MONOGRAPH SERIES 2026-02

A MONOGRAPH ON THE 8TH KATIPUNAN CONFERENCE

Philippine Strategic Outlook 2030

Policy, Power, and Partnerships at the Business-Government Nexus

PUBLISHED BY

University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Philippines

ISSN 2719-0722 (PRINT)
ISSN 2719-0730 (ONLINE)

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UP CIDS MONOGRAPH SERIES
2026-02

UP CIDS Monograph Series is published by the

University of the Philippines
Center for Integrative and Development Studies

Lower Ground Floor, Ang Bahay ng Alumni
Magsaysay Avenue, University of the Philippines
Diliman, Quezon City 1101

Telephone: (02) 8981-8500 loc. 4266 to 4268 / (02) 8426-0955
Email: cidspublications@up.edu.ph
Website: cids.up.edu.ph

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with support from

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V., Philippines Office

Unit 4, 22F, Tower 6789 Ayala Ave., Salcedo Village
Makati City, 1226 Metro Manila

Telephone: +63 2 5310 0069
Email: info.manila@kas.de
Website: www.kas.de/philippines

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ISSN 2719-0722 (Print)
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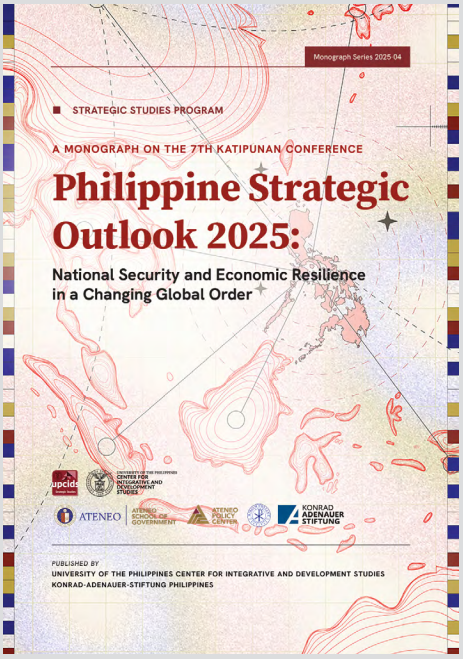
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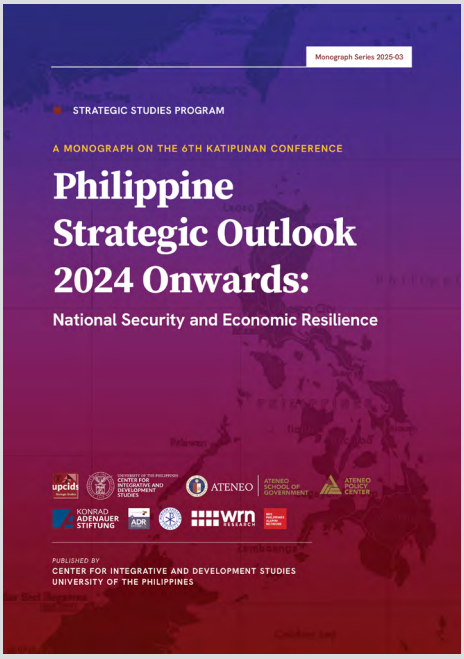
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MONOGRAPH

Philippine Strategic Outlook 2025: National Security and Economic Resilience in a Changing Global Order



MONOGRAPH

Philippine Strategic Outlook 2024 Onwards: National Security and Economic Resilience

About the Monograph

This monograph collects nine papers presented at the Eighth Katipunan Conference, organized by the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) with the UP Office of the Vice President for Research and Innovation (OVPRI), in partnership with Miriam College, the Ateneo School of Government, and with support from the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung-Philippines. The conference was held on October 22, 2026, at Miriam College, Quezon City, under the theme Philippine Strategic Outlook 2030: Policy, Power, and Partnerships at the Business-Government Nexus.

UP CIDS has convened the Katipunan Conference since 2015 as a forum on national security and economic resilience. The conference brings together scholars, practitioners, and policymakers from government, civil society, the private sector, and the academe. It has three aims: to examine where national security and economic resilience intersect, to build lasting partnerships among the institutions working on these questions, and to turn research findings into policy recommendations for the Philippine government.

The 2026 conference took place amid continuing tensions in the Middle East, including escalations involving Iran and the United States. These developments threaten global energy supply through the Strait of Hormuz and may affect how far the United States can sustain its commitments in the Asia-Pacific. Both concerns bear directly on the Philippines, which depends heavily on imported energy and on partnerships for its security.

The monograph follows the three plenary sessions of the conference. Part One, on Regional Security, contains three papers on Philippine alignment strategy, allied military exercises and Chinese grey-zone activity, and the legal threshold of an armed attack. Part Two, on Economic Resilience, contains three papers on fiscal governance and food security, environmental justice in just energy transition policies, and the emigration of Filipino STEM professionals. Part Three, on Malign Foreign Influence and Interference, contains three papers on network-based influence over the state, the regulation of disinformation, and Philippine narrative authorship in the Luzon Economic Corridor.

The authors include faculty members, graduate students, and researchers from Philippine and international institutions. Their papers are written for legislators, executive agencies, local governments, the security sector, industry, civil society, and researchers working on Philippine security and development.

The views expressed in this monograph are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of UP CIDS, the UP Office of the Vice President for Research and Innovation, or the University of the Philippines.

Foreword

Daniela Braun
Country Director, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS)

On behalf of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Philippines, it is my great pleasure to introduce this 8th Katipunan Conference Monograph on the increasingly important relationship between national security and economic resilience.

In recent years, the international environment has become more complex, interconnected, and unpredictable. Geopolitical tensions, regional conflicts, supply chain disruptions, cyber threats, energy insecurity, and economic coercion continue to demonstrate that security and prosperity can no longer be viewed as separate policy domains. Rather, they are deeply intertwined. A country's ability to safeguard its national interests increasingly depends not only on traditional security capabilities, but also on the resilience of its economy, institutions, infrastructure, and societies.

This publication is a timely contribution to an ongoing global conversation. It builds on the discussions fostered through the Katipunan Conference, which, since 2015, has served as a platform for constructive dialogue among scholars, practitioners, and civil society leaders. By bringing together diverse perspectives and rigorous scholarship, the Conference has sought to strengthen the connection between academic research and evidence-based policymaking. This monograph continues that tradition by offering analysis and policy recommendations on some of the defining challenges of our time, including grey-zone coercion, food and energy security, disinformation, climate resilience, and geoeconomic competition. It also examines how the Philippines can strengthen its resilience and strategically position itself in an increasingly contested, rapidly evolving geopolitical order.

From a German and European perspective, recent events have underscored the importance of resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in global supply chains, while Russia's invasion of Ukraine highlighted the risks associated with strategic dependencies in critical sectors such as energy. Across Europe, governments have increasingly focused on diversification, economic security, critical infrastructure protection, and strategic resilience as essential components of national security.

Similar conversations are taking place throughout the Indo-Pacific. For the Philippines and its regional partners, economic development, national security, and geopolitical stability are closely linked. As an archipelagic trading nation integrated into global markets, the Philippines is particularly affected by developments far beyond its shores. Disruptions to maritime trade, fluctuations in energy markets, technological competition, and regional security challenges all have the potential to influence economic growth, social stability, and national development.

Addressing these challenges requires more than government action alone. Effective responses demand collaboration across sectors and disciplines. Policymakers, researchers, business leaders, and civil society must work together to develop innovative solutions and strengthen the resilience of both states and societies. Sound public policy must be informed by rigorous research, open dialogue, and a willingness to engage across institutional and national boundaries.

