acquire and how they actually use them. However, because ASEAN is so diverse – both in membership and in regime types – coming up with a comprehensive data set is challenging. Some countries like Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam do not regularly publicise information about their armed forces or have ceased to do so entirely. Because of these limitations, a quantitative approach is the most feasible. While fleet sizes do not necessarily reflect operational priorities, nor military expenditure reflect the percentage spent on new acquisitions, they do provide us with a solid baseline from which to expand on our analysis.

Looking at the developmental trajectory of select ASEAN navies,² we can see that excluding Indonesia, fleet expansion in terms of principal surface and underwater

2 Maritime nations with ongoing territorial disputes with China.

combatants has been fairly limited between 2005 to 2020 (Figure 2). In fact, some navies like the Philippine and Vietnamese navies suffered attrition from the retirement of older platforms, with routine decommissioning and acquisition processes accounting for the disparities in the total tonnage and number of vessels. Even if we consider expected acquisitions by 2030, fleet expansion³ across the four navies (ttl. 83) only averages to around three ships a year over a 25-year period – a far cry from the eight launched annually by Britain (ttl. 29) and Germany (ttl. 17) at the height of the Anglo-German naval arms race between 1906 to 1912 (Maurer 1992).

Southeast Asia's Navies								
	Indonesia				Malaysia			
	Ships	Tonnage	Subs	Tonnage	Ships	Tonnage	Subs	Tonnage
2005	41	37,010	2	2,780	16	13,734	0	0
2010	44	43,029	2	2,780	20	20,438	2	3,466
2015	58	52,213	2	2,780	22	23,790	2	3,466
2020	58	53,468	4	5,604	22	23,790	2	3,466
2025*	73	91,203	5	7,926	30	44,070	2	3,466
2030*	80	125,561	8	14,826	38	64,504	2	3,466

	Philippines				Vietnam			
	Ships	Tonnage	Subs	Tonnage	Ships	Tonnage	Subs	Tonnage
2005	15	14,467	0	0	18	10,340	2	448
2010	15	14,467	0	0	21	11,990	2	448
2015	15	19,315	0	0	26	17,908	4	5,172
2020	13	19,323	0	0	32	25,716	8	14,620
2025*	22	28,964	1	1,733	30	26,590	8	14,620
2030*	28	44,564	2	3,466	27	26,265	8	14,620

Notes:

Ships include surface combatants of 200 tonnes or more.

* These include the continuation of normal retirement patterns and completion of currently ordered and planned production.

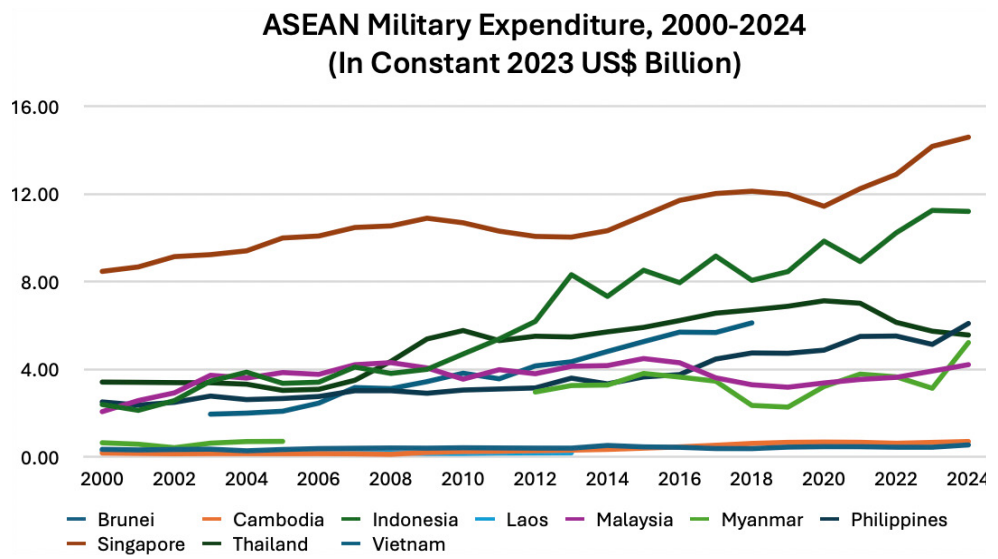
- **Figure 2.** Number and tonnage of principal combatants in select ASEAN navies. Source: Felix K. Chang, “Southeast Asian Naval Modernization and Hedging Strategies.”

Defence spending, too, was not subject to any rapid increases that might be indicative of an arms race. Using 2013⁴ as a jumping off point, we can see that regional military expenditure maintained a steady upward trajectory, even before attitudinal changes toward China (Figure 3). Excluding Singapore and Indonesia – both of whom possess the largest economies in Southeast Asia – defence spending

3 Excluding submarine acquisitions.

4 The year following the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff and the beginning of artificial island-building activities in the South China Sea.

among major ASEAN states like Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam have hovered roughly between USD four to USD six billion for much of the last decade (Figure 3). Indeed, for the region as a whole,⁵ military expenditure has only increased approximately 33 percent from USD 32.3 to USD 43 billion between 2013 to 2024 compared to 55 percent from USD 19.4 to USD 29.4 billion between 2000 to 2012.



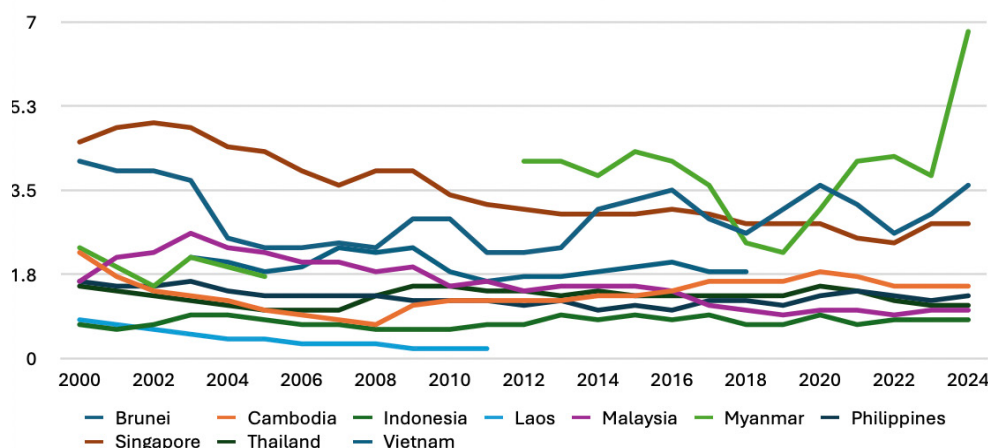
■ **Figure 3.** ASEAN Military Expenditure, 2000–2024 (in US\$ billion).⁶ Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

We see the opposite of this trend when we examine defence spending as a percentage of the GDP. Barring a few outliers like Brunei, Myanmar, and Singapore which have occasionally breached past 3 percent, military expenditure has remained fairly consistent at around 0.9 to 1.5 percent of the GDP for most ASEAN states (Figure 4). For some like Laos, Malaysia, and even Singapore, defence spending relative to their GDP has actually fallen below their pre-2013 levels (Figure 4). So, while the actual value of military expenditure may have risen between 2000 to 2024, its share in the region’s total resource output per annum has not. This begs the question: if ASEAN states were not actually investing more on defence, how do we explain higher spending?

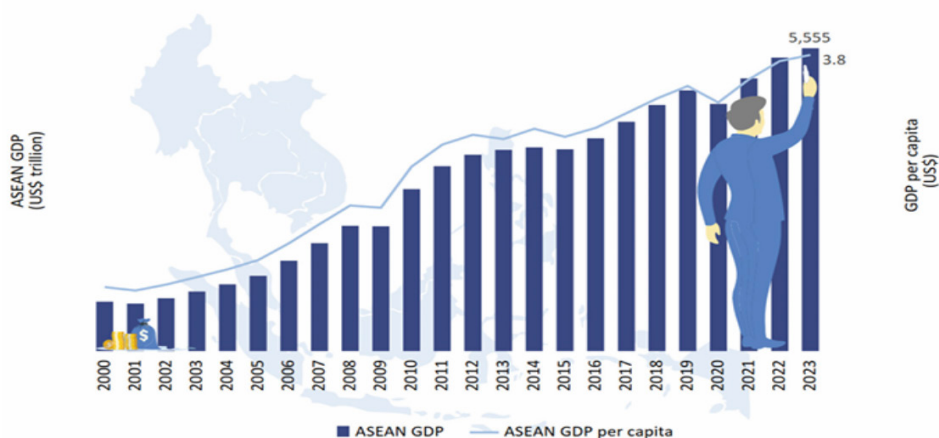
5 Excluding Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam.

6 The chart contains missing data from Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, all of whom do not regularly or have since ceased publicising military expenditure.

ASEAN Military Expenditure, 2000-2024 (In % of GDP)



■ **Figure 4.** ASEAN Military Expenditure, 2000–2024 (in % of GDP). Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.



■ **Figure 5.** ASEAN GDP (US\$ trillion) and GDP per capita (US\$), 2000–2023. Source: ASEAN Secretariat, ASEANstats Database.

When set against the backdrop of the ASEAN economy, the answer becomes obvious. Factoring out contractions caused by the 2008 Financial Crisis and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, ASEAN’s GDP growth has consistently enjoyed upward momentum throughout 2000 to 2023 (Figure 5). Combined, its members make up the world’s fifth-largest economy behind the US, China, Japan, and Germany. The bottom line is – ASEAN’s “pie” is growing. Although the number of slices for defence remains roughly the same, the size of the slices has become much bigger today than

they ever were in the early 2000s. More importantly, the cost of defence has grown exponentially. Modern naval platforms have far outpaced their predecessors in the cost of acquisition. Better ships mean bigger price tags. More weapons mean more design modifications. Add to that maintenance and repair, inflation, and purchasing power parity among others, and defence budgets simply do not have the same mileage as they used to. With these factors mind, the increase in actual values of military expenditure should be seen less as a symptom of a burgeoning arms race and more of two things: (1) the product of sustained regional economic growth and (2) a course correct to keep up with global economic headwinds, especially as most Indo-Pacific states move past inward-looking security toward a more external-oriented defence posture.

THE BLACK BOX OF ACQUISITION

While quantitatively, there are no indicators that an arms race in Southeast Asia is underway, few will contest the fact that most Southeast Asian, and by extension Indo-Pacific states, are in the midst of a unilateral build-up of their naval capabilities. What is contested is whether these efforts were aimed at a particular adversary, and whether these new capabilities were to be used offensively or defensively in pursuit of their respective countries' maritime interests. Precisely because of the ambiguity surrounding the use of naval platforms, a qualitative approach is more suited. By looking at what navies (or their governments) say, how they behave, what their objectives are, and how they intend to achieve them, we can contextualise the role specific platforms play within the broader framework of national security.

Consider the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force's (JMSDF) Izumo-class destroyers. While a standard nomenclature for warships does exist, the lines for what qualifies a vessel as one particular type over another is often blurred. In this case, critics have been quick to point out how these self-described "helicopter destroyers" – now "multi-role cruisers" – were actually aircraft carriers in all but name. First commissioned in 2006, their primary purpose was for anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). This was reflected in a complement which consisted mostly of ASW and search and rescue (SAR) helicopters. At the same time, the Izumo destroyers were specifically designed to accommodate fixed-wing, short take-off and vertical landing (SVOTL) aircraft like the F-35B. Offensively, they would allow the JMSDF to enhance its force projection capabilities – particularly along Sino-Japanese flashpoints like the East China Sea – and enable the conduct of air strikes far beyond the capacity of their land-based counterparts. Defensively, carrier-based F-35Bs would extend naval air defence coverage hundreds of kilometres beyond the Japanese mainland, allowing the JMSDF to conduct offensive operations and equip the JMSDF with the offensive

strike capabilities necessary for a defensive sea control strategy (Blair and Rodeman 2019).

But while Izumo carriers can fulfil both offensive and defensive mission roles, force structure seems to favour the latter. It was only in 2024 that the Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) established its first F-35B squadron under the 5th Air Wing at Nyutabaru Air Base (Lee 2023). It plans to field a second squadron by 2030, with Nyutabaru serving as the fleet's main storage and training facility until the completion of a dedicated air base at Mageshima Island (Mahadzir 2025). This tells us two things. First, that while the F-35Bs will operate from JMSDF ships in the future, the platforms themselves as well as the personnel to operate and maintain them still fall under the command of the JASDF – in contrast to other navies which tend to have dedicated naval aviation components for their carriers. And second, that because the JASDF retains overall control over their F-35B complements, JMSDF carriers will not be conducting missions outside established areas of operations (AOR) for command-and-control (C2) centres on the Japanese mainland.

Besides larger surface vessels, submarines have also emerged as a mainstay of regional acquisition trends in the Indo-Pacific. As Herwig (1996, 227) had put it, “to its advocates, [submarines] constitut[e] a cheap but effective counterthreat to superior surface forces, the weapon of the poorer against the richer power.” So, while the US, China, Russia, and North Korea continue to maintain the world's largest submarine fleets, for middle powers especially, these platforms have become increasingly sought-after for their role as an asymmetric sea denial capability. Five (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Myanmar, and Vietnam) of the ten ASEAN states now maintain their own submarine fleets, with two (Thailand and the Philippines) looking to buy in (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025). And Taiwan is in the middle of an ambitious programme to develop seven indigenously built diesel-electric submarines for the Republic of China Navy (ROCN) in order to improve its “overall defence” posture (Lee 2024).

None, however, have so personified the Indo-Pacific submarine boom – and the criticism that comes alongside it – than Australia and its quest for nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs). Since the release of its fifth defence white paper 2009, Australian officials have emphasised the need to increase the country's existing fleet of six Collins-class diesel-electric submarines (SSKs). Dubbed Force 2030, it called for a minimum of 12 submarines to adequately defend Australia's maritime approaches, safeguard other Australian Defence Force (ADF) assets, and undertake strategic missions requiring stealth and precision at sea (Department of Defence 2009). By 2021, Canberra announced the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) partnership alongside London and Washington, with Pillar One of the new trilateral focusing

specifically on the development of Australia's SSNs. The reception was mixed. While the Philippines – and to a lesser extent Singapore and Vietnam – supported the decision from the outset, others like Indonesia and Malaysia warned of the dangers to regional stability, including nuclear proliferation, arms racing, and provocation in the South China Sea (Storey and Choong 2023).

Much of the backlash had to do with the platforms themselves. Compared to conventional SSKs, SSNs were capable of greater speed and endurance. A sustained submerged speed of 30 knots allows for far-reaching, covert mobility surpassing that of any surface vessel. They can deploy for months at a time, docking only for resupply, repair and maintenance, and crew rotations. They are difficult to detect and, depending on their armament, can threaten both sea and land-based targets for comparatively little risk. More importantly, SSNs are about force projection. They enable commanders to support surface assets, counter undersea ones, and deny the enemy uninhibited access to vital zones of interest (Ohff 2017). In pursuing a nuclear submarine programme of its own, Australia was effectively positioning itself as a major player in the Indo-Pacific, and thus, a threat to any who sought to upend the regional order.

However, as Taylor (2020) points out, Canberra's behaviour – especially regarding the South China Sea – mark a clear divergence between the rhetoric and implementation of its Indo-Pacific strategy. While Australia has been a vocal opponent of China's destabilising activities in the region, it has been noticeably hesitant to flex its middle power status – and the capabilities that come alongside it – despite longstanding foreign policy traditions to the contrary (Taylor 2020). In 2023, the Albanese government refused to cancel the Chinese-owned Landbridge Group's 99-year lease on Port Darwin despite its potential ramifications to national security (Dziedzic 2023). And although it has been working to enhance defence cooperation with other like-minded “anti-China” states such as the US, Japan, and the Philippines, its commitment to these coalitions remains miniscule in comparison. In fact, Washington has grown seriously concerned about Australia's supposed unwillingness to deploy its SSNs offensively against China in the event of armed conflict (Needham 2025).

This was not at all unfounded. Australia's 2024 National Defence Strategy continues to emphasise the use of its military capabilities in a denial strategy to deter would-be adversaries, protect its sea lines of communication (SLOCs), and safeguard its northern approaches (Department of Defence 2024). Indeed, during a simulation exercise with US forces, ADF commanders acted in accordance with established strategic defence objectives by refusing to utilise their submarines against

Chinese targets from the South China Sea – much to the chagrin of their American counterparts (Needham 2025).

Clearly then, while Japan and Australia have or are currently in the process of acquiring advanced naval platforms capable of fulfilling offensive mission roles, their intended purpose remains largely defensive in nature. Neither Tokyo nor Canberra have doctrinally or organisationally laid the groundwork for dedicated force projection, instead structuring their forces as largely green-water navies with blue-water capabilities. Build-up, in this case, could reasonably be subsumed under the broader ambit of technological development. If, as Michael Horowitz (2020) writes, weapon systems (and platforms) were “tools that states employ in the pursuit of military power,” then its logical conclusion would be that states will acquire the very best tools they can afford in the pursuit of that military power.

THE *PARA BELLUM* PARADOX

If the ongoing naval build-up was neither the symptom of an arms race nor a provocative effort by Indo-Pacific states to enhance their capabilities at the expense of their adversaries, then why have recent acquisitions provoked such strong responses from regional actors? The simple truth of the matter is that capability development cannot be divorced from the broader system of geopolitics that determines who is a threat and how much of a threat they pose to state interests. China’s emergence in the 21st century as a global superpower and its desire to take on a larger role in world affairs has put it on a collision course with the old order headed by the US. It is through that lens that naval development – whether targeted or agnostic – will be viewed, regardless of any rhetorical assurances made by their respective principals.

Europe had faced a similar dilemma during the Anglo-German naval arms race between 1906 to 1914. While many were quick to single out Germany’s naval build-up for having contributed to the outbreak of World War I, few have highlighted the role that underlying tensions played in framing that build-up as a direct challenge to British naval hegemony. Under Kaiser Wilhelm II, Germany had adopted an imperialist foreign policy of *Weltpolitik* (“world policy”) that sought to establish the country as a global power. One of the cornerstones of that policy was Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz’s plan to develop a strong Imperial German Navy (IGN), not to rival the British but to serve as leverage and extract diplomatic concessions (Stevenson 2004, 15). Indeed, even at the height of naval production, Germany’s total naval tonnage never exceeded 1.3 million tons – less than half of Britain’s 2.7 million tons (Kennedy 1987, 203). By the beginning of hostilities in 1914, it was outclassed and outnumbered 510:221 by the Royal Navy (RN) (Table 1).

Table 1. British and German Navies, 1914.

FLEET COMPARISON (1914)				
TYPE	BRITAIN		GERMANY	
	In Service	Under Construction	In Service	Under Construction
Dreadnoughts	22	13	15	5
Battlecruisers	9	1	5	3
Pre-dreadnoughts	40	-	22	-
Cruisers	121	-	40	-
Destroyers	221	-	90	-
Submarines	73	-	31	-
Total	510		221	

Source: Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy*.

All of this was happening at a period in history where Europe had not seen a major conflict since the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. By making a dedicated effort to maintain the balance of power, the Concert of Europe had ensured relative peace in the continent. Germany's rise as a singular nation under the leadership of the Kingdom of Prussia was the first real challenge to that equilibrium; the build-up of its naval forces was the most explicit. Thus, while the IGN was hardly ever a material threat to the RN – nor did Tirpitz even expect to defeat them – Germany's quest for its “place in the sun” had cultivated an underlying antagonism which tainted the threat perceptions of Europe's old guard. And as the old Latin adage goes, *si vis pacem, para bellum*.” If a state was intent on building up its military instrument, then it stands to reason that it is intent on using that instrument at some point or another. For Britain, the choice was clear: if it wanted peace, then it must prepare for war. The rest, as they say, is history.

In many ways, China is today's Imperial Germany. Though all states possess an inherent right to self-defence and are – with exceptions – permitted to pursue whatever means to meet its defence requirements, these efforts are not above the scrutiny of their fellow nations. For outsiders looking in, rhetoric and policy are the only windows into the black box of state decision-making. Beijing has made no secret of its goal to develop the PLA as a world-class military by 2049, and to complete material preparations necessary for major combat operations in time for the PLA centenary in 2027 (Culver 2025). Moreover, it has overseen an immense build-up of its naval forces, with the PLAN overtaking the US Navy sometime between 2015 to 2020 to become the world's largest maritime fighting force by sheer number of hulls (Table 2) (O'Rourke 2025).

Table 2. Number of PLAN and US Navy Battle Force Ships, 2000-2030.

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2025	2030
Selected ship types							
Ballistic missile submarines	1	1	3	4	4	6	8
Nuclear-powered attack submarines	5	4	5	6	7	10	13
Diesel attack submarines	56	56	48	53	55	55	55
Aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers	19	25	25	26	43	55	65
Frigates, corvettes	38	43	50	74	102	120	135
Total number of China Navy battle force ships, including types not shown above	210	220	220	255	360	400	425
Total U.S. Navy battle force ships	318	282	288	271	296	287	294
U.S. total above compared to China total above	+108	+62	+68	+16	-64	-113	-131

Source: O' Rourke, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress."

An argument could be made that China's naval build-up was simply commensurate to its great power status. Naval warfare was, after all, platform centric. According to Speller (2019, 127), "Changes to those platforms, and to the threats that they face, inevitably bring change to the tactical conduct of naval operations." China needed a modern navy that can keep up with an evolving security environment to assert its interests – especially as they extend further and further from the mainland. In February 2025, for example, PLAN Task Group 107 – composed of one *Renhai*-class guided-missile cruiser, one *Jiangkai II*-class frigate, and one Type 903 *Fuchi*-class replenishment oiler – crossed Philippine and Indonesian archipelagic waters to conduct live-fire exercises in the Tasman Sea (Gan 2025). The move was a clear demonstration of the PLAN's ability to embark on long-distance deployments and carry out replenishment at sea – two things necessary for an emerging naval power. But because Chinese naval development was so geopolitically loaded, military activities that fall even within the established parameters mandated by international law remain suspect to coastal states such as Australia and New Zealand – both for its uncommonness as well as the actual capabilities brought to bear (Rothwell 2025). Given Beijing's growing footprint in the Indo-Pacific and among the Pacific Islands in particular, these kinds of misinterpretations are likely to become more commonplace.

This is not to say that individual threat assessments were based on erroneous threat perceptions of routine modernisation efforts. In places like the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, Beijing has clearly utilised its naval superiority as a coercive

tool to bully smaller states into submission. At the same time, it has condemned similar efforts by other navies to develop their own capabilities and improve their defence posture. China has, for example, expressed significant outrage to Manila for allowing the continued deployment of a single US Typhon anti-ship missile launcher in the Philippines, highlighting its potentially destabilising influence in the region (Chen and Flores 2024). In March 2025, it put the PLA Southern Theatre Command on “high alert” in response to the US-Japan-Philippines trilateral exercises in the South China Sea (Zhuang and Zhen 2025). In reality, despite rhetorical assurances and material-doctrinal evidence to the contrary, threat perceptions of capability development ultimately depend on nothing else than a state’s own strategic calculus.

Washington itself was not immune to this problem. Beijing’s naval build-up and its supposed 2027 deadline for a Taiwan invasion have become a particularly pervasive bogeyman among US officials. China’s shipbuilding capacity far outpaced that of the US; and Washington needed to get its act together and catch up, or risk getting swarmed by an unending tide of PLAN warships in the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, just this year, the US Navy laid out a force structure goal to maintain a standing fleet of 381 battle force ships and 134 unmanned surface and undersea vessels – 515 naval platforms in all. To achieve this (and considering attrition), it plans to acquire 293 combat and 71 combat logistics and support ships (ttl. 364) over the next 30 years, the total cost of which was estimated at US\$1.075 trillion (Congressional Budget Office 2025). All this, despite the fact that US ships were still larger and equipped with superior weapons, electronics, and sensors; and that despite possessing blue-water capabilities, the PLAN did not actually have the capacity to sustain a global presence due to alliance and basing deficiencies.

CONCLUSION

Taking the ongoing naval build-up in the Indo-Pacific purely as a qualitative and/or quantitative improvement of one’s forces, there is little evidence to suggest that capability development has been an inherently destabilising factor in the region. Even in dynamic areas like Southeast Asia, the rate of regional acquisitions and defence spending relative to economic growth shows no signs of a burgeoning arms race – contrary to alarmist prophecies and media headlines. Similarly, despite drawing concern from neighbouring states, the pursuit of advanced naval platforms by the likes of Australia and Japan has not indicated any shift toward a more offensive posture in securing their maritime interests. If anything, there is a clear effort among many Indo-Pacific states to divorce these new capabilities from potential use in regional flashpoints.

However, capability development does not exist in isolation. Underlying tensions in the Indo-Pacific – coalesced into contested waters such as the South China Sea and heightened by strategic competition – have painted otherwise routine efforts by states to update legacy systems, modernise their navies, and improve their defence posture as pro-active measures in preparation for armed conflict. Naval build-up was not the epicentre of regional instability. Like the Anglo-German rivalry before it, the US and China have merely co-opted the maritime domain as an arena of strategic competition. They have established a common operating picture which places naval superiority as the deciding factor in the struggle for regional hegemony.

At the end of the day, the military instrument as a means is one that is inextricably tied to the politics that serves as its (perceived) end, intentional or otherwise. Just as every instrument has its purpose, navies it seems, are destined to become pieces in a geopolitical chessboard – even if most have proven unwilling players. Southeast Asia was engaged in an arms race because China was at their very doorstep. Japan wanted carriers for its fleet because it needed to secure the Senkaku Islands against China. Australia wanted submarines because it wanted to prove its reputation as the dependable ally. China wanted a larger navy because it seeks to supplant the US as the regional hegemon. The US wanted an even more capable navy in turn because it sought to maintain that hegemony. It is a dangerous miscalculation; and the result has been blanket insecurity as Indo-Pacific players look suspiciously toward any moves that might usher in a potential climax to this maritime century.