This conviction lies at the heart of the KAS's work worldwide. We are committed to promoting democratic governance, a rules-based international order, economic prosperity, and international cooperation. In the Philippines, we are proud to support initiatives that foster informed policy discussions and contribute to constructive solutions for the country's most pressing challenges.

I sincerely thank our partners, particularly Prof. Rosalie Arcala Hall and her team at UP CIDS, as well as all researchers, contributors, and editors whose expertise, dedication, and hard work made this publication possible. Their contributions deepen our understanding of the complex interplay between security and resilience and offer valuable insights for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners alike. Through their efforts, this monograph advances an informed and constructive dialogue on some of the most pressing challenges facing the Philippines and the wider region today.

We hope that this monograph will stimulate further discussion, encourage new research, and contribute to policies that strengthen resilience, promote stability, and support sustainable development in the Philippines and beyond.

Introduction

Rosalie Arcala Hall, PhD
Executive Director, UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies

This volume brings together selected papers from the Eighth Katipunan Conference, convened by the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) with the UP Office of the Vice President for Research and Innovation under the theme Philippine Strategic Outlook 2030: Policy, Power, and Partnerships at the Business-Government Nexus. Since its first iteration in 2015, the Katipunan Conference has sought to serve as a bridge between academia, practitioners, and policymakers, and to consolidate research into recommendations that can inform national security and economic policy.

The year 2030 is near enough that decisions made now will shape where the country stands at the end of the decade. The papers collected here examine what the Philippines must understand and do to strengthen its security, its economy, and its control over its own affairs by then. They are organized around the conference's three plenary themes: regional security, economic resilience, and malign foreign influence and interference.

The Strategic Context

The conference met as tensions in the Middle East continued to reshape the global security environment. Escalations involving Iran and the United States have revived concerns over the security of energy supply chains, particularly through the Strait of Hormuz, where any obstruction of maritime traffic can rapidly drive up world oil prices. For the Philippines, which relies heavily on imported energy, such shocks quickly raise costs for households and businesses.

Deeper American engagement in the Middle East may also change how Washington allocates its strategic attention and resources, with consequences for the depth and consistency of its commitments to allies in the Asia-Pacific. Developments in the Middle East therefore affect the country's alliance calculations, its energy and food security, and its exposure to external political pressure. Accordingly, the Philippines as US ally has to increase its own independent ability to contribute to security in its own backyard, and to seriously rethink its position in the global energy supply chain.

For this reason, the conference treated regional security, economic resilience, and foreign influence as related problems.

Regional Security

Philippine regional security policy is increasingly defined by a dual strategy. On one hand, the country continues to reinforce its long-standing defense alliance with the United States while widening cooperation with Japan and Australia in maritime security, joint exercises, and capacity-building. On the other, it remains actively engaged within ASEAN, especially in managing tensions in the West Philippine Sea. The coherence of this strategy, and its durability under strain, is the central concern of the first part of this volume.

The papers in this section address this question at the levels of strategy, military operations, and international law.

Jenan S. Naz's "Strategic Hedging in a Bipolar Decade: Can Manila Sustain Decisive Posturing if U.S.–China Relations Warm?" begins with the apparent break that the Marcos administration has made from the hedging that long defined Southeast Asian statecraft. Through the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept, the expansion of Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement sites, and a widening minilateral network with the United States, Japan, Australia, and France, Manila has cast itself as the most assertive frontline state in the first island chain. Tracing Philippine alignment behavior from Aquino through Marcos, Naz asks whether this posture would survive a new working equilibrium between Washington and Beijing. The paper argues that the posture is decisive in rhetoric but materially thinner than its symbolism suggests. A genuine thaw would expose three vulnerabilities at once: a narrowing of ASEAN's strategic space, an unsettled domestic contest over alignment, and a gap between announced and deployed capabilities. Naz's answer is not to abandon decisiveness but to redefine it, anchoring deterrence in minilateral structures and indigenous capability that can outlast shifts in Washington's priorities.

Georgi Engelbrecht of the International Crisis Group focuses on military operations. His paper, "Tit for Tat in the Grey-zone? The Maritime Domain, Multilateral Exercises and Chinese Responses in the South China Sea," tests two competing assumptions: that allied multilateral exercises deter Chinese grey-zone assertiveness in the West Philippine Sea, and that they instead feed a spiral of tensions. Examining expanded maneuvers such as Balikatan and joint maritime cooperative activities from 2022 to 2026, Engelbrecht finds support for neither a direct escalatory loop nor a reliable deterrent effect. Allied exercises improve interoperability and send clear political signals, and Beijing remains deterred at the conventional level. In the grey zone, however, it remains undeterred. Multilateral exercises, he concludes, are essential to regional power balancing and capacity-building, but they cannot by themselves answer grey-zone coercion.

Melchizedek R. Ramos's "The Dangers of Ambiguity: Gray-Zone Coercion and the Threshold of an Armed Attack" takes up the problem that Engelbrecht's findings leave open. Some states, Ramos observes, deliberately calibrate coercion to stay below the legal threshold of an "armed attack," and the ambiguity of concepts such as "war" and "armed attack" leaves loopholes in international law. Drawing on Western and Eastern traditions in philosophy and international relations, Ramos argues that gray-zone tactics can be morally equivalent to an armed attack. He builds the case on three grounds: harm, intention, and the cumulative character of such actions. He then proposes the BEACON method, a qualitative, evidence-based framework that weighs bodily harm, exposure to death, aims, civilian status, ongoing pattern, and norms. The framework is meant to help determine when a gray-zone incident should be raised and treated as an armed attack.

The three papers point to a mismatch between the instruments the Philippines has assembled and the pressure it actually faces. Alliances and exercises help deter large-scale conflict, which is the least likely scenario. The more likely forms of coercion take place where capabilities are thin, deterrence is uncertain, and the law is unclear.

Economic Resilience

Geopolitical and geo-economic conflict, including the struggle for oil and power in the Middle East, calls for a closer look at what economic resilience requires over the medium and long term. The second part of this volume treats resilience as the capacity to absorb shocks while protecting human welfare. This view follows Dudley Seers, whose critique of the liberal economic model ushered in a view of development measured by the fullest blossoming of human potential.

The papers in this section deal with public finance, environmental justice, and human capital.

Severo C. Madrona Jr.'s "Food Security, Fiscal Resilience, and Agribusiness Transformation in the Philippines" starts from the fragility of import-dependent food economies. That fragility is exposed whenever global tensions unsettle energy markets and trade routes. Despite long-running agricultural and rural development programs, Madrona finds persistent structural weaknesses in public expenditure management, infrastructure investment, procurement, and local implementation, and these continue to hold back agribusiness modernization and productivity. Drawing on budgetary and audit records from 2016 to 2026, comparisons with other Southeast Asian institutions, and stakeholder interviews, he argues that food security should be understood not solely as an agricultural concern but as a question of economic resilience, governance capacity, and strategic planning. His proposed Public Fiscal Management and Food Resilience Framework joins climate-responsive

investment, adaptive fiscal governance, rural infrastructure, and agribusiness modernization into a single agenda for food sovereignty.

Joseph Edward B. Alegado and Shanice Espiritu-Amador of the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University turn to the energy transition. Their paper, "Unpacking and Comparing Environmental Justice in Official Just Energy Transition Policies in the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia: A Narrative Policy Analysis," examines how far environmental justice principles have actually entered the just energy transition plans of the three countries. They find that the actors in these policy narratives are caught between the pursuit of economic growth and the demand for justice. Procedural and distributive justice appear in the plans, while recognition and restorative justice remain largely invisible. Moreover, because the roadmaps lack clear targets and defined pathways, how justice is to be achieved remains unclear.