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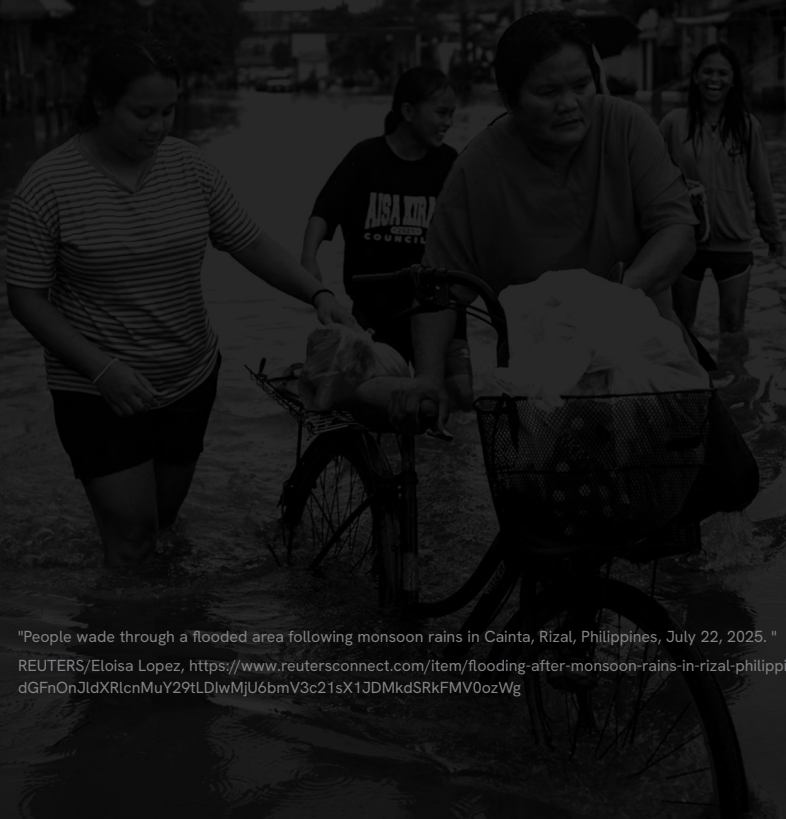
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Shifting Terrain: A Phenomenological and Thematic Analysis of the Economic and Social Costs of Flooding in Once Resilient Communities in the Philippines

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"People wade through a flooded area following monsoon rains in Cainta, Rizal, Philippines, July 22, 2025. "

REUTERS/Eloisa Lopez, <https://www.reutersconnect.com/item/flooding-after-monsoon-rains-in-rizal-philippines/dGFnOnJldXRlcnMuY29tLDlwMjU6bmV3c21sX1JDMkdSRkFMV0ozWg>

Shifting Terrain: A Phenomenological and Thematic Analysis of the Economic and Social Costs of Flooding in Once Resilient Communities in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study examines the effects of the changing climate in previously non-flood-prone communities in the Philippines. This study aligns with one of the main priorities of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030): enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to “Build Back Better” in recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction. This study positions local experience within global conversations on disaster preparedness, climate adaptation, and sustainable development. The study employed thematic analysis and purposive-snowball sampling. Emerging themes included economic and social costs, community resilience, and environmental impact. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and bracketing techniques allowed participants to share narratives with minimal researcher bias. The findings suggest that while resilience is critical in disaster risk management, there is an urgent need for a more comprehensive strategy that focuses on long-term development, like urban planning, to address the deep-rooted issues of environmental degradation in developing communities. This research contributes to the broader discussion on the trade-offs between

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climate change and economic growth and development, highlighting the importance of integrating community experiences into policy-making to mitigate the effects of climate change and natural disasters.

INTRODUCTION

The archipelagic terrain of the Philippines, composed of rivers, low-lying areas, and coastal areas, are some innate factors that make it vulnerable to flooding. Adding to the challenges at hand is the absence of flood-proof infrastructure, drainage systems and mechanisms, rural urbanization, environmentally degrading domestic practices equivalent to deforestation and mining, and improper waste management, among others. These issues emphasize the country's heightened exposure to hydrometeorological hazards, perpetually threatening both livelihoods and local development.

Given this context, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 adopted by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), provides for a global framework with which may be used to understand disaster risk and pattern effective response and recovery (UNDRR 2015). For the Philippines—one of the world's most disaster-prone countries—the Sendai Framework serves as a critical reference for evaluating how institutional and community capacities interact with environmental and social risks in flood-prone areas.

Moreover, the conventional focus on community coping masks a deeper systemic issue. This paper argues that many communities are caught in a resilience trap: a cycle in which their capacity to recover is continually undermined by failures in governance and unsustainable development. By focusing on reactive resilience, the underlying structural drivers of vulnerability are often ignored, trapping residents in a state of perpetual recovery without progress.

Further elucidating this resilience trap and the factors that contribute to it, the study utilizes an experiential approach to analyzing narrative accounts of participants' lived experiences in relation to flooding in once considered resilient communities of Antipolo City. Through the years, these communities have been increasingly plagued by persistent inundation. Factors that led to this heightened flood risk include rapid urbanization that has driven extensive residential development (Phl-Microsat 2019), environmental degradation from deforestation, and mining activities ultimately reducing the soil's capacity for rainwater absorption (Villamente 2024). Aggravating the situation further, improper waste management and unregulated land use, combined with inadequate flood infrastructure, has led to the poor management of waterlog and runoff reflecting the far-reaching infrastructural disparities relative

to urban centers and their peripheries (MMDA 2024). By examining the concept of the resilience trap in conjunction with first-person accounts from Antipolo, Rizal, this study seeks to provide insight applicable to other flood-prone regions across the Philippines.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

For many areas that were once considered resilient, Antipolo, Rizal was one of the areas affected during the severe flooding incidents in the past decade (Supnet et al. 2015). Flooding worsened not only due to climate change, but also due to environmental degradation, reduced tree cover from urbanization, and improper waste disposal blocking waterways and clogging drainage systems. Such issues further increase the likelihood of a flood in the area.

Seen as one of the least likely places to be flooded before, Antipolo, Rizal now faces the existing problems of flooding. This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the economic and social costs of Antipolo's worsened floods?
2. How did the effects of typhoons, particularly flooding, worsen in Antipolo, Rizal? What are the factors that led to the exacerbation of these effects (e.g., urbanization, waste management, environmental degradation)?
3. What are the strategies and interventions of the Antipolo LGU to address the impacts of flooding in the area? How effective are these strategies in the long run?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to obtain data on the impacts and factors that affect and worsen flooding and, and to provide an evaluation of the LGU's current mitigation efforts in the areas of Antipolo, Rizal.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Sendai Framework

The Sendai Framework is the preeminent blueprint of most global disaster risk reduction management plans. It is widely adopted by most UN member nations when creating their country-specific disaster risk reduction (DRR) plans. It consists of four main priorities:

1. Understanding disaster risk
2. Strengthening disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk
3. Investing in disaster risk reduction for resilience
4. Enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to “Build Back Better” in recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction.

Looking through the themes examined in the study, Antipolo's resilience strategy is heavily leaning towards priority 4, focusing on recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction, with themes heavy on relief and rescue operations. However, a significant flaw is that priorities 2 (governance) and 3 (investment in risk reduction) are both significantly overlooked, which causes poor urban planning and governance. This gap in accomplishing the priorities confirms a lack of full disaster risk reduction planning according to the Sendai Framework, leading to resilience in Antipolo remaining reactive instead of preventive.

Urbanization and Negative Externalities

The respondents from Antipolo pointed out urbanization as one of the likely causes of the changes in flood patterns. Urbanization generally increases the size and frequency of floods and may expose communities to increasing flood hazards (Konrad 2016). While natural factors, such as but not limited to climate change and global warming, contribute to the worsened floods (Denchak 2023; United States Geological Survey 2023; Vernick 2024), anthropogenic factors exacerbate flooding as well (Alborzi et al. 2022; Associated Programme on Flood Management 2013; Hirabayashi et al. 2021; Hoang and Liou 2024). Studies have shown that human-induced modifications to landscapes, such as deforestation and urbanization, alter hydrological regimes, potentially increasing runoff and decreasing soil infiltration, leading to a higher likelihood of flooding (Associated Programme on Flood Management 2016). Urbanization is anthropogenic. Human actions are said to increasingly alter most river basins worldwide, resulting in changes in hydrological processes and extreme events (Mazzoleni et al. 2022). Urban areas are increasingly prone to flooding due to climate change, rising urbanization, and inadequate stormwater management (Rubinyi and Eisenberg 2023). Antipolo is no exception.

In recent years, Antipolo has experienced deforestation, agricultural land conversion, and an increase in subdivisions. As more agricultural lands are being converted to residential lands, residents of Antipolo believe that the local ecosystem and infrastructure are altered in ways that affect not only those directly involved in urban development but also the surrounding community and environment. Antipolo

City Mayor Jun Ynares points to mining, urbanization, deforestation, siltation, and bad land use planning as among the causes of flooding in Rizal (Gozum 2024), all of which are anthropogenic actions resulting in negative externalities.

Flooding as a Negative Externality

The theory of externalities applies as a negative externality to the worsening floods in Antipolo caused by urbanization. As agricultural lands are converted to residential lands and deforestation occurs, there is an increased runoff and reduced water absorption, leading to higher flood risks. Converting agricultural land to residential or commercial use can make areas more vulnerable to flooding (Li et al. 2019). The residents of Antipolo suffer from the sharper edge of the sword, yet they are not directly involved in deforestation and land conversion.

The Economic and Social Costs of Flooding

As the residents suffer from the worsened floods, there are some economic and social costs associated with them. Economic costs include recovery struggles as the residents face financial challenges post-flooding. It also includes the impact on livelihoods with the disruption to jobs and loss of income. There are also learning losses due to the class suspensions, eventually resulting in a loss of human capital and economic productivity in the long run. It even exacerbates the already existing disparities in learning and education. A respondent pointed out that not everyone adopts well when learning modalities shift. This condition reflects a broader social vulnerability, which involves a combination of factors that determine the degree to which someone's life and livelihood are put at risk by an event (United Nations Development Programme n.d.).

The intensified flooding in Antipolo imposes significant burdens on residents, including property repair expenses, income loss, depleted savings, and additional household costs. These costs impede what Amartya Sen's capability approach calls the “capability to function,” which is essential for a person's well-being and ability to live a dignified life (Todaro and Smith 2020). As noted by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (2022), the poor and marginalized are disproportionately affected by environmental repercussions such as these. While economic analyses often emphasize the pecuniary costs of flooding, the non-pecuniary impacts—such as psychological distress and social disruption—are equally important (Davies 2015).

Local Governance and the Resilience Narrative

In response to the issue of flooding, the Local Government Unit (LGU) of Antipolo, particularly its City Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office (CDRRMO), has implemented flood control efforts, including, but not limited to, improvements in drainage systems, infrastructure projects, waste management, and the waterways, among others. There are also relief operations for the flooding victims as well as community-driven initiatives to augment the LGU's disaster response and interventions.

Ironically, despite the LGU's active disaster response, flooding continues to worsen. Yet, some respondents say that the interventions and disaster response are effective. Some even claim that the LGU immediately responds and is on alert status whenever there are flooding emergencies. Despite this, most, if not all, respondents attest to the claim that the flooding in Antipolo has been aggravated in recent years. This highlights the critical role both national and local governments must play in disaster governance through effective policy-making and implementation. (Blanco 2015). While some respondents shared that the

LGU has been working on improving drainage systems and waterways, some respondents mostly shared about relief efforts from the LGU. This reflects the LGU's disaster response, in which the emphasis is on resiliency rather than development. Resilience, in the context of disasters, focuses on a community's capacity to absorb, adapt to, and recover from flooding events while maintaining essential functions (Zhai and Lee 2024).

The concept of resilience can be extended from an individual's or leader's perspective to apply to an entire community's effort to respond to disaster. Community resilience relies upon pre-existing adaptive capacities, for instance, on economic development, social capital, information and communication, and community competence, that can be mobilized during a disaster (O'Neill et al. 2016). However, psychological resilience to flooding and other extreme weather events can translate to diminished motivation to mitigate climate change (Ogunbode et al. 2018). The concept of resilience has become prominent and now dominates thinking about risk management, notably including environmental hazard management. Resilience has gained prominence and now dominates thinking about the management of risks facing humankind (Parker 2019).

METHODS

To understand the effects of flooding in the communities of Antipolo, Rizal, the study uses phenomenological thematic analysis. Phenomenology gives an in-depth analysis of the lived experiences of long-term residents, with the main objective of understanding their experiences in transitioning from a non-flood-prone community to a flood-prone community (Tracy 2013). Moreover, thematic analysis identifies the themes and possibly occurring patterns from the data which can uncover the explicit and nuanced impacts of flooding on participants' livelihoods, well-being, and social dynamics (Braun and Clarke 2021). The combination of the two methods aims to show key insights and provide a comprehensive framework into the lived experiences of the residents that are not easily observed.

Sampling Method

The study used a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling to identify the participants to be interviewed. Information was gathered from the local barangay hall units to find out which specific areas and families were most affected by flooding in the area. From there, the researchers gathered the first respondents by visiting the recommended areas and asking residents who were currently present in the area. Snowball sampling was employed after the initial interviews, wherein each respondent was asked to refer at least one other potential participant. This method helped the researchers reach hard-to-identify individuals who were directly affected by flooding in the community and who might not have been located without such referrals (Atkinson and Flint 2001).