Mary Krizangelic J. Cabuslay's "Green Brain Drain in the Philippines: Dependency, Economic Security, and Challenge Climate Resilience" examines the shortage of skilled workers needed to carry out the transition. As geopolitical tensions and climate impacts accelerate demand for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics professionals, the Philippines continues to lose its own to emigration. Cabuslay acknowledges the value of remittances and of programs such as the Department of Science and Technology Science Education Institute (DOST-SEI) Balik Scientist Program. Still, she argues that the outflow of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) professionals from the climate, energy, and environment sectors is a critical threat to national economic security, one compounded by local green career paths that remain invisible to young people already oriented toward work abroad. Grounded in dependency theory, the paper reads this outflow as a new form of resource extraction, in which developed countries absorb Philippine green human capital to meet their own energy and adaptation goals. The resulting labor bottleneck slows domestic climate response and stalls regional initiatives such as the ASEAN Power Grid. State-sponsored brain circulation and educational reform, Cabuslay concludes, are not enough. The country must activate the business-government nexus, building partnerships with the private green technology sector to create a domestic innovation ecosystem that can keep and mobilize this talent.

All three papers locate the weak point of Philippine economic resilience in implementation. Fiscal systems, justice commitments, and the supply of skilled workers determine whether existing plans can be carried out.

Malign Foreign Influence and Interference

As geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific intensifies, the Philippines faces growing attempts by foreign actors to shape its institutions, political processes, and subnational governance. The third part of this volume rests on a distinction that is easily blurred in public debate. Malign foreign influence refers to covert or manipulative efforts to shape state policy or public opinion, through disinformation, economic pressure, or propaganda, that are not necessarily illegal. Foreign interference refers to illegal, covert, coercive, or corrupt activities, such as cyberattacks, espionage, and the infiltration of parties and government, meant to manipulate a state's internal affairs in the service of a foreign power.

The papers in this section examine how influence is structured, how it can be regulated, and how the state can assert its own position.

One Miguel B. Policarpio of De La Salle University, in "The Invisible Empire: How Network Occupation Captures the State Without Conquering Territory: Strategic Nodes, Attention Economies, Local Governance, and Elite Networks in the Future of Philippine Sovereignty," argues that security debates remain fixed on kinetic conceptions of power: territorial disputes, military modernization, and great-power rivalry. Yet by 2030, the most serious challenge to Philippine sovereignty may come not from conquest but from "network occupation." In this form of power, external actors shape state behavior by controlling key nodes in interlinked systems of food, energy, information, infrastructure, digital platforms, local government, and elite networks. Policarpio traces the cascading effects of the Strait of Hormuz disruption alongside Philippine cases on infrastructure, sister-city agreements, digital platforms, and local elite networks. Through them, he shows how external shocks and influence spread across connected systems to affect public opinion, institutional decisions, political stability, and prices. Building on classical realism, he proposes a framework of "Network Realism" in which strategic advantage derives from controlling critical positions in the networks that sustain modern society.

Dominic Vincent Ligot, Frances Claire Tayco, Carljoe Javier, Bill Urrutia, Janina Santos, Dana Batnag, Jenin Velaquez, Grace Salonga, and Carlos Nazareno address one of those networks directly in "Governing Reach, Not Truth: A Structural Approach to Disinformation Regulation." Philippine responses to disinformation, they observe, have centered on fact-checking, criminal penalties, and proposals for administrative bodies empowered to identify and suppress "fake news." The authors argue that these content-centric approaches misdiagnose the problem and carry serious constitutional risks. The harm of disinformation, they contend, tracks the scale of exposure, which is driven by algorithmic recommendation and coordinated amplification rather than falsity alone. Professionalized disinformation also operates

through covert influence-for-hire markets, which calls for regulatory attention to payment, coordination, and transparency rather than to the adjudication of truth. And content-based enforcement by administrative agencies is vulnerable under Philippine free-speech doctrine and risks chilling legitimate political expression. Their alternative regulates amplification, requires disclosure of paid political influence, targets coordinated inauthentic behavior, and holds platforms to process-based duties, reserving content-based adjudication for the courts and for specific, demonstrable harms. Although the paper's scope extends beyond foreign actors, its focus on influence markets and coordinated behavior speaks directly to the mechanisms through which foreign information manipulation operates.

Jared Jezoar M. Pacheco of the University of Asia and the Pacific looks at how the Philippine state shapes its own position. His paper, "Hostage Chain, Shared Destiny: Philippine Narrative Authorship in the US-China Contest at the Luzon Economic Corridor," examines the Luzon Economic Corridor and its incorporation into the US-led Pax Silica initiative. Rather than treating Manila as a passive backdrop to competing US–Japan economic-security frames and Chinese Belt and Road rhetoric, Pacheco shows how Philippine official discourse accepts elements of the US–Japan frame while asserting Philippine jurisdiction, developmental priorities, and national leverage. He traces this pattern from the May 2026 rejection of exceptional legal treatment through regulatory decisions in July 2026. Drawing on the international-law principle of permanent sovereignty over natural resources and on developmental-state theory, he argues that narrative authorship is an essential and observable dimension of middle-power statecraft.

The three papers show that influence today works mainly through networks, markets, and narratives. Defending sovereignty therefore requires regulating the structures through which influence flows, protecting open political debate, and using official discourse to set the terms of the country's partnerships.

The Business-Government Nexus

The relationship between business and government runs through all three parts of this volume. Maritime capability, energy and food systems, and the integrity of the information space all depend on decisions made by the public and private sectors, which do not always pursue the same aims. As the papers in this volume argue, the government’s long standing liberal economic policies has not reduced the country’s dependency in oil imports, nor has it persuaded private sector investment into green energy development. The government has long kept an arms length on private sector initiatives, which has steered towards activities that capture overseas remittance earnings. Government promotion of export labor does not help grow the labor resource requirements for manufacturing, nor support a robust agro-industrial sector