Data Collection

The data for this study were obtained through in-person semi-structured interviews, in which participants answered a set of 15 predetermined questions designed to explore the economic and social costs of flooding, as well as environmental changes observed in Antipolo, Rizal. However, the interviews did not strictly adhere to the 15 predetermined questions, allowing for follow-up clarifications and minor deviations as necessary. The questions were designed to elicit the genuine effects of flooding on residents of Rizal. Each interview was conducted with the informed consent of participants, who were notified that their responses would be recorded to ensure the completeness and accuracy of the data. Participants also provided explicit authorization for the audio recordings, in accordance with ethical research standards and with due regard for their welfare (Orb et al. 2001).

Mode of Analysis

The study employed a systematic and iterative process grounded in Sarah J. Tracy's Phronetic Iterative Data Analysis (Tracy 2013). This method was applied to ensure that the identified themes captured both the structural and textural essence of the residents' lived experiences.

The data were organized using a coding matrix maintained in Google Sheets, which served as the study's primary analytic tool and audit trail. The analysis progressed through the following iterative phases:

1. **First-Level Coding:** After familiarizing with the full transcripts and subsequently filtering the responses by only getting the meaning units (responses that answered the questions), we conducted an initial open coding pass. This pass involved assigning descriptive and concise codes to segments of data, focusing primarily on what the participants experienced (textural descriptions). This ensured every statement's primary topic that captured their lived reality.
2. **Second-Level Coding and Thematic Development:** This phase shifted the focus from pure description to structural interpretation. We analyzed the initial codes to identify patterns, connections, as well as the underlying conditions, contexts, and relationships (structural interpretations) that gave meaning to the experiences. These patterns were then grouped into broader, more interpretive categories and ultimately solidified into the core themes.
3. **Synthesis and Final Account:** The final themes represented the composite textural-structural synthesis of lived experience, encapsulating the economic costs, social costs, and environmental changes experienced by residents of Antipolo, Rizal.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis revealed three core themes that capture the lived experiences of Antipolo residents with recurrent flooding: (1) Economic Collapse and Debt-Driven Fragility; (2) Structural Drivers: Environmental Collapse and Urban Overdevelopment; and (3) Social Vulnerability & Inequitable Institutional Response.

Table 1. Core Themes and Sub-Themes of the Thematic Analysis

THEME 1: ECONOMIC COLLAPSE AND DEBT-DRIVEN FRAGILITY		
Economic Collapse and Debt-Driven Fragility	Structural Drivers: Environmental Collapse and Urban Overdevelopment	Social Vulnerability & Inequitable Institutional Response
Interruption of Primary Livelihoods	Increased Flood Frequency and Intensity	Health and Psychological Burdens
Erosion of Financial Capital & Assets	Deforestation and Urban Encroachment	Forced Displacement and Migration
Recovery Dependent on Debt	Accelerated Water Flow and Climatic Change	Reactive Government Measures (Aid and Rescue)
Financial Tightness and Daily Strain	Inadequate Water Management Infrastructure	Inequity in Aid and Demand for Structural Change

Theme 1: Economic Collapse and Debt-Driven Fragility

In the selections' worldview, the recurring floods are not only environmental events, but rather economic shocks that destabilize their livelihoods. The floods have shown to repeatedly disrupt income sources and exhaust financial reserves, exposing how disaster risk translates into this cycle of structural poverty. As participants shared:

"Yes, we have to close whenever there's a strong storm or flooding." (S1)

"We couldn't move, we couldn't make a living." (S8)

Their experiences capture the interruption of primary livelihoods; a phenomenon consistently observed with World Bank (2023) findings that extreme weather disproportionately impacts informal and low-income sectors. For many, recovery is nothing but a tight deadline that most cannot keep up with. The losses incurred cannot be replenished before the next flood arrives. This leads to an erosion of financial capital and assets. As one of the selections a resident explained, *"In repairs, of course, instead of... circulating the money, it went to the damages"* (S11).

This constant financial strain now pushes households into a dangerous cycle of recovery-dependent on debt. As one selection noted, the most common solution is to *"look for lending, banks, borrow just to have a livelihood again then they start from there"* (S4). This cycle creates a "poverty trap of disaster exposure" (Hallegatte et al., 2020), where frequent shocks prevent asset accumulation and push households into dependency. The theme also includes families' recovery struggles and the learning loss among children from school cancellations, further hindering financial recovery.

This condition reflects the daily financial tightness and strain on households trying to save amidst constant uncertainty.

Table 2. Theme 1: Economic Collapse and Debt-Driven Fragility

Interruption of Primary Livelihoods	“Yes, we have to close whenever there's a strong storm or flooding.” (S1) “We just got stuck... I left at seven in the morning, when I came back, no one could pass...” (S3)
Erosion of Financial Capital & Assets	“We’re just renting so well, when our things get damaged. We just let it go because we really don’t have much, how much do we even earn a day” (S8) “In repairs, of course instead of just... circulating the money, it went to the damages.” (S11)
Recovery Dependent on Debt	“Usually because we are not rich... to rise again... they go to borrowing... that’s the most common solution, they look for lending, banks, borrow just to have a livelihood again then they start from there.” (S4) “Once students go back to class regularly, we bounce back. Then we deal with loan payments after. What we use to recover.” (S3)
Financial Tightness and Daily Strain	“Yes, for our needs here. A bit tight.” (S6) “...it’s really hard to save, you can’t save especially if you just spend here, spend there.” (S12)

Theme 2: Structural Drivers: Environmental Collapse and Urban Overdevelopment

Participants expressed an acute awareness regarding the worsening of flood events. Their collective memory traces a shift where floods, once rare, are now routine and more destructive. This aligns with LGU data indicating a lack of historical preparedness, as the area was previously known for landslides and wildfires, not flooding.

The community's views point to rapid urbanization as a primary cause. This is captured in the sub-theme of deforestation and urban encroachment. Residents vividly described the transformation:

"Before, that area opposite was full of trees. Now there's nothing, just houses, only a few trees are left." (S10)

"Before, Antipolo didn't flood at all... But now, because of so many subdivisions built where there used to be trees, flooding happens..." (S17)

This aligns with an LGU representative’s observation that riverside communities are now overpopulated. Such unregulated growth undermines natural drainage and amplifies hazard exposure. This leads to accelerated water flow during rains, which residents perceive as a clear sign of climate change. While some acknowledge waterway rehabilitation efforts, the dominant narrative points to an imbalance where inadequate water management infrastructure cannot offset the cumulative effects of land-use change.

Table 3. Theme 2: Structural Drivers: Environmental Collapse and Urban Overdevelopment

Increased Flood Frequency and Intensity	“...here in Antipolo, it’s the third, fourth time it got flooded. First was Milenyo. It only rained for three hours, immediately Antipolo got flooded, no one could pass out there” (S3) “...during Ondoy, this was almost submerged, half of the barangay... you couldn’t even see this roof, only the roof was left here at ‘De los Santos Clinic Center.’” (S7)
Deforestation and Urban Encroachment	“...the forests now, some of them... like... they say... are being turned into housing...” (S6) “Before, Antipolo didn’t flood at all... But now, because of so many subdivisions built where there used to be trees, flooding happens even in the subdivisions” (S17)
Accelerated Water Flow and Climatic Change	“It really is faster. Unlike before, even if it floods here, the water rises quickly. And also the weather is different now-- they say it’s climate change eh. The rain system is different now, it’s stronger, the drops are bigger. That’s why the weather has changed.” (S12)
Inadequate Water Management Infrastructure	“...even if it’s cleaned, it’s also on the people. It’s also on the people, and then the drainage here, it’s not really fixed because there’s no outlet for the water.” (S11) “...we really cleaned up the dirty canals and creeks. We taught and showed people by landscaping areas where trash used to be dumped.” (S13)

Theme 3: Social Vulnerability & Inequitable Institutional Response

Beyond physical damages, participants underscored the social and institutional inequities shaping their flood experiences. Disasters amplify health and psychological burdens, including stress, anxiety, and illnesses like dengue and fever that disrupt work and family life. The constant threat and aftermath also lead to forced displacement and environmental migration. As one respondent shared, “... *they lost their jobs so they had to leave. It affected us*” (S1).

Community responses are often characterized by reactive government measures, primarily focused on aid and rescue. Residents acknowledged these efforts, noting how the barangay provides relief goods and conducts rescue operations. However, there is also disenchantment with the inequity in aid and a demand for structural change. Participants voiced perceptions of favoritism, stating, *"They prioritize people they know. If you're not known, you're not prioritized"* (S17).

This highlights a critical gap: the government's focus on resilience offers only short-term solutions. Despite having high-class rescue equipment, communities still suffer heavily, suggesting that resilience is not enough. What is needed is a shift toward proactive, long-term urban planning to address the root causes of vulnerability, a sentiment echoed in residents' calls for engineered solutions like flood basins such as BGC's advanced drainage system, which includes a 22,000-cubic-meter water detention tank designed to hold rainwater and manage urban runoff (Victoria 2020). This aligns with the need to integrate urban planning into developing communities to mitigate disaster effects and tackle environmental degradation.

Table 4. Theme 3: Social Vulnerability & Inequitable Institutional Response

Health and Psychological Burdens	"Mostly when the kids get sick, things like dengue, fever, and colds..." (S1) "...usually sickness. Because the weather changes, the children, especially the little ones, easily get sick." (S17)
Forced Displacement and Migration	"...they lost their jobs so they had to leave. It affected us." (S1) "...all of the people here evacuated those living in the lower areas." (S11)
Reactive Government Measures (Aid and Rescue)	"...they're just on alert. If trees fall, like last time, I texted the barangay right away, within 5 minutes they were already there." (S3) "...when there's flooding like that, they give out relief goods." (S14)
Inequity in Aid and Demand for Structural Change	"...they should automatically be here to help the people who need them. Eh the problem is sometimes they're not." (S12) "They prioritize people they know. If you're not known, you're not prioritized." (S17)

RECOMMENDATIONS: BEYOND RESILIENCE

The findings reveal a resilience trap driven by systemic failures. To break this cycle, we must go beyond resilience and create a fundamental shift from reactive coping to proactive strategies and risk-informed development. This paper proposes three

concrete and accountability centered plans to align policy, build economic capacity, and institutionalize participatory governance.

1. **Align Local and National Policy.** To address the critical disconnect between national policy and local practice, we recommend a “Local-National DRR Policy Alignment Audit” that will be using a public scorecard to measure a specific LGU’s level of compliance towards national DRR policy and goals. This audit, which will be managed by an independent, multi-sectoral committee that is composed of government and civil society experts, would ensure LGU land-use plans are fully compliant with the prevention and mitigation goals of the NDRRMP.
2. **Shift to Pre-Disaster Economic Resilience.** To counter the national pattern of debt-driven recovery, we recommend establishing a Local Resilience Fund that will be based on a national Department of Trade and Industry (DTI)/ Department of Finance (DOF) template. Through this, LGUs will have a replicable and fiscally sound model for providing grants and low interest loans to Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in their vicinity for them to have the capacity to invest in disaster proofing their operations even before a typhoon hits. By providing co-funding for LGUs, this program would shift the focus from post-disaster aid to building pre-disaster economic capacity, particularly for small entrepreneurs.
3. **Institutionalize Participatory Governance.** To address the widespread governance failure of non-participatory planning, we recommend institutionalizing a Community Disaster Resilience Council at the barangay level. Guided by a charter from the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) charter, these councils must have mandated sectoral seats targeted towards not only the most vulnerable groups but those that are directly impacted by the disaster to ensure a more equitable disaster management strategy.

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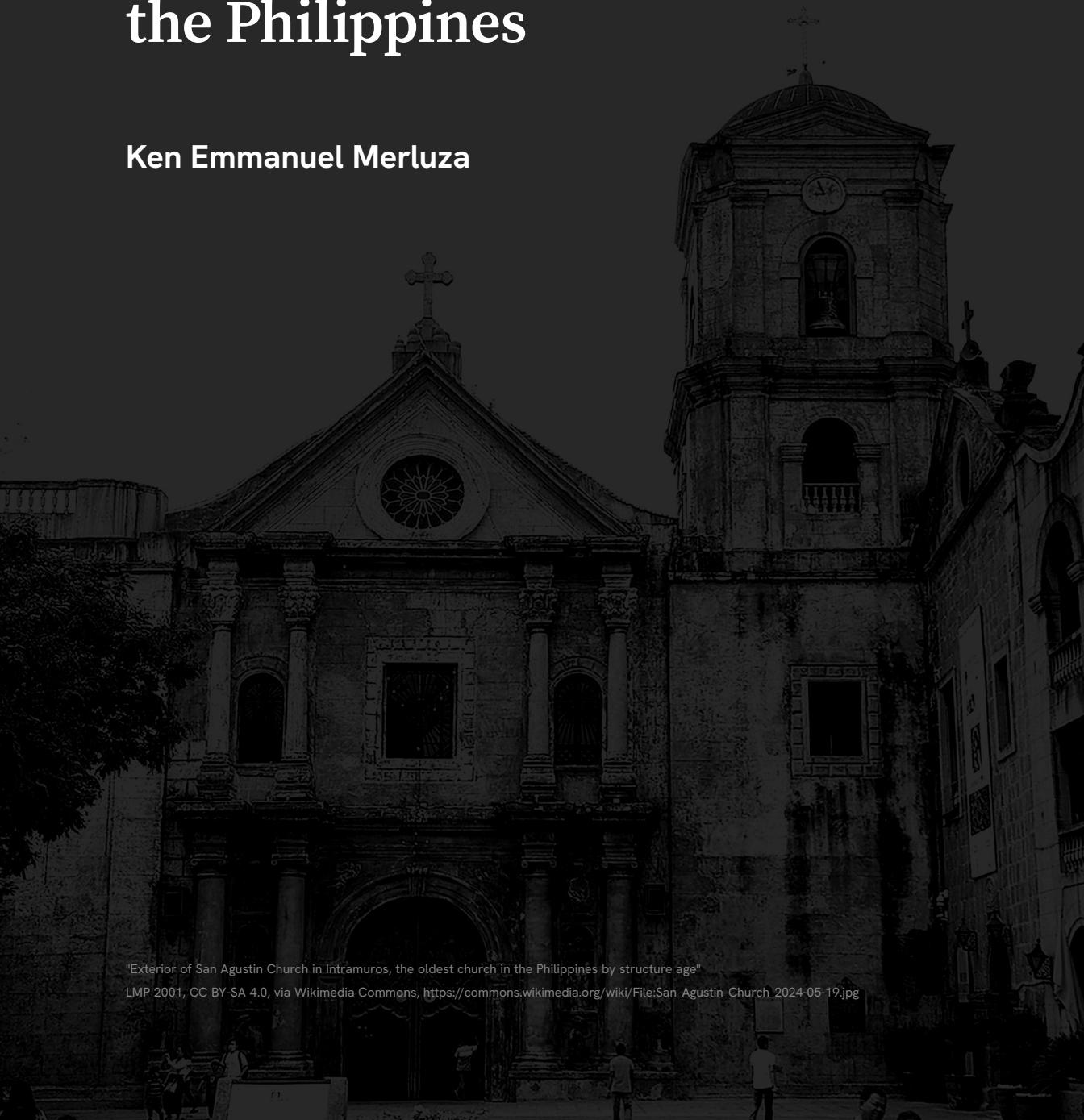
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Heritage and Resilience: A Review of Risk Assessments and Adaptation Measures towards Heritage Churches in the Philippines