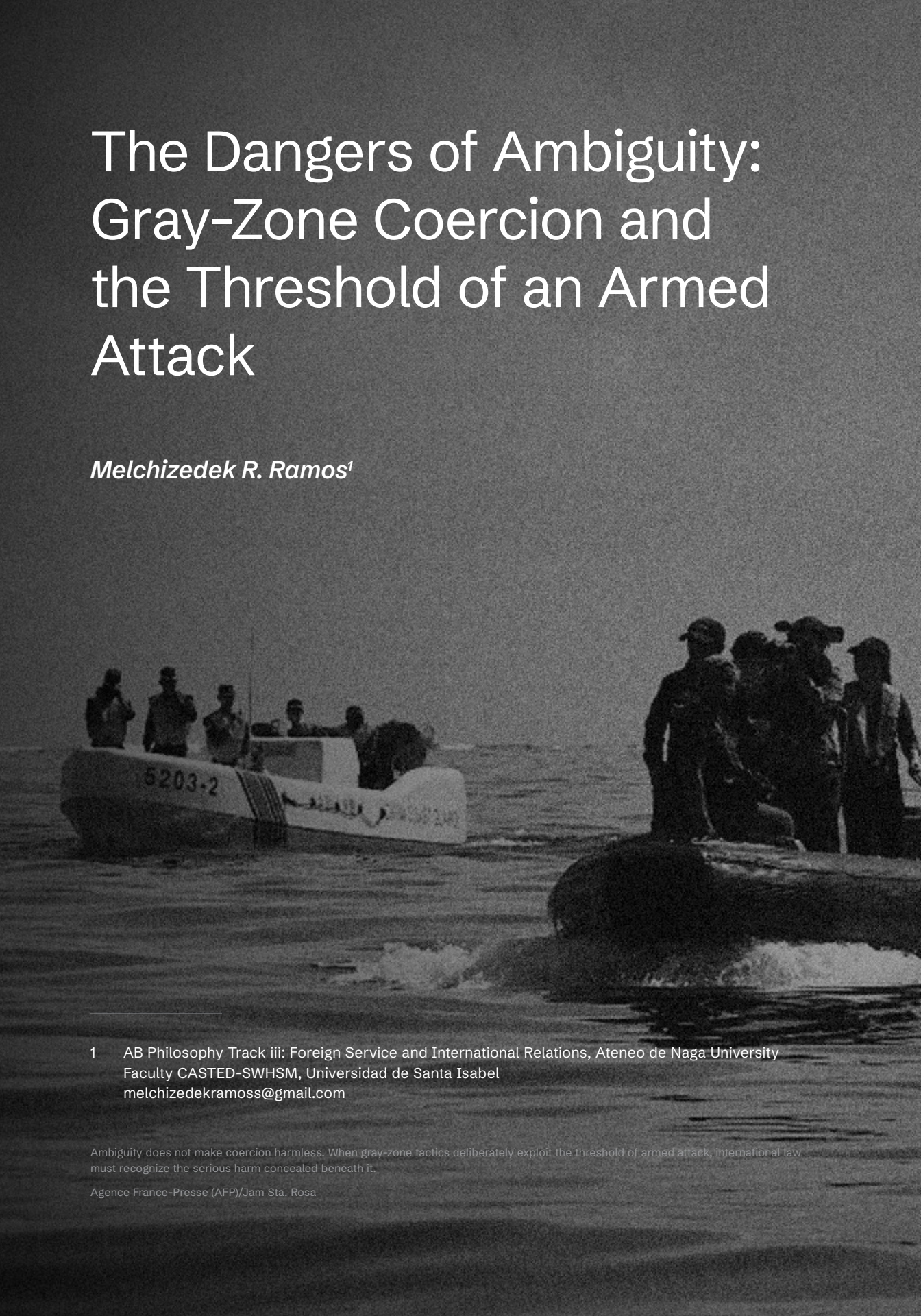
from which food security could be attained. This pattern is also seen in the outward-oriented maritime sector and a fledgling domestic marine transport system.

Government-business partnerships can strengthen national resilience, but they can also create vulnerabilities, as the papers by Policarpio and Pacheco show. The Philippines' position in these crucial global networks limits the effectiveness of government and business response to disruptions. Cabuslay's call for partnerships with the private green technology sector treats the same relationship as a source of solutions.

The papers offer evidence, frameworks, and recommendations that we hope will be useful to legislators, executive agencies, local governments, the security sector, industry, and civil society in the years leading to 2030. We present them in keeping with the purpose of the Katipunan Conference, which is to bring research to bear on the policy choices facing the country.

The Dangers of Ambiguity: Gray-Zone Coercion and the Threshold of an Armed Attack

Melchizedek R. Ramos[1]



1 AB Philosophy Track iii: Foreign Service and International Relations, Ateneo de Naga University
Faculty CASTED-SWHSM, Universidad de Santa Isabel
melchizedekramoss@gmail.com

Ambiguity does not make coercion harmless. When gray-zone tactics deliberately exploit the threshold of armed attack, international law must recognize the serious harm concealed beneath it.

Agence France-Presse (AFP)/Jam Sta. Rosa

Abstract

In contemporary times, the threat of armed attack is unpredictable and uncertain, and the use of conventional force is most unlikely; however, it will be employed in a far more coercive action against individuals and the state itself. International law relies on concepts such as “war” and “armed attack” to determine the gravity of such action. But the issue is that states exploit the ambiguity of those concepts through coercive actions deliberately designed to remain below the traditional threshold of an armed attack. This paper argues that the gray-zone tactic is morally equivalent to an armed attack, because it exploits and renders coercive actions that may hinder or degrade the quality of life of an individual. This paper also argues that armed attacks should be redefined due to the vagueness and ambiguity of these terms, which create various loopholes that may be exploited in international law. Drawing on different approaches in philosophy and international relations, this paper discusses concepts such as “war,” “armed attack,” and “gray zone” from Western and Eastern perspectives. It then redefines these concepts as equivalent to an armed attack. It proceeds with three arguments: harm, intention, and cumulative actions. These conditions may help us understand the gravity of such actions. To support the arguments, the paper presents the BEACON method, which is a qualitative framework that is fact- and evidence-based on bodily harm, exposure to death, aims, civilian status, ongoing pattern, and norms. This framework is used to evaluate whether such a gray-zone incident should be raised and treated as an armed attack. The paper concludes that these concepts should be reconsidered for redefinition and to address gray areas through policy, dialogues between states, and agreements in international law.

Keywords: gray zone, war, armed attack, and BEACON Keywords: retrospective voting, local government, fiscal behavior, electoral accountability, patronage democracy

Introduction

In contemporary times, peace and conflict are in a cycle in international relations. It is inevitable, such as the rise of technology in digital and other nontraditional forms of warfare. We have to acknowledge that such tactics of warfare are changing every single day. The problem of ambiguity in international relations has been debated from the vagueness of what constitutes an armed attack under the United Nations Charter, Articles 2(4) and 51 to the coercive nature of grey-zone tactics. This creates the main problem: when states deliberately exploit definitions of "war and armed attack" in the use of grey-zone tactics, what makes it morally and legally wrong? The challenge is that threshold concepts are meant to prevent things from getting progressively worse; one common belief is that raising the bar for what constitutes an "armed attack" helps break cycles of force and counterforce.

To clarify what the paper tries to answer, it is a philosophical and international relations matter utilizing applied ethics, theories, and case studies. This paper does not advocate war or other means of harm. Instead, it calls for purely and genuinely preventing and mitigating conflict, exploring possible alternatives to alleviate such harm and death, or both options. We have to acknowledge that states operate in an anarchic international system where every state is sovereign and they prioritize their national interest and the survival of the state at the expense of peace and harmony.

What Is War?

To understand the paper and its claims, we have to know such definitions first. Over the centuries, warfare has evidently changed dramatically, from the use of conventional to unconventional means of force. Firstly, we have to discuss what war is. From a legal standpoint, we have to see Walzer's just war, which treats war as a legal relation or such condition that is initiated when one or more parties activate it. Such activation of this relationship is subject to the rules of war and must follow them accordingly (Braun 2023, 44). This relates to international humanitarian law, the UN Charter, and other defense treaties that are ratified and agreed upon. War is commonly known for its unforgiving nature of violence, as mentioned in the works of Carl Philipp Gottlieb von Clausewitz, a Prussian general and military theorist. He based his treatment of war on his extensive experience in multiple campaigns. He defines war as only a continuation of state policy by other means (1976, 40). He also says that "war" is nothing but a duel on a larger scale, an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will through bloodshed. For him, there is no logical limit to the application of that force (15).

In this sense, the realist standpoint in classical, neoclassical, and offensive branches of international relations theory tells about how the international system plays and

operates in the involvement of power-seeking due to the selfish character of human nature (Morgenthau 2014, 53). Human nature governs individuals' "lust" for power, but it is not purely for the individual who governs the state but its national interest that benefits it (Korab-Karpowicz 2017, 1–7). In this sense, there is no automatic harmony. A state will use force to attain its goals if, after assessing the prospects for success, it values those goals more than it values the pleasures of peace (Waltz 2001, 160). It is a phenomenon in which calculations of power dominate states' thinking and how they compete for power. That competition sometimes necessitates going to war, which is considered an acceptable instrument of statecraft to show that states are sovereign and free (Mearsheimer 2001, 18, 31).

However, not all states are power-driven and do not have the capabilities to wage war. Yanqing Qin (2016, 36) argues that actors do not automatically establish distinct identities, but they are formed through continuous forms of social relationships. He frames the term "interconnectedness" on the condition that it is not one of discord, but rather of continuous interactions with different individuals and states. Consequently, war should not be viewed as an innate state but rather as a specific and complex form of relationship. The situation reflects a relational outcome in which the processes of managing and harmonizing relations have, unfortunately, deteriorated significantly. Qin argues that the relational perspective posits that "conflict is a necessary deviation from the state of nature" (41), indicating that harmony represents the ideal and natural order.

Therefore, this paper defines war as a

> hostile political relationship between actors, in which policy is pursued through organized and conventional forces and coercive violence, which may reach the legal threshold of an armed attack. This can trigger large-scale conflicts worldwide.

What Is an Armed Attack?

In international law, such definitions of usage of force or other means of harm are formalized and codified in order to have records of what is agreed upon and to remind that there are rules that need to be observed and followed. However, some of the rules of international law are vague and may lead to loopholes that can lead to exploitation of such international law. The International Court of Justice has differentiated the gravest forms of force from lesser forms principally according to their scale and effects. This distinction establishes a threshold: coercive conduct may constitute force without necessarily reaching the gravity required to qualify as an armed attack (Ruys 2014, 163).10 However, regarding gray-zone tactics, there was discussion on the application of cyberspace in international law. In this context,

aggression and attack can be defined as conventional and nonconventional (that does not require any physical harm). It is also interesting to note that Singapore treats a cyberattack as an armed attack when it causes damage, injury, death, or destruction that is equivalent to a conventional armed attack.

In this case, the definition of an "armed attack" in this paper is:

> "Armed attack" takes place when a state uses force in a conventional and coercive action that results in, or is likely to result in, significant physical injury, death, damage, or an imminent danger to the state's security.

What Are Gray-Zone Tactics?

In the modern lens, a gray-zone tactic is ambiguous, contested, and serves as a condition under which such actions can hardly reach the threshold of an armed attack. However, for a Chinese general in the Warring States period, Sun Tzu offers a clear insight into why grey-zone tactics are being used in the first place. In his work The Art of War, Chapter 2, "Doing Battle," discusses how a battle should be fought and the importance of resources in conflicts, where materials are a vital source to one's army and state (Sun Zi 2007, 85). He emphasized that resources are scarce, and an army is unable to wage war when such vital supplies run thin. The campaign can face setbacks, such as having a weak soldier who is exhausted due to prolonged combat duties and the thin supply that is rationed to them. Such wars are costly; states must prepare for them so their armies can be maintained in active and reserve roles to support their national interests. In chapter 3, "Planning for the Attack," Sun Tzu points out that one should go to battle when one knows one has the advantage, and that knowing one's enemy is a strategic advantage to a certain victory. Sun Tzu argues that, even though winning such battles is considered that enemy forces submit without one is the most excellent approach, it means that, in the modern lens, such battles do not require conventional forces to enact power to such a state, but instead utilize the ambiguity and vagueness of definitions. In this relation to gray-zone tactics, there are modern variations in the definition of such terms:

> Those covert or illegal activities of non-traditional statecraft that fall below the threshold of armed organized violence, including the disruption of order, political subversion of governments or non-governmental organizations, psychological operations, abuse of legal processes, and financial corruption, as part of an integrated design to achieve strategic advantage.

In this definition, it is clear that gray-zone tactics involve actions that fall short of, or cannot reach, the threshold of an armed attack, as it emphasizes that they are

organized and disrupt order in many ways. In line with Javier Jordan's definition, the gray zone is an intermediary space that separates competition waged in accordance with conventional guidelines governing interstate politics from direct and ongoing armed confrontation. Gray-zone conflict revolves around an incompatibility perceived as relevant, at least by the aggressor (2020, 5). The strategies employed are multidimensional and synchronized (hybrid), and implementation is gradual, typically in pursuit of long-term objectives (Hoffman 2018, 36). Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, two colonels from the People's Liberation Army (PLA), discussed in the book *Unrestricted Warfare* the impact of modern wars. In chapter 7, "Ten Thousand Methods Combined as One: Combinations That Transcend Boundaries," Qiao and Wang (1999, 179) discussed how modern wars will affect the price of gasoline in pipelines, food supplies, and the economy of one's state. It is also noted that modern wars may be fought outside in active warfare, and international law will be loose based on the new tactics in nonconventional actions of numerous states. Firstly, the phrase "to exceed the limit" means not violating boundaries or international laws but finding ways not to trigger such laws. They coined the definition "combined war that goes beyond limits," in which a new method of warfare is achieved by taking a classical idea of Machiavelli's, combining forces and methods, and expanding it to incorporate all available resources while surpassing boundaries that restrict what counts as warfare. In Shyr-Guang Shiau's definition, this "combined war" is a strategy that, as a lower-intensity coercive approach that goes under the threshold that can trigger an armed attack, the "gray-zone" strategy does not resort to direct and large-scale use of force, but only employs hybrid tactics and operates at an intensity below the threshold of military conflict within the theater of operations, the "grey zone" strategy (Shiau 2023, 30).

These tactics are operationally ambiguous as no violations are crossed under international norms. Ambiguity over such traditional objectives is inherent in these tactics because they do not trigger the concept of armed conflict under international law. It acts as a "de facto" condition of hostilities; states exploit and apply pressure so that such actions cannot be recognized as an act of "war." To emphasize, the Chinese definition of gray-zone tactics pushes boundaries between combatant and noncombatant, conventional and nonconventional, and conflict and gray-zone tactics, where methods avoid "direct and large-scale" conflicts. Therefore, in the literature given, the various definitions from the Western to the Eastern lens of gray-zone tactics, it is considered in this paper that gray-zone tactics are

> coercive, nontraditional forms of statecraft that are often covert, unaccountable, and legally contested, and are deliberately used to stay below the threshold of an armed attack while still conducting strategic pressure and political leverage.

Arguments Against Gray-Zone Tactics

1. Argument Against Gray-Zone

Contemporary international conflict occurs in times of peace and conventional warfare. States employ grey-zone tactics such as coercive measures that are deliberately premeditated to remain below the threshold of an armed attack. The main idea is that the legal threshold does not necessarily make an action morally permissible when states deliberately exploit ambiguity surrounding the concepts of "war" and "armed attack."

2. Argument from Harm

The first argument concerns harm, not only in actual harm, but also the possibility of harm. Seth Lazar's account of risky killing demonstrates that wrongdoing cannot be evaluated solely by its final consequences. An actor who knowingly exposes an innocent person to a substantially greater probability of wrongful harm commits a more serious moral wrong (2015, 97). Such acts deliberately create situations where injury or death becomes foreseeable. Therefore, evaluating such actions only after they occur overlooks the moral importance of the risks deliberately imposed on individuals. Jens Johansson and Olle Risberg's Negative Influence on Well-Being Account further supports this argument. Harm does not have to consist exclusively of immediate physical injury; an event can be harmful when it negatively affects a person's well-being (2023, 512). This includes both intrinsic harms, such as physical suffering, and extrinsic harms, such as the disruption of life or other conditions necessary to a normal life.