Ken Emmanuel Merluza



"Exterior of San Agustin Church in Intramuros, the oldest church in the Philippines by structure age"

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Heritage and Resilience: A Review of Risk Assessments and Adaptation Measures towards Heritage Churches in the Philippines

Ken Emmanuel Merluza¹

ABSTRACT

UNESCO's 2023 report on World Heritage and Climate Change identifies Cultural World Heritage sites as possessing Outstanding Universal Values (OUV) and emphasizes the increasing vulnerability of these sites due to climate change. The Baroque Churches of the Philippines specifically, the Church of the Immaculate Conception of San Agustin in Manila, the Church of La Nuestra Señora de la Asunción in Ilocos Sur, the Church of San Agustin in Paoay, and the Church of Santo Tomas de Villanueva in Miagao, are prime examples of heritage sites at risk. These centuries-old churches, designated as UNESCO World Heritage sites, are now facing heightened threats from natural disasters promulgated by climate change, affecting their respective local history and culture. This paper examines the implementation of risk resilience frameworks based on national policies in these sites namely, Article XIV, Sections 14, 15, 16, and 17 of the Philippine Constitution and Republic Act No. 10066 or the "National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009," examining how these policies have implemented strategies towards mitigating risks and managing vulnerabilities. This paper also assesses how these structures have stood the test of time, the effects of natural disasters on these structures, and their vulnerability to future risk. With these frameworks, an evaluation of the contribution of national and local policies towards the preservation of the cultural significance of the Baroque Churches are assessed. In the face of growing environmental challenges provides a perspective on how different sectors of society interact to maintain the historical value and meaning these churches provide towards their local communities.

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INTRODUCTION

Heritage is defined as the people's inheritance from their past that plays a vital role in shaping their identity and psyche. It also helps them understand themselves as heritage provides a link that shows how society evolved and developed. Furthermore, heritage gives human existence a deeper meaning. It is a significant part of society and a major factor in the quality of life (Besmonte 2022, 3). Heritage also involves the tangible items in a nation's history and how it reflects into the intangible qualities its society manifests (Apaydin 2020). UNESCO's 2023 report on World Heritage and Climate Change identifies Cultural World Heritage sites as possessing Outstanding Universal Values (OUV) and emphasizes the increasing vulnerability of these sites due to climate change. UNESCO collectively included four churches as part of "The Baroque Churches of the Philippines." These churches were inscribed in the World Heritage Site list because they met the following criteria designated by UNESCO:

1. The group of churches established a style of building and design that was adapted to the physical conditions in the Philippines which had an important influence on later church architecture in the region; and
2. In line with the Outstanding Universal Values, these churches represent the fusion of European church design and construction using local materials and decorative motifs to form a new church-building tradition.

Not only were the churches symbols of colonial rule and places for worship, they also served as havens for security and safety. Yet, while these churches have survived centuries, their resilience is not absolute as challenges to the conservation of these heritage churches involve its geographical setting and construction technology. The Baroque Churches of the Philippines are the following: the Church of the Immaculate Conception of San Agustin in Manila, the Church of La Nuestra Señora de la Asunción in Ilocos Sur, the Church of San Agustin in Paoay, and the Church of Santo Tomas de Villanueva in Miagao. These churches serve as prime examples of heritage sites at risk (Soliman 2019, 2). This study is limited to focus on the Baroque Churches of the Philippines but such assessments of vulnerability and conservation are also applicable to other heritage churches designated by national level authorities. Other church structures not included in the World Heritage List are also vulnerable to risks exacerbated by climate change as these centuries-old churches, integral to local history and culture of their respective localities, also need attention towards adapting towards the effects of climate change (Soliman 2019, 4).

This paper examines the implementation of risk resilience frameworks in these sites, assessing what implementations of strategies and policy have mitigated risks and managed vulnerabilities. With the available legislature, this paper also highlights the contribution of private and public entities to the preservation of their cultural significance in the face of growing environmental challenges. An assessment on how these structures have stood the test of time is compiled through the use of available literature through desk research. The effects of natural disasters on these structures and their vulnerability to future risk are also tackled. With these assessments, a review of the policies or actions geared towards the conservation of these churches is taken to analyze the efforts to preserve and adapt for the resilience of these historic sites and churches.

At the UNESCO World Heritage Convention in 2023, the policy document for World Heritage Sites was revisited and became the forefront of exploring and managing the impact of climate change towards heritage sites and historical landmarks. These Cultural World Heritage properties are represented by cultural landscapes, historic cities, archaeological sites, and vernacular architecture (3). Following the convention, a 2024 UN Global Assessment Report states that proactive measures that are aligned to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are called for to reduce vulnerability and exposure to hazards so that they can act as shock-absorbers to the impact of these events (IX). The Baroque Churches of the Philippines have stood the test of time and climate change has exacerbated the risk that these heritage churches can experience from natural disasters. Soliman (2019, 8) writes that most of the Heritage buildings are known to be resilient in terms of their structural stability. To resist disasters and remain standing for several years, these buildings proved their strength throughout their existence over the centuries, serving as silent observers of the development of Philippine history and society. With the risk of disaster increasing, inequality has been more prevalent and the progress made to protect these structures might be lacking.

In accordance with UNESCO's Conservation Report on the Baroque Churches of the Philippines, the inscription of these four churches in the World Heritage List was based on their fulfillment of two principal criteria. Collectively, they exemplify an architectural style that was adapted to the environmental and geographical conditions of the Philippines, influencing the evolution of church architecture across the region. Moreover, their OUV is embodied through the adaptation of European Baroque design principles that were built with local materials and craftsmanship. The Baroque Churches represent a distinct Filipino architectural tradition that reflects both resilience and the diffusion of the nation's history through its heritage.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE BAROQUE CHURCHES OF THE PHILIPPINES

Apaydin (2020, 16) further writes that the interlinkage of memory with cultural and tangible heritage provides strong representations of the knowledge and experience of people in the past and present. Spanish Philippine Churches can be regarded as an embodiment of the Filipino aesthetic during the formative period of the Filipino nation (Legarda 2020, 3). To understand the value of these heritage churches, a historical overview of Baroque churches and the establishment of Catholicism in the Philippines is necessary to show its context to the heritage of the country.

Christianity in the Philippines first arrived during the Magellan expedition in 1521 where the first mass was administered in the island of Limasawa, consequently baptizing the locals. The efforts of the Magellan voyage would soon be followed by a number of expeditions that attempted to establish a colony in the Philippines with the most successful being that of Miguel Lopez de Legazpi in 1565. When Spain decided to make a permanent settlement in the Philippines, Legazpi, accompanied by a group of Augustinian friars, were to carry on the work of evangelization in a more thorough and systematic fashion than previous journeys. Missionaries from different church orders would soon arrive on the shores of the Philippines, carrying with them instructions from the king of Spain to pass on the same faith and evangelize the native Filipinos (Schumacher 1979, 13).

With the geography and of the Philippines proving to be a difficult obstacle to overcome, the shortage of personnel to carry out the evangelism missions became a factor to spread the faith. In order to engage the natives towards the religion, resettlement policies were enacted by the clergy to place 2,400 to 5,000 people into one compact village and indoctrinate them in huge clusters instead near built churches. To entice the Filipinos to join the faith, church officials would host colorful rituals such as fiestas and build visitas placed on the highlands so that masses at churches would be more accessible, leading towards the Filipinos assimilating into the Spanish culture. The layout of the cabecera villages followed a gridiron style with a central plaza and rectangular street blocks, laying the foundation for the reorganization of Filipino settlements and the movement towards inland settlements (Phelan 1959, 41-50). Since pre-colonial Philippine architecture was not intended to be permanent as most structures were made out of wood and easily rebuilt during natural disasters, the Spanish came to the islands wanting structures that would reinforce the stability of Christianity and symbolize the presence of Spain and its commitment to the Philippines through the construction of large and lofty structures built out of stone that were meant to be permanent (Villalon 2001).

The Baroque Churches of the Philippines were erected between the late 16th and 18th centuries during the Spanish colonial period. To define Filipino colonial Baroque entails a description of the factors and conditions that led to the adaptation of Baroque to the Philippines. The grueling and perilous journey of the early Catholic missionaries at sea resulted in the lack of master-artisans from Spain to work in the Philippines for fear of the dangers of the voyage (Del Castillo 2015, 57). Thus, the friars themselves became the architects of the churches and other buildings of the mission complex.

The danger of fire, frequency of typhoons, and the need for military protection called for the use of heavy construction materials available to build these churches. Adobe, taken from volcanic mud in quarries, were the most common masonry material used for these churches alongside black volcanic tuff and sandstone to ensure that the churches could withstand such hazards. This form of architecture emerged as Filipino and Chinese artisans, commissioned by Spanish friars, adapted European Baroque architecture where either stone or brick consolidated with lime was used for its retablos or decorative panels within the altar, ceiling paintings, pyramidal finials of wall faces, wall buttress, and folk iterations of the motifs for saints and Christ (Lee-Niinioja 2021). Such efforts by groups of Filipino and Chinese individuals would show the spirit of true folk architecture as attempts to reproduce the form of a European baroque church would be completed.

The specific attributes featured in the architecture reveals a fortress-like character that was used for the purpose of protection from pirates, marauders, and the geographic conditions of the Philippines. The fused style is also present with the construction of bell towers attached to the churches, meant to attract those living under the bells or *bajo la campana* which was representative of the site planning principles of the “Law of the Indies” enacted by Philip II in 1563. This decree by the king served as the basis of city planning for Spain’s new colonies but Spanish friars had to rely on their memories of Baroque churches from Spain and Mexico, adapting the design to local environmental conditions. This kind of architecture would then lay the foundation for a unique Filipino architecture that fused eastern necessities and western style to create a distinct Filipino style (Villalon 2001, 5).

INITIAL CONSERVATION EFFORTS

The objective of conservation as stated by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) is to “preserve for posterity the unaltered state of a heritage structure and that special care should always be given to carry out the restoration work for heritage structures.” At the national level, the Philippine government ratified laws and policies that focus on protecting and conserving heritage sites

and structures. In order to help build a national consciousness for heritage sites that symbolize Filipino culture, the enactment of Presidential Decree 260 in 1973 recognized the importance of built cultural heritage in the Philippines. The ratification of this law paved the way for public and private sectors to contribute in protecting these heritage structures. At the time of inscription to the World Heritage Sites list, the properties had already been strongly protected by national legislation declaring them as National Cultural Treasures and as National Historical Landmarks through this decree. Article XIV of 1987, Sections 14, 15, 16, and 17 of the Philippine Constitution, mandates the State to promote the preservation, enrichment, and dynamic evolution of a Filipino culture, considering the principle of unity in diversity in a climate of free artistic and intellectual expression. This in turn paved the way for Republic Act No. 10066 or the “National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009” as an initiative by the NCCA to promote National Cultural Heritage. The law covers the conservation, development, and promotion of the country’s historical and cultural resources. Soliman (2019, 2) argues that when it comes to natural disasters, the law seems to lack in future plans for conservation thus the need for an assessment of these churches.