3. Argument from Intention

Daniel M. Farrell (1992) constructed a moral argument: If a policy requires people to intend to do wrong things, that policy is immoral. That policy would be morally wrong to implement or support in any other way. In his discussion, nuclear deterrence is useful and effective here as an analogy for structure. Farrell reorganized the moral argument that a deterrence policy requires some agents to intend to carry out wrongful acts. Second, it is wrong to have such intentions; therefore, the policy is immoral, as mentioned in the first sentence of his reconstructed argument. He points out that it is not enough to show that an intention is right or wrong; one must also explain why a policy that depends on agents' intentions is condemned. Patrick Tomlin's (2025) discussion on intentions under uncertainty strengthens this argument. Real-world decisions rarely involve certainty about exactly who will be harmed, how severely, or when. Moral evaluation must therefore consider the range and probability of foreseeable outcomes rather than judging an action solely according to what ultimately occurred. German federal law provides a practical model of

proportional coercion. One clear example of how proportionality may limit coercive authority can be found in German federal law. As outlined in § 4 of the Gesetz über den unmittelbaren Zwang bei Ausübung öffentlicher Gewalt durch Vollzugsbeamte des Bundes (UZwG), it is imperative for federal law-enforcement officers to choose from among appropriate measures those that minimally impact individuals and the broader community. Furthermore, the anticipated harm must not be excessive in relation to the intended objective (Federal Ministry of Justice, UZwG § 4). In a similar vein, Section 15 of the Federal Police Act (BPolG) stipulates that authorities are required to implement the least restrictive measure that is suitable, to avert consequences that are evidently disproportionate to the intended objective, and to conclude the measure once its purpose has been fulfilled (Bundesministerium für Justiz, BPolG § 15). These guidelines outline how coercion can be developed through measures that are both graduated and proportionate, rather than granting authorities unrestricted freedom to utilize any force available to them. This offers a clear example of the elements at play in the argument from intention, specifically how a state may structure its processes to ensure that coercive measures are directed toward achieving a legal objective while reducing anticipated harm.

4. Argument from Cumulative Actions

Kyle Fritz's (2018) work explores the concept of moral responsibility. He questions whether an agent can be held accountable only for what they voluntarily control or for nonvoluntary failures, such as forgetfulness, inattentiveness, or certain attitudes. Fritz divides the two sides: volitionists, who hold that agents are responsible for voluntary actions, and nonvolitionists, who hold that some nonvoluntary actions are still held accountable. In his main paper, the volitionist thought on voluntary control is conceptually more problematic than it seems, and the debate about moral responsibility should be reframed around intentional action and intentional omission. Fritz argues in his paper that repeated tactics that pose a risk of physical injury and death are not morally permissible, even if they may lead to a larger conflict.

Lel Jones (2024, 619, 626) argues that a blame-inclusive norm must "account for cumulative harm" and "be risk-sensitive to the microaggressed," ensuring that patterned, low- level wrongs are not morally ignored. She specifically addresses the question of disaggregation by stating that "individuals can be individually blameworthy for contributing to cumulative harm" (617). Jones believes that to make this a reality, we should "hold [perpetrators] more blameworthy for transgressing in a way that contributes to a broader pattern of harm," meaning we should include that contribution when deciding who is to blame (626). In this sense, such cumulation of "incidents" is not a form of human error, but it is intentional, deliberately harming the personnel and civilians. This is not morally

accepted and acknowledged. With these arguments, I would argue that gray-zone tactics are an unethical form of statecraft, where it undermines the well-being of individuals through harm, intent, and repeated actions generated by states employing such tactics for their sake of survival and national interest.

The BEACON Method

The BEACON method is a normative, case-based judgment that evaluates gray-zone incidents to determine if the action constitutes an armed attack. This is not a point system for evaluating these incidents, but rather a language-based judgment with supporting evidence and case analysis. This method is not part of the argument, but only a tool for understanding and analyzing such incidents to evaluate actions if deemed unethical. This method can also be used in various gray-zone cases. Table 1 identifies and helps determine whether an action or case constitutes an armed attack. This method is not the main central argument of this paper, but rather a tool for identifying and analyzing whether gray-zone tactics constitute an armed attack.

Table 1. The BEACON Method

Lens	Questions	Labels (*X*)	Indicators (*Y*)
Bodily Harm	Did people suffer injury or traumatic harm?	■ None ■ Clear	■ Medical treatment ■ Visible injuries ■ Consistent crew statements ■ Post-incident stress symptoms
Exposure to Death	Did the act create a clear risk of death?	■ None ■ Clear	■ Near-collision/ramming ■ Lasers ■ High-pressure water cannons at unsafe range/sea state
Aims (Intent)	Was it accidental, coercive, or unmistakably pursued?	■ Accidental ■ Coercive ■ Intentional	■ Repeated blocking ■ Radio warnings ■ Synchronized messaging ■ Timing with diplomatic events
Civilian status or distinction	Are civilians targeted or recklessly endangered?	■ No evidence ■ Civilian ■ Military personnel (government)	■ Passports ■ Birth certificates
Ongoing pattern	Is this an isolated event, or does it represent multiple patterns?	■ Isolated ■ Sustained or standard practice	■ Recurrence of similar incidents ■ Reescalation of actions over time

Lens	Questions	Labels (*X*)	Indicators (*Y*)
Norms (Legal)	Did the conduct breach core norms?	■ Questionable ■ Breach	■ Failure to avoid collision ■ Disproportionate measures ■ Unnecessary action

The BEACON method involves six elements. The first element is bodily harm, which investigates physical manifestations of harm. The second element, exposure to death, is discussed in relation to the argument against harm. In this vein, exploiting international-law definitions can be a serious violation when it carries a high risk of injury or death. The third element, aims, is illustrated in relation to the argument from intention. Actions or direct orders from superiors, or policies that intend to commit a wrong action, are morally wrong. The fourth element, civilian status, focuses on whether or not an incident features the targeting of civilians, as well as reckless actions that affect civilians. International humanitarian law provides a basic protection that requires both states in conflict to distinguish between civilians and combatants and to conduct operations only against military objectives. The fifth element, ongoing patterns, highlights that repeated actions are immoral because they undermine autonomy by narrowing a person's safety and security over time. The sixth element, norms, evaluates whether a gray-zone act breaches binding legal rules and procedures, especially in international law.

How to apply:

> 1. Summarize the facts of an incident in one paragraph.
> 2. Analyze through BEACON.
> 3. In the section below, you can find the format for reasoning and justification, with X as the Label and Y as the Indicators or evidence.

For example:

> B = [X] because [Y]
> E = [X] because [Y]
> A = [X] because [Y]
> C = [X] because [Y]
> O = [X] because [Y]
> N = [X] because [Y]

Example of usage

> B = [Clear & serious] because [for example: two crew treated; cracked windshield documented.]

> E = [Clear] because [for example, blocking at less than 20m made a collision with the vessel]
>
> A = [Intentional] because [for example, repeated blocking.]
>
> C = [Directed at Civilians] because [for example, Civilians or researchers are obvious from markings].
>
> O = [Sustained or standard practice] because [for example, similar blocking earlier that month],
>
> N = [Breach] because [unlawful use of excessive action against Civilians]

Other Concerns

> a. If the evidence is insufficient to apply the checks, the result is indeterminate.
>
> b. If the checks fail despite adequate evidence, the incident is not an armed attack under BEACON.
>
> c. If the answer is either one sentence or one paragraph long and still provides substantial evidence and justification for analyzing the method itself, then it is acceptable.

Note that all elements must be present. If any of them lack evidence or information, the gray-zone tactic is not considered an armed attack.

Case Study and Application

In this section, the paper tries to analyze cases of grey-zone tactics if such actions may be potential to an "armed attack" through the application of the BEACON method, we can analyze and deliberate with the help of the arguments against gray-zone tactics and the additional supporting details regarding the BEACON method, this paper may go deeper if such actions can be considered reaching the threshold of an armed attack. This is not the main focus of this paper, but this method may help identify and analyze such actions.

South China Sea: Coercion at Ayungin Shoal

This case study explores the events of the June 17, 2024, engagement at Ayungin Shoal, which occurred during a Philippine rotation and resupply mission to the BRP Sierra Madre. The incident does not demonstrate an inevitable shift toward traditional warfare given the larger pattern of coercive encounters at the shoal; rather, it demonstrates how persistent grey-zone coercion can result in cumulative

harm and increase the risk of escalation while staying below the threshold of conventional armed conflict.(Philippines v. China 2016, ¶¶1113, 1115, 437–38). In early 2013, Philippine authorities had already reported repeated Chinese vessels around the shoal (¶¶1115–27, 438–44). On 9 March 2014, two Chinese Coast Guard vessels intercepted Philippine vessels conducting a rotation and resupply mission and prevented them from reaching the Sierra Madre. Later that month, another Philippine vessel encountered Chinese Coast Guard ships that maneuvered to obstruct its passage (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2024). This pattern intensified between 2021 and 2024. Recorded incidents included water cannons, blocking maneuvers, lasers, collisions, and ramming. On 5 March 2024, a Philippine supply vessel sustained damage, and four personnel were injured after the use of water cannons and dangerous maneuvers. On 17 June 2024, another confrontation involved ramming, boarding, collisions, lasers, and water cannons, injuring eight Philippine personnel, including one serviceman who sustained a severe hand injury.

1. Bodily Harm—Clear

In the presented case, bodily harm is evident: the use of a laser in February 2023, four personnel sustained minor injuries in March 2024, and there are additional injuries sustained in a water cannon incident on 23 March 2024, and eight injured personnel on 17 June 2024. This includes the Philippine personnel who got his right thumb cut off. It also records damage to vessels, including shattered windshields, severe engine damage, slashed and deflated RHIB floaters, and broken navigational screens.

2. Exposure to Death—Clear

Instances of near-collisions, ramming, the use of lasers, and high-pressure water cannons at unsafe distances or under adverse sea conditions are noted as potential threats to life. The occurrences at Ayungin closely mirror these, down to the details. It was observed that obstructive actions presented potential hazards, including the risk of collision, recurrent impacts, ramming, deployment of lasers, the use of water cannons, and towing, alongside various other assertive measures.

3. Aims—Intentional

The incident stretches back to 2013, including repeated interventions, supply blockades, and the use of force in nonconventional warfare. The Ayungin situation emphasizes the importance of deliberate action. The conduct in question cannot be dismissed as a mere isolated incident or a singular engagement. This situation has persisted over the years, with a distinct operational objective: to disrupt and delay the resupply missions to the BRP Sierra Madre. In this sense, the argument presented in the argument of intentions is that the policy

should be intended to show a series of procedures and arsenal where the least harm to the lethal form of enforcement in such international law must follow. However, in this case, all things have gone "downhill," wherein one personnel was dismembered in his service.

4. Civilian Status—Government Personnel

In Ayungin, the primary focus is not on civilian fishing vessels but on Philippine resupply operations linked to the grounded BRP Sierra Madre and the Marines stationed in the area.

5. Ongoing Pattern—Sustained

Chinese vessels have maintained a presence in the area since 2013, with documented instances of interference in Philippine resupply operations dating back to 2014. Chinese vessels have also been involved in numerous incidents from 2021 to 2024, including the use of water cannons, physical interference, ramming and collisions, the use of lasers, and cases of physical injury.

6. Norms (Legal)—Breached

In addressing incidents, it is essential to adhere to fundamental principles. For instance, it is essential to adhere to regulations while maneuvering and traversing. It is essential to adhere to the navigation regulations set out in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). It is essential to comply with the Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea, commonly referred to as COLREG. This involves avoiding collisions and refraining from unnecessary or unsuitable actions. China's current actions have raised significant concern about possible clashes and potential breach of Article 94 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea. The report indicates that China's actions were obstructing the Philippines' initiatives. Chinese law enforcement vessels were obstructing the passage of Philippine boats, increasing the likelihood of a potential collision. It is essential to adhere to marine regulations, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea, to prevent collisions.

Verdict

The Ayungin situation presents itself as coercion, injury, risk, and actuality of harm. This repeated pattern is categorized as unethical comparable to an armed attack. Under BEACON, it warrants stronger accountability.

Belarus

The Belarusian–European crisis illustrates a substantially different form of gray-zone tactics. In 2021, migration flowed toward Europe, specifically in Lithuania, Poland, and Latvia. It increased dramatically from Belarus amid deteriorating diplomatic relations with Belarus. The European Union (EU) described the action as the "instrumentalization of migrants," where it is deliberately facilitated to destabilize the European Union by applying pressure through the use of migrants from Africa to the Middle East (Radjenovic 2022, 2–3).

On 16 November 2021, 7,698 persons entered the EU from Belarus, including 4,222 in Lithuania, 3,062 in Poland, and 414 in Latvia. More than 40,000 attempted border crossings were reported in 2021 (European Commission 2021, 32). Human Rights Watch (2021) reported the pushbacks by border patrols of Belarus and the EU, as migrants were moved back and forth between Polish and Belarusian territory. Migrants also reported physical abuse and exposure to lack of basic necessities and severe weather conditions. There is one incident in which one migrant drowned trying to cross into Poland through the river (Human Rights Watch 2021).

1. Bodily Harm—Clear

The situation at the borders of Belarus, Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania showed significant evidence that harm was inflicted upon these migrants, who were beaten in collection sites, left with little to no supply of food and water, and experienced harsh environmental conditions.

2. Exposure to Death—Clear

In relation to clear bodily harm in Belarus's case, the individuals were placed in collection sites, where the freezing environment and the lack of basic needs led to a foreseeable death. In one instance, Belarusian officers ordered someone who could not swim to travel down a wide, fast-flowing river on an inflatable raft. In that incident, one migrant drowned.

3. Aims (Intention)—Intentional

This case falls under the intentional part because Belarus began these tactics in retaliation against EU sanctions right after the 2020 elections, when Belarusian authorities and travel agencies encouraged migrants to transfer to the EU by crossing the Belarusian border. However, the intention was to destabilize the EU—in terms of economic, national security, and territorial integrity.

4. Civilian Status—Civilians (Migrants)

In this case, the targeted individuals are not soldiers or border officers, but migrants from Middle Eastern states who seek asylum in European countries.

5. Ongoing Pattern—Sustained

The migration situation in Belarus shows a continuous pattern that started in June 2021 and extended to Lithuania, Poland, and Latvia, involving thousands of migrants, tens of thousands of attempts to cross, repeated pushbacks, repeated repatriation, repeated deprivation, repeated 106 beatings, and repeated crossings. The crisis is still ongoing in 2026, with over 12,000 illegal crossing attempts prevented in 2025.