Through these enactments, national agencies have taken the lead at conserving these churches. According to UNESCO’s profile on the Baroque Churches’, the three churches and their land properties are legally owned, administered, and managed by their respective corporations while one church (San Agustin, Intramuros) is owned and managed by the Augustinian Order. The churches have been traditionally administered by church authorities and parishioners. Specific church Management Plans were not prepared at the time of inscription, but the San Agustin Church in Intramuros is covered by the Management Plan of the Intramuros Administration. There is an overall management system where the NCCA is the overall site manager. The NCCA works with its culturally affiliated agencies: the National Museum (NM) and the National Historical Commission of the Philippines (NHCP) who are the implementers of conservation and restoration projects. Altogether the three agencies collaborate closely with the church authorities-property owners and with the stakeholders, as well who are made aware of projects on the churches. The day-to-day management of the church is undertaken by the church authorities. There is a tripartite agreement for the conservation and management of the World Heritage property as well as other nationally designated heritage sites. The main actors of the tripartite agreement—the NCCA, NM, and NHCP—and the church authorities with the National Commission of Culture and the Arts provide resources for the conservation, protection, and regular maintenance of the churches.

An administrative protection system is in place through a tripartite agreement between the different national cultural government agencies, while agreements

between church authorities and the Government have been entered into, especially the *Accordo* between the Holy See and the Republic of the Philippines on the Cultural Heritage of the Catholic Church in the Philippines, ratified in 2008. Conservation and restoration are undertaken through offices under implementing national cultural agencies which ensure the regular monitoring of its state of conservation including its many concerns, threats, and problems. The Canon Law on the pastoral care of the cultural heritage resources of the Church is likewise being applied by the Catholic authorities. The NCCA works with the NM and NHCP in ensuring that work is done according to World Heritage standards and to improve the conservation management processes so that the Outstanding Universal Value of the properties are maintained and properly managed. If repairs are done that involve the replacement of deteriorated parts, these are undertaken with care so that the replaced areas are differentiated from the original.

Both affiliated cultural agencies sit at the National Commission for Monuments and Sites (NCMS) as *ex-officio* members. A Technical Working Committee (TWC) has also been established within the NCCA composed of experts on conservation and its members ensure that the highest standards of conservation are afforded to World Heritage properties. Both the NM and the NHCP are the implementers of projects in the Baroque Churches and they too sit as members of the NCCA, the NCMS and the TWC.

ASSESSMENTS OF VULNERABILITY AND RISK

Existing literature on multi-hazard vulnerability assessment is notably sparse, especially in direct reference to historic buildings (D'Ayala, 2016). Assessments on the vulnerability of cultural heritage structures are especially less advanced. When more than one hazard is identified with a particular structure, there is a need for a consistent approach to assess the related vulnerability so that risk can be calculated in the event of calamities. A study by Paredes-Santillan and Manalo (2018) gives a perspective on the assessment for the conservation efforts of Spanish colonial churches of the Philippines. The Philippines, being a part of the Pacific Ring of Fire, is subject to frequent earthquakes and typhoons, making these churches vulnerable to the impact of earthquakes and moisture problems arising from floods. Influences from Spanish and Mexican architecture have led to the development of a unique style of architecture that was developed named "Earthquake Baroque." Paredes-Santillan and Manalo (2018) further wrote that challenges to the conservation of these heritage churches involve its geographical setting and construction technology. Reports made by the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) have assessed and evaluated the state of conservation of some of these churches. At the World Heritage Convention in 1997, ICOMOS created a report on the

Paoay and Intramuros Churches which gives more context on how local custodians and institutions have maintained and assessed the needs of these churches to their structural integrity. With these centuries-old structures, the Spanish era churches serve as integral pieces of the nation's history during the time it was under colonization. The risk poses a challenge to the resilience of these structures as they are already marked as cultural heritage sites by UNESCO, denoting the value of these churches to its communities and the need to highlight its preservation and conservation. Institutions both private and public are called to create partnerships that foster the development and preservation of these heritage sites. With the churches serving as a form of architectural heritage as influenced by the country's colonial history, numerous communities still have these structures as symbols of faith. The structure of these churches started from high pitched roofs built on stilts and has since evolved into massive stone structures that stood the test of time.

Paredes-Santillan and Manalo (2018), were able to collect data on the vulnerabilities within the structure of Miagao Church. Findings included severe deterioration of the stone vaulting of both bell towers and the severe water filtration from the upper floor. A sizable portion of the stone vaulting has also suffered, resulting in the disintegration of the masonry elements, and loss of mortar. This poses a threat and a structural concern as the vault is a main structural element of the tower which serves as the foundation of the church.

Soliman (2019) highlights the vulnerability of these structures considering the geographical location of these heritage churches. The Philippines is known to be one of the countries that are prone to natural disasters. From typhoons, earthquakes, flash floods, volcano eruptions, and other natural disasters. Every calamity that passes through the country leaves damage on infrastructure. An example of this is the 7.2 magnitude earthquake in 2013 that was felt in Cebu and Bohol, damaging numerous structures including the Basilica Minore del Sto. Nino, a heritage church that is in the Baroque style, located in Cebu City where the church's belfry collapsed and was only restored three years after the calamity.

The earthquake affected over 1.2 million people, with 222 fatalities (195 in Bohol) and at least 976 were reported injured. Damage included 79,000 structures such as homes, roads, churches, schools, and public buildings.² In an interview with SunStar Cebu, officer-in-charge of PHIVOLCS Region VII, Robinson Jorgio urged

2 Sunstar, "Lessons learned 9 years after the 2013 Bohol earthquake," Sunstar, 14 October 2022. <https://www.sunstar.com.ph/cebu/local-news/lessons-learned-9-years-after-2013-bohol-earthquake#:~:text=Bohol%20quake&text=The%20earthquake%20affected%20over%201.2,and%20public%20buildings%20were%20damaged.>

the public to have a “proactive mindset” to disaster preparedness considering that catastrophes such as earthquakes do not happen at a definite time. The disaster in Cebu and Bohol could very well happen to other structures that UNESCO has declared as Cultural Heritage Sites. Outside of natural calamities, local development of infrastructure and people-oriented decisions have also contributed to the risk that challenges the integrity of these churches.

As of 2000, the ICOMOS reports have indicated that the structural integrity of the Paoay and Manila churches were already at risk due to its dilapidated foundation and the growth of vegetation within the cracks of the churches’ structures. Monitoring missions conducted with Archaeological and Heritage Impact Assessment (AHIA) by the ICOMOS have found that the churches were also prone to flooding and damping issues caused by rainwater. Hanazato (2000) reported that the main facade of the church is structurally stable under today's conditions, provided that the church is not subjected to destructive external loads. However, monitoring the movement of the cracks on the main facade should be started immediately. Furthermore, additional surveys and analyses should be carried out to study the structural stability against large earthquakes that will occur, as well as to design the structural intervention. In her report on the San Agustin Church, De Vos (2000) writes that the recommendation to not build an ossuary to house bones was accepted and the space to the rear of the church be converted into a garden. However, care should be taken to ensure that water does not collect in the area between the monastery wall and the raised path and finally its way into the building, causing extensive dampness. A permanent solution to the disposal of rainwater in the courtyard was long overdue as a lack of implementation will lead to further deterioration and a collapse of the church structure.

EFFORTS TOWARDS ADAPTATION AND RESILIENCE

Bankoff (2007) writes about the interrelationship between Philippine culture and its incorporation of threat into daily life, calling it to be a “normalization of threat” thus vulnerability has become prevalent within communities. He writes that Filipino society has evolved certain “coping mechanisms” to come to terms with the constancy of hazard and to mitigate the worst effects of disasters. With the lingering risk that heritage churches face, threat is constant and must be managed by institutions that will care and maintain the upkeep of these heritage churches. The vulnerabilities of these churches have been tackled on a global platform that presented recommendations for adapting towards threats.

As evidence of a resilient community program for these heritage churches, multiple activities have been initiated by local authorities such as the Intramuros

Administration, the governing body of Intramuros and its heritage sites, to help in the maintenance and conservation of the San Agustin Church. Disaster recovery planning has traditionally taken place in the early stages of a disaster event. However, the sense of urgency to act quickly and the lack of time limits the creation of an effective recovery plan that encompasses sectoral needs. A comprehensive Pre-Disaster Recovery Planning (PRDP) workshop was concluded for Intramuros in 2018. The workshop was attended by cultural heritage experts, disaster managers, and the local community of Intramuros. First, three presentations were given by Intramuros Administration, the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (PHIVOLCS), and the authors of the policy document to summarize the results of the Heritage and Vulnerability Assessments to explain the disaster scenario. Participants were divided into three groups: heritage, disaster, and community, each of which was given tasks to discuss possible risk management strategies as a team.

Numerous efforts have also been initiated by the World Heritage Committee in sending funding toward the promotion and the training on managing the Baroque Churches of the Philippines. UNESCO has allocated USD 27,000 since 1997 towards the improvement of conserving these heritage churches. As of 2023, communication activities have been conducted with stakeholders and the public to ensure that their engagement activities are always met.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HERITAGE CONSERVATION

Florentin et al. (2021) write that from a policy standpoint, there are no provisions on cultural heritage in existing Disaster Risk Reduction Management laws in the Philippines. The Republic Act No. 10121 or the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act of 2010 focuses on the protection and preservation of lives of the people. On the other hand, the R.A. No. 10066, which is the foundation of the Philippines' heritage policy, is centered on the protection and preservation of cultural properties, including tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The two laws also institutionalized these objectives in the form of the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) and the NCCA. Fundamentally, the intent and the mandate of the NDRRMC and NCCA are different, and there has to be an effort to integrate their purpose in the conservation of these structures. Furthermore, he writes that implementations towards Disaster Risk Management for culture heritage are at an infant stage, consisting mainly of Memorandum Circulars coursed by the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) down to the local government units. Cultural mapping from the NCCA has also been a helpful tool that assists local government units and communities to train them in the preservation of heritage sites. These heritage churches can be geotagged

and data on their physical attributes can be collected for local communities to be knowledgeable on the conservation and promotion of these structures.³

Local support and funding towards the conservation of heritage sites are currently being conducted by the NCCA (2019) with the proposal of the Philippine Heritage Charter, recognizing the existence of diverse meanings, values, and significances of the country's Heritage Sites and Spaces, and their Associated Environments. Economic Viability is one of the frameworks included in the charter to ensure that heritage is a resource that can be of benefit to the whole community. For heritage to become more valued, its economic, social, and cultural role should be recognized as a driver of sustainable local and national development. To entice local governments with the conservation of their respective heritage sites, the charter recommends that incentives in the form of tax relief and fund appropriation for conservation, management, and marketing activities should be provided for owners, custodians, and managers of local Heritage Sites and Spaces, and their Associated Environments, provided that such incentives do not pose any threat or cause damage to the said sites.

The ICOMOS' reactive monitoring missions in 2000 presented recommendations for the conservation of the Baroque Churches in Paoay and Manila, along with the needed adaptation to improve the sustainability of taking care of these structures. The focus of the adaptation methods of the Paoay church was on monitoring facade cracks, conducting structural stability and safety evaluations, identifying causes of deformation, and designing seismic interventions using appropriate materials and a systematic flowchart for the usage of the custodians maintaining the church. The monitoring mission at the San Agustin Church in Manila emphasized retaining the Augustinian Order in its original home, preserving the monastery's unique layout with two diagonally aligned courtyards designed for cross-ventilation, and maintaining the adjacent garden, historically used for transport, to reduce road congestion; both implementations still present up to the current day. Despite adaptations to improve the conservation of these structures, threats have still risen in recent times that could impact the condition of heritage churches. An example of these threats is the construction of the Binondo-Intramuros Bridge (BIB) which stirred controversy as it threatened to encroach the buffer zone set by the local authorities of where the San Agustin Church was located. The BIB was meant to connect the south of Intramuros, the old walled city of Manila, towards the old

3 See NCCA, *Cultural Mapping Toolkit: A Guide for Participatory Cultural Mapping in Local Communities* (National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 2019).

economic district in Binondo to boost the ease of mobility coming in and out of the tourist spots of the capital.

With the construction of the bridge, In the 2019 World Heritage Committee the conservation report for the Baroque Churches in the Philippines mentions the construction of the bridge would add more traffic volume than expected which may affect the Outstanding Universal Values set by UNESCO towards the Manila-based church. The 2023 State of Conservation report of the San Agustin Church, states that the updated Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) concluded that no immediate and direct physical impact has been observed on San Agustin Church, including during the construction period of the bridge, significant potential indirect and long-term impacts caused by growth in traffic volume are identified. A recommendation in the HIA calls for an implementation of necessary mitigation measures such as traffic rerouting, imposing vehicle load limits, removing the carpark in front of the church, closing the surrounding streets and roads of the property to vehicles, creating pedestrian areas, conducting structural assessments, and organizing regular monitoring and maintenance work to San Agustin Church and on its surrounding heritage assets that support the OUV of the property. Porio (1997) highlights that development increases climate and disaster risks as well as the impacts to already highly exposed and vulnerable communities. Social and physical infrastructures are put at risk with the increasing urbanization affecting the economy and livelihoods associated with these developments.

CONCLUSION

The Baroque Churches of the Philippines and other heritage churches serve as enduring symbols of the nation's rich history, culture, and resilience. The efforts from Spanish friars-turned architects along with Filipino and Chinese builders, created these churches that would become a mix of European architecture adapted for Asian conditions, making these structures uniquely Filipino. Despite their architectural strength and cultural significance, these structures face escalating risks from natural disasters exacerbated by climate change, urbanization, and human activity. Efforts at preservation have been commendable, from legal frameworks such as the National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009 to local initiatives and international action such as UNESCO's funding and monitoring missions. However, policies on the conservation and protection of heritage sites are lacking, along with the lack of local government support. Involvement of local communities is strongly encouraged and they are considered important stakeholders where their views are listened to in consultative processes. Church authorities' involvement in all aspects is vital and they also form an essential part of agreements to ensure that conservation is undertaken at their level, being custodians of these churches

themselves. Vulnerabilities also persist due to geographic and structural challenges, underscoring the need for more adaptive and proactive measures. Despite these risks that are shown, a whole of society approach has been taken to ensure that these heritage churches remain resilient and continue to withstand the test of time. By fostering resilience through collaborative action, these historical landmarks can continue to inspire and connect future generations with their cultural past.

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Disinformation for Rent: Are POGO Networks Behind Influence Operations on Philippine Social Media?

One Miguel B. Policarpio



"Photo of Mayor Alice Guo"

Angie de Silva, Rappler, <https://www.rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/newsstand-what-do-about-alice-guo/>

Disinformation for Rent: Are POGO Networks Behind Influence Operations on Philippine Social Media?

One Miguel B. Policarpio¹

ABSTRACT

Back in 2016, under the Duterte Administration, Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs) were portrayed as economic drivers that stimulate growth, yet data suggest the opposite. Furthermore, it had been found in violation of labor and tax crimes. In light of the recent controversies of espionage and foreign-linked infiltration operations in the Philippines, this paper investigates the convergence of digital warfare, national security, and foreign economic activity, thus delving into the unexplored capability of POGOs to operate, fund, and facilitate disinformation campaigns. The study analyzes the possibility of digital proxies in foreign-backed influence operations aimed at eroding public faith in institutions and destabilizing information credibility in an otherwise fractured society. Based on hybrid theory, networked disinformation, computational propaganda, and the sharp power approach, we can theorize POGOs as economic actors and information manipulators.

The research will implement a mixed-methods approach to examine how POGOs pose a novel national security challenge—one that blurs the line between commercial and hybrid threats. This paper exposes such vulnerability and contributes to the ongoing discourse towards geopolitics and foreign sharp power intervention, highlighting the ongoing tensions in Southeast Asia. By identifying these patterns of behavior, we can assert the need for a coordinated cybersecurity strategy and a greater regional strategic alignment.

Keywords: Philippine Offshore Gaming Operations (POGO), disinformation, hybrid warfare, sharp power, influence operations, political patronage

INTRODUCTION

In 2016, during the Duterte administration, POGOs were granted a license to operate under the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation (PAGCOR). The rise of POGOs was initially framed as a source of lucrative foreign investment and tax revenues following the ban imposed upon e-bingo and games. Generating employment and revenues to boost the Philippine economy has also generated an intense link with a surge of criminal activities, including human trafficking, kidnapping, tax evasion, organized crime, espionage, and disinformation. According to the cost-benefit study performed by the Department of Finance (DOF) in 2022, POGO operations produced economic benefits ranging from PHP 133.7 to 144.5 billion in annual revenue. However, POGO operations entailed an astonishing cost of PHP 147.7 billion per year due to lost potential investments and tourism profits, as well as the expenditures connected with enforcement and immigration. This resulted in a net cost of approximately PHP 3.3 to 14 billion per year, which was equal to 0.01 to 0.06 percent of GDP (Senate Bill No. 2689), highlighting the underlying drawbacks. Coincidentally, this also resonates with the massive increase in digital disinformation in the last decade, where a new line of workers called “purple collars”—consisting of political operators, public relations managers, influencers, and troll farms—are weaponized to dictate the narratives of digital platforms—skewing the common individual’s standpoint and electoral results, dividing national interest. This aligns with the Philippines as one of the largest digital interactions in the world, with over 90 percent of users accessing Facebook and YouTube (Herrera Jaidka, n.d.). These two inquiries have been substantially studied over the past years, accumulating a significant amount of related literature. Yet, a crucial nexus remains unexplored: the capability of POGO networks to utilize black ops campaigns using the media to dominate the Philippines’ interests.

In 2024, President Marcos issued Executive Order No. 74, formally banning POGO operations in the nation, citing national security and public order as the main drivers of this decision. Section 2 states: “In the interest of national security, public safety, and the maintenance of public order, as well as to uphold the rule of law, the ban on POGO/IGLs and other offshore gaming operations encompasses the following: Illegal Offshore Gaming Operations, License Applications, License Renewals, Cessation of Operations shall no longer be allowed, renewed or extended”. Furthermore, two laws were filed in response to the House Quad panel’s investigation into POGOs. House Bill No. 10987 formalizes the POGO ban for national security and crime prevention; at the same time, House Bill No. 11043 permits the government to seize land or property illegally acquired by foreigners to run POGOs. The Philippine government raided multiple POGO hubs in provinces such as Pampanga and cities like Pasay, revealing illegal workers, gambling equipment,

and, most intriguingly, a stash of digital infrastructure such as assorted SIM cards, cellular phones, both iPhone and Android, and pre-made scripts used for scamming and other illegal operations.

Dismissed Bamban, Tarlac Mayor Alice Guo is facing allegations of crimes committed by Philippine offshore casino operations, including human trafficking, money laundering, tax evasion, and forging paperwork to obtain Philippine citizenship. The Commission on Elections has sued her for lying on her candidacy certificate (Rappler 2025). This was further aggravated by the masterful deception of their identity. Guo Hua Ping, or Mayor Guo, was able to exit the country unnoticed by multiple layers of government agencies tasked to arrest her. Ashley Acedillo, Deputy Director General of the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency (NICA), indicated that available information and statistics indicate that the former mayor of Bamban is an agent of influence (Abarca 2024). This raises an unsettling question: Is China, as a diplomatic partner and POGO source, simply an economic motivator that operates in diplomatic and legal grey zones, or is it an emerging covert operation that both coordinates disinformation and plants a Trojan Horse in National Security, thus undermining the very essence of regional cooperation and peace?

Philippine disinformation, as defined by Ong and Cabañes (2018), is a systematic hierarchy of workers mainly consisting of marketing professionals, influencers, and local trolls concerned with creating an “illusion of engagement,” largely focused on local and national election discourse within campaign periods. However, the involvement of foreign-controlled commercial entities with deep ties to organized crime and a broadening of discreet government involvement remains a puzzle. This addresses the era in which the Philippines enters a new generation of elections, digitalization, and political interest in Southeast Asia.

The research seeks to investigate the synergy between China's expansionist policies and POGO operations, namely their digital infrastructure, ownership, network, and labor systems, which serve as a “disinformation-for-rent” hub. By combining existing disinformation literature, computational research, sharp power, and hybrid threat theory, this paper argues that POGOs are proxies that participate in influence operations, posing a threat to Philippine information security and digital sovereignty. The paper argues for a new framework to better understand how transnational entities conduct information warfare in fragile democracies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is at the intersection of national security, espionage, information integrity, and transnational economic entities, hypothesizing that POGOs, which are often

viewed as an economic driver, may serve as a coordinated platform for foreign-backed influence disinformation campaigns to undermine a host country's digital ecosystems. Framing this argument requires the synthesis of intersecting theoretical perspectives: the Hybrid Threat Theory, Computational Propaganda, Networked Disinformation, and Sharp Power Theory. This framework will illuminate how covert influence operations work in fragile democratic environments.

1. *Hybrid Threat Theory*

The theory refers to hybrid threats that combine military and non-military elements, as well as covert and overt tactics, such as disinformation, cyberattacks, economic pressure, the deployment of irregular armed groups, and the use of regular forces. Hybrid techniques are used to blur the distinction between war and peace and to instill uncertainty in the minds of target populations. They seek to destabilize and weaken societies (NATO n.d.), which also includes criminal elements (e.g., POGOs) to achieve strategic goals. The theory first gained fame in the 2006 Lebanon War against Israel. In 2006, Hezbollah demonstrated the lack of large, high-quality armament in other terrorist groups. They used asymmetric warfare against Israel, resulting in 119 deaths and 1,244 injuries. Hezbollah combined local units with experts, using light anti-tank rocket launchers and guided missiles. This blending of guerrilla tactics and advanced weaponry disrupted the traditional distinction between regular and irregular warfare (Hoffman 2007).

In recent years, both Russia and China have been identified as key sponsors of hybrid threat campaigns that use state-backed networks to execute cyber operations, control public discourse with disinformation, and use proxies for irregular warfare (Galeotti 2016; Polyakova and Boyer 2018). Russia's initial volley in the Ukrainian invasion was a disinformation campaign. As Russia increased military strength along the border, a Russian spokesperson said it was a large-scale training exercise and promised that troops and ships would soon resume normal operations. Russian officials maintained this stance, becoming more outspoken as Western officials pointed out contradictions between their claims and actions on the ground. As the world knows, Russia's statements were untrue, but their messaging stopped Ukraine and the West from reacting to the buildup until Russia launched the attack. This incident is an excellent illustration of reflexive control laced with misinformation (US Army War College - Publications n.d.) China uses a variety of narratives to undermine Philippine leaders and the country's independence, as well as the Philippines' long-standing alliance with the United States and civil-society groups that oppose it.

By casting doubt on the Philippines' independence, China undermines both its strategic autonomy and regional support for Manila. According to Enrique Manalo, the Philippines' foreign affairs secretary, China's misleading narrative portrays the West Philippine Sea as merely a stage for Great Power rivalry in the region, with the Philippines acting purely at the behest of another country. China's latest disinformation campaign targets *Atin Ito!*, a civil society group leading humanitarian missions to the West Philippine Sea. Rappler reviewed 500 China-produced social media videos, alleging secret funding by the US and Philippine governments (Perry World House 2025).

POGOs exemplify hybrid threats by the convergence of economic engagement, criminality, and manipulation. Their rise was left unchecked despite violations and security warnings—further signifying protection by powerful foreign entities. Many POGOs have been identified to Chinese nationals and companies, raising suspicions that they operate not only for profit, but also as part of a state-aligned strategic stance to undermine local law enforcement, foment corruption, and exploit digital vulnerabilities. By integrating Hybrid Threat Theory, this frames POGOs not only as a criminal enterprise but as a quasi-commercial variable that intervenes with political structures.

2. *Networked Disinformation*

The framework, built upon by Ong and Cabañes (2018), refers to the systematic production and distribution of disinformation via technology, mainly through digital actors, and thus provides a model for comprehending the layered architecture of propaganda networks in the Philippines. This paradigm distinguishes three groups: strategic operators, digital laborers (e.g., trolls, content moderators), and media amplification networks.

A disinformation network can be formed when two or more spreaders share disinformation in a coordinated manner through the Philippines' most popular social media sites, Facebook and YouTube. Diani and McAdam (2003) define a network as a structured collection of actors and their relationships. This typically consists of the following: 1) political clients composed of individual or groups that fund and initiate campaigns; 2) PR agencies and advertising firms who run the operations; 3) influencers, meme pages, vloggers, and other accounts designed to seed content; and 4) lastly the troll and bot armies, who act as the localized foot soldiers of the campaign. Furthermore, the material infrastructure (phone clusters, SIM cards, and virtual private networks or VPNs) discovered during POGO operations resembles the physicality of

disinformation laboratories. This erodes the faith of ordinary citizens in the establishment, where citizens struggle to identify credible accounts and forms of factions of close associates within the disinformation community. Disinformation ecosystems in India and Brazil were mobilized to propagate sectarian hatred and political misinformation via WhatsApp group networks and local influencers (Resende et al. 2019).

This, when analyzed from the Philippine perspective, highlights that foreign commercial entities such as POGOs may and can duplicate such systems, hiring digital workers to generate phony interaction, boost narratives defending POGO legality, or even create content criticizing the government based on falsified information. This suggests that operations such as this are effective and an inherent part of digital economies.

3. *Sharp Power Theory*

In light of foreign state influence, the research also engages the dynamics of espionage and diplomacy, thus applying Sharp Power Theory, “which pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in targeted states” (Cardenal et al. 2017, 6). Sharp power also aims to delegitimize the host country's institutions, political system, and regime type (Richter 2022). Sharp power is categorized based on its tools rather than its avenues of effect and is defined as manipulation, censorship, propaganda, control, and influence (Melin 2021). More specifically, sharp power activities may seek to undermine or weaken the legitimacy and integrity of a target state's independent institutions.

Manipulation is one of the strategies that the People's Republic of China often uses; a prime example of this is the “Chinese Dream” and “Brand China.” The Chinese dream and the rejuvenation of the People's Republic of China are described as fundamentally soft power pursuits of long-term economic prosperity, upgrading the perception of “Brand China,” and instilling cultural values to “balance materialism” (China Daily 2014).

China possesses a vast array of sharp power tools. In the Philippines, POGOs with Chinese backing can be framed as a sharp power apparatus behind a promise of economic investment, with their continued presence in the Philippines, despite increasing evidence of criminal and disinformation-related activities. Such framing suggests that they may be protected or encouraged by foreign political interests seeking to undermine Philippine democratic institutions, monitor overseas communities, or shape geopolitical alignments

in favor of regional hegemonic goals (Kurlantzick 2023). These are added with the use of the Chinese language interfaces, and pro-POGO narratives, which demonstrate that they act not as solo actors, but as orchestrated nodes of a foreign-linked propaganda program.

The three form a cohesive framework to explain how POGOs operate not only in the legal areas of the law, but also as a threat to national economic and information security. Each theory tackles a different aspect of the same inquiry. Hybrid threat theory blurs the line between dark ops and legal business operations, focusing on the tactical convergence. The confiscated equipment during the raids exemplifies the multi-use of commercial yet organized communications systems. Meanwhile, the sharp power theory takes on a strategic stance as POGOs are not just an economic entity, but a Trojan horse to penetrate and manipulate the information environment. Lastly, Networked disinformation emphasizes the operational level of POGOs, the use of “purple collar” social media workers to blend social narratives, sowing discontent and confusion. These theories reveal POGOs as a threat to Manila’s economy, digital sovereignty, and strategic interests, thus weakening policy. The integration of the three theories frames POGOs as not just a domestic affair, but a transnational threat apparatus equipped to challenge national governments.

METHODOLOGY

The research employs public data and contemporary affairs that integrate documentary analysis, digital investigation, and content analysis of POGOs as an extension of state-backed espionage operations or an independent commercial disinformation operation in Philippine cyberspace. This allows researchers to easily map the digital traces of suspected disinformation agents, given the limited sources available.

DATA SOURCES AND COLLECTION

The research focuses on a case study approach to examine POGO operations in the Philippines. Focusing on the physical site raids in Bamban, Pasay, and Las Piñas, local authorities confiscated communication-related hardware, including SIM cards and burner phones used in online scamming and gambling, which can also be seen to support online propaganda activities and legal investigations orchestrated by the government, where several Chinese nationals were questioned in a Senate hearing regarding their real identities and affiliations.

ANATOMY OF THE POGO-DISINFORMATION NEXUS

POGOs in the Philippines operate as a hybrid economic and geopolitical entity, designed to serve both financial and military purposes. What may be called “dual-use infrastructure” is infrastructure systems and assets that are designed and built to serve civilians in normal conditions and can also be converted to cater to strategic, security, and defense under extreme circumstances of threat to civilians and national interests. In the Philippine context, asserting influence and operating a clandestine activity aimed at leveraging China’s position within the local politics and de-Westernizing Manila’s foreign policy, would mark a shift in the power balance in the Indo-Pacific, leaving a gap in the first island chain of the US strategy of containing the brown water navy of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) from ever becoming a full blue water navy, mimicking the US power projection doctrine.

The Chinese government has long operated a quasi-agency and civil society organization based overseas that blurred the line between an official or private entity, thus providing complete deniability, dubbing it the “magic weapon” of Beijing. The United Front Work Department (UFWD) is an agency that operates directly for the CCP’s Central Committee’s Politburo, first set up in 1943, even before the rise of the Communist Party. Mao hailed the United Front’s key role in the Communist Party’s victory in the Chinese Civil War. It mainly coordinates the various overseas Chinese community organizations. Although its primary focus is on managing any opposition groups within China, the agency in charge of organizing these influence activities also has a significant global influence mission. The UFWD leads “overseas Chinese work,” which aims to co-opt ethnic Chinese people and communities outside of China to carry out its influence operations overseas. Other important affiliated organizations, which are directed by China’s larger United Front strategy, also carry out influence operations against foreign states and actors (Bowe 2018). Furthermore, in the Philippine context, Michael Yang, a former aide to President Duterte, was appointed to a government position despite being a Chinese national. This reinforces how POGOs mirror the UFWD’s operational logic of creating patronage networks and cooperation with local and national political elites, which enables a state commercial espionage system to allow Beijing to extend its reach while denying any direct action. In the local government, Alice Guo’s infiltration is not through direct intervention, but the gradual normalization of economic and cultural integration, making detection difficult. Chinese nationals create an information corridor where they collaborate in exchange for money or through coercion; this is a template used by the KGB to collect intelligence during the Cold War.

In Philippine legislation, the 1931 Revised Penal Code refers to espionage as he unauthorized entry into “a warship, fort, or naval or military establishment or reservation to gain any confidential information, plans, pictures, or other material related to the defense of the Philippine Archipelago,” or the revelation of such confidential information to a foreign force. While another law, specifically Commonwealth Act No. 616 of 1941, broadened the violation to include obtaining or distributing information useful to an enemy during warfare. These are pre-World War II laws that had no comprehensive updates, remain largely ill-equipped to tackle digital and cyber forms of espionage. In combination with the weak cybersecurity capacity, this becomes a vulnerability.

POGOs provide Beijing with a civilian facade similar to Russia’s use of a private company, such as the Wagner Group, as a geopolitical instrument and a non-military lever to undermine institutions without even firing a bullet. From the outside, POGOs function under the guise of online gambling, but at its core, it is a web of capital flow, cyber operations, and political patronage that is operated in three interlinked dimensions of 1) structural organization, 2) financial flow, and 3) influence operations.

1. **Structural Organization** – POGOs are created to obscure the line of accountability and maintain plausible deniability, typically registered under a local company or shell corporation to conceal involvement: the former president's spokesperson, Atty. Harry Roque was repeatedly cropping up in the investigation of the POGO documents and was involved in the operation of an illegal POGO hub in Porac, Pampanga, operated by Lucky South 99 Corp. and Whirlwind, serving not just as legal counsel but also cooperating and participating in the renewal of the Internet Gaming License (IGL), leading to trafficking and exploitation of both Filipino and foreign workers. This highlights the use of intermediaries serving as “protectors,” undermining weak regulatory oversight. Government raids on POGO hubs mirror espionage-like operations where they are divided into units that handle finance, recruitment, logistics, digital operations, and security. Furthermore, the discovery of multiple fake IDs and burner devices is a deliberate attempt to achieve plausible deniability—a defining feature in covert operations and black ops.
2. **Financial Flow** – Revenues from online gambling are unregulated capital, enabling the laundering of money to fund political financing and covert operations without the direct sponsorship from the Ministry of State Security or the United Front Work Department. The revenues generated can then be funneled into intractable crypto wallets, real estate investments, gold, paintings, or even antiques; these blur the line between dirty and clean money.

Laundering allows for the redirection of funds to sponsor political elites and their campaigns, bribe government personnel, and run coordinated influence.

3. **Influence Operations** – POGOs have evolved from mere economic entities that employ the infrastructure of online gambling as a vector of influence operations that reflect the work of the Chinese Communist Party's United Front Work Department. The existence of confiscated communication hardware and SIM cards during the raids may suggest simpler scamming operations, yet these point toward a broader covert digital ecosystem that disseminates curated narratives and coordinate messaging campaigns.

These operations are run by both Filipino and Chinese nationals to handle the day-to-day operation, such as the capital flow and personnel recruitment. Internal discipline is enforced using coercive tactics; the existence of torture rooms and underground facilities, along with the evidence of torture itself, can be seen in reports. The massive financial power of POGOs enables them to funnel funds to political campaigns, bribery, and the development of allegiance among national and local leaders. As demonstrated, POGOs facilitate state-sponsored influence, allowing Beijing to increase its influence while preserving plausible deniability (Tulad 2024).

These operations amplify Beijing narratives or manipulate domestic narratives revolving around issues such as the West Philippine Sea and Philippine-China relations. The combination of state-aligned information warfare and illegal cyber activity is consistent with the “disinformation-for-rent” model, in which private or semi-private players carry out influence operations for financial gain or political advantage, all while denying any connection to China's Ministry of State Security.

The Philippines faces a new battlefield that challenges the current security paradigms; one that is fluid, transactional, and deniable. The modern face of the contemporary struggle of superpowers, whether direct or indirect, shapes the political landscape of the target nation, in this case, the Philippines. Beijing's campaigns are not just territorial, but an informational war through data, capital, and narratives.

STRATEGIC MOTIVATIONS

The rise of Xi Jinping's China onto the world stage as an economic and military power on a collision course with the United States as the sole superpower has created a multipolar world of shifting alliances and fragile diplomacies. The Philippines is in the middle of “Asia's new battle,” as it occupies a crucial position

within the first island chain, and its proximity to Taiwan means that within it, the strategic containment buffer zone would be compromised and allow the PLA Navy to operate beyond the traditional waters and into the wider Pacific, historically controlled by the US Navy. POGOs, as a dual-use infrastructure, would significantly aid Beijing in undermining this strategy without deploying conventional assets.

Operating deep into the Pacific can theoretically increase the PLA's new blue water navy to erode US maritime surveillance and position its nuclear-powered submarines carrying intercontinental ballistic missiles to overpower the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), the bi-national military command of the United States and Canada to monitor North America's aerospace and maritime zone to detect threats and maintain air sovereignty and defense of the continent, bypass the historical two-ocean geographical defense, and threaten the mainland US to deter any aid for a potential Taiwan Strait invasion.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS & CYBER SOVEREIGNTY RISKS

The infiltration of POGO operations into the nation's political economy exposes a critical policy dilemma: preserving national sovereignty while being permeated by transnational and state-linked actors. This is no longer a domestic enforcement issue, but a question of sovereignty in the age of cyberspace, where information is power.

The Philippine security framework remained focused on physical security: territorial and military deterrence, yet hybrid infiltration had demonstrated that breaches in the 21st century occur on the systems of the web. The relationship between POGOs and economics is that it creates revenues that contribute to national income while undermining state sovereignty. This also makes PAGCOR and the Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA) reluctant to impose stricter control in fear of revenue loss; economic gains outweigh national security. Furthermore, the digital infrastructure of the nation utilizes foreign-based platforms and technologies, mainly from Chinese and American software; this dependency allows Beijing and Washington to exercise a level of control. This also continues to be a diplomatic and strategic issue, as it raises doubt in Washington about Manila's capacity and, on the other hand, risks Beijing's retaliation should the Philippines pursue restrictive policies.

Perhaps the most important aspect is the silent colonialism through cyber dependencies, dual-use infrastructure, and disinformation networks to occupy a nation's sovereignty without direct annexation or military presence. This represents a soft colonization, exercised by code and platform rather than force.

This dynamic encapsulates the dilemma of small states in a struggle of superpowers; the Philippines must navigate both the technological and diplomatic landscape dominated by major powers, all while maintaining autonomy amid these competing pressures.

CONCLUSION

The POGO dilemma had illustrated how foreign influence and digital manipulation connect with the Philippine government. Under the promise of economic prosperity, POGOs initially appeared to the naked eye as a revenue-creating industry and have transformed into a hybrid operations system that combines economic gains and intelligence gathering into one ecosystem. This highlights that the phenomenon of disinformation is no longer a mere political campaign designed to smear opposition but a hired service industry of espionage and digital control.

POGOs, as “disinformation for rent,” function as a transactional model of local actors providing manpower and political cover, while foreign entities supply capital and technology. This is evident in the case of Alice Guo and Chinese-linked enclaves in Bamban and Pasay; they are not an anomaly, but a systematic effort to blur national sovereignty and create a shadow governance structure of the UFWD, enhancing Beijing's influence.

This theoretically makes POGOs a stealth and sharp power for China, which, if left unchecked, risks the Philippines becoming a strategic vassal, its policies shaped by foreign narratives, and slowly redefining sovereignty in the digital and information age, where nations are not only defined by physical but also by digital control over national data.

The Philippines’ POGO disinformation nexus is a prime example of a hybrid attack in the Global South, and for the nation to maintain its autonomy, it must be an active actor in the 21st century battle for cyberspace and acquire the capacity to defend the truth and the integrity of its institutions over the architectures of disinformation.

RECOMMENDATIONS: THE PHILIPPINE DEFENSE AGAINST HYBRID THREATS

The threat had highlighted the need for a multi-domain, transnational, and comprehensive strategy to defend not just the Philippines, but the entire ASEAN bloc from hybrid infiltration. This threat is interdisciplinary and demands coordination across economics, cybersecurity, intelligence, and public communications. The following are the recommendations proposed:

1. Strengthening national agencies to combat hybrid threats

The Philippines must set a framework to specifically combat espionage activities and consolidate cross-agency cooperation of agencies to monitor foreign investment, financial flows, personnel identification, and digital activities. This approach is similar to NATO's hybrid defense that encompasses the realm of cyberspace security. Furthermore, the nation is in critical need of updating its legislation towards redefining what and how espionage is conducted in response to recent spying actions conducted by Chinese nationals.

2. Expand the intelligence apparatus and cybersecurity capabilities

Beyond the monitoring of economic activities, the Philippines must rethink its intelligence priorities from combating local insurgency to active counter-espionage operations similar to its western counterparts, and the creation of a robust system of cyberintelligence capable of tracing and neutralizing disinformation for rent networks before they proliferate.

3. Public education and awareness

This hybrid threat requires a partnership with civic society, as combating disinformation for rent is not simply a military challenge, but one of societal concern. The state should cooperate with media organizations, civic society, and universities to foster a culture of digital and political literacy. The incorporation of this intervention, especially in secondary and tertiary education, will enable citizens to analyze and build up resilience towards manipulations and resist.

4. Increase regional cooperation and strategic alliances

Manila and other ASEAN members must create a multinational task force designed for operations beyond the national borders of each nation. This would facilitate intelligence sharing, joint training, and responses to threats directed towards ASEAN. The Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) and other bilateral agreements with Japan, Australia, and the United States need to be expanded beyond the conventional military aid to include cybersecurity and data protection expertise sharing.

5. Strengthening financial regulations towards foreign enterprises

PAGCOR and related agencies must revise their licensing protocol for foreign operators to include transparent ownership and regular auditing of digital

systems. In parallel to this, the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas and the Department of Finance will be needed to monitor the cryptocurrency and the remittances commonly exploited by POGOs.

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