6. Norms (Legal)—Breached

The breaches of international law can be analyzed first. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), in Article 6 (Right to Life), mentions that "Every human being has the inherent right to life" and "no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his life." Then Article 7 of the ICCPR (Prohibition of Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, Degrading Treatment) provides a clear stance: "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." Lastly, the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in states in Article 33, Section 1: "No Contracting State shall expel or return a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened."

Verdict

Under BEACON, the case of Belarus shows that migrants were instrumentalized for political pressure and exposed civilians to serious forms of harm and a repeated pattern that categorizes the action as unethical. Under BEACON, it warrants stronger accountability.

Conclusion

Gray-zone tactics exploit the ambiguity between armed attack and peace while still generating the risk and actual harm, intention of destabilizing and harming, and sustained coercion. The cases of the Ayungin Shoal and the Belarus migration crisis demonstrate that repeated and intentional actions can become morally equivalent to an armed attack. BEACON method. It comprises bodily harm, exposure to death, aims, civilian status, ongoing patterns, and norms. It was noted in the case analysis that these cases shared a common structure, involving coercive action that exploits

ambiguity to cause concrete human harm or danger. The paper does not claim that gray-zone tactics cannot automatically be raised to the level of an armed attack; it should consider the following arguments, especially with the help of the BEACON. Therefore, existing policies and international law must be reconsidered. The point is not to lower the threshold of an armed attack, but to ensure that there must be a legal and moral evaluation of the realities of war.

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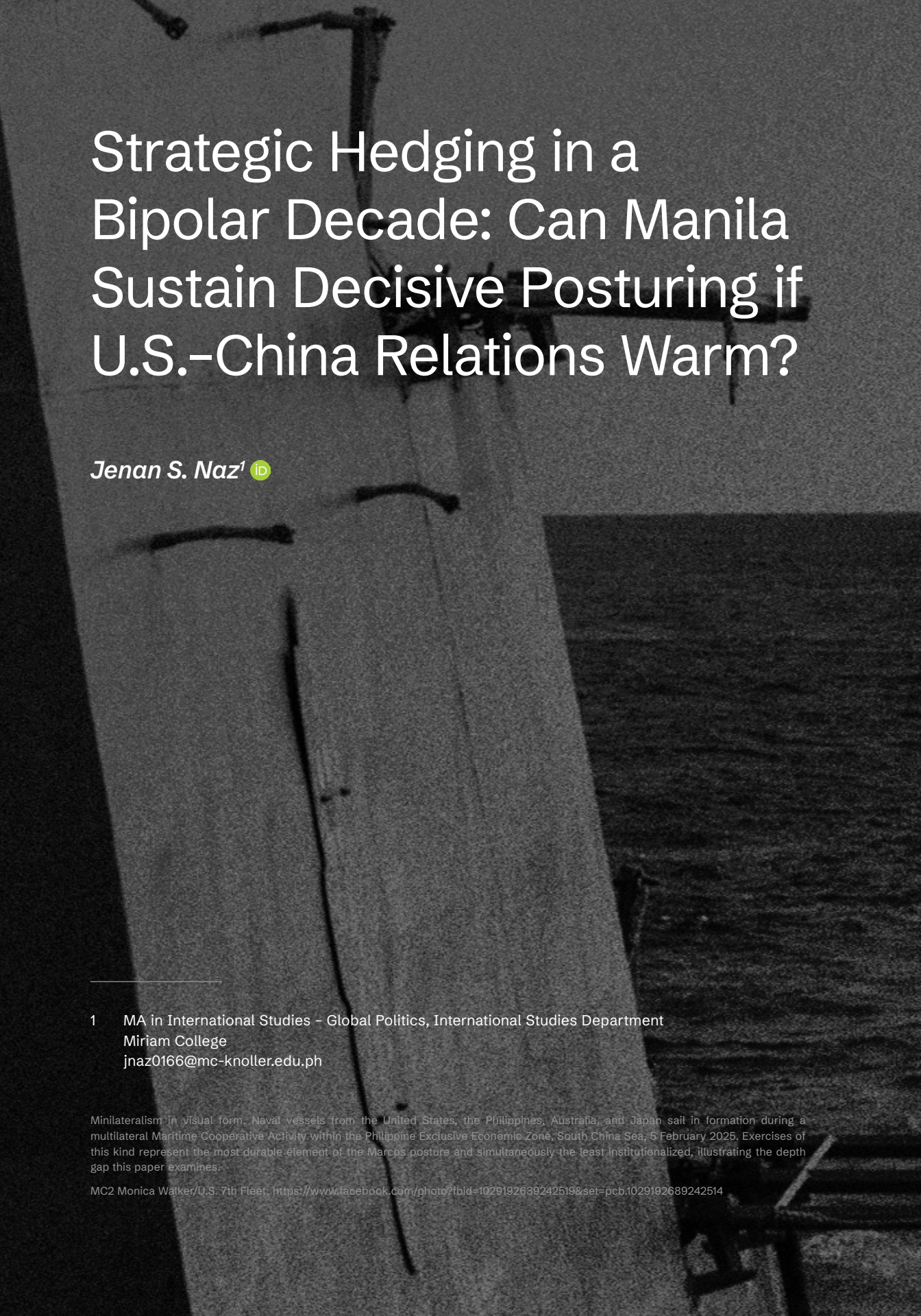
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Strategic Hedging in a Bipolar Decade: Can Manila Sustain Decisive Posturing if U.S.–China Relations Warm?

Jenan S. Naz[1]

1 MA in International Studies – Global Politics, International Studies Department
Miriam College
jnaz0166@mc-knoller.edu.ph



Minilateralism in visual form. Naval vessels from the United States, the Philippines, Australia, and Japan sail in formation during a multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activity within the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone, South China Sea, 5 February 2025. Exercises of this kind represent the most durable element of the Marcos posture and simultaneously the least institutionalized, illustrating the depth gap this paper examines.

MC2 Monica Walker/U.S. 7th Fleet, https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=1029192639242519&set=pcb.1029192689242514



Abstract

The Philippines under Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has executed what looks like, on the surface, a clean break from the hedging behavior that defined Southeast Asian statecraft for two decades. Through the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept, the expansion of Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement sites, and a thickening minilateral architecture that now ties together France, Japan, Australia, and the United States, Manila has positioned itself as the most assertive frontline state in the first island chain. This paper asks whether that posture can hold if Washington and Beijing find a new working equilibrium. Drawing on the hedging literature and tracing Philippine alignment behavior from Aquino through Marcos, the analysis argues that the current posture is decisive in rhetoric but materially thinner than its symbolism suggests. A genuine thaw in great power relations would expose three vulnerabilities at once: 1) a narrowing of ASEAN's strategic space when Beijing feels accommodated, 2) the unsettled contest over alignment within Philippine domestic politics, and 3) the gap between announced capabilities and deployed ones. Manila's most durable path forward is not to abandon decisiveness but to redefine it, anchoring deterrence in minilateral structures and indigenous capability that survive shifts in Washington's appetite.

Keywords: alliance politics, hedging, minilateralism, strategic autonomy

Introduction

Few states in Asia have shifted posture as visibly over the past four years as the Philippines. Under Ferdinand Marcos Jr., Manila has picked a side, or at least appears to have. The Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept, unveiled in 2024, sets out a doctrine of distributed maritime defense aimed at Chinese coercion in the West Philippine Sea. Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement or EDCA sites have grown from five to nine, several close enough to Taiwan to concern Beijing's planners, alongside fresh missile and uncrewed-system deployments, a further USD 144 million in EDCA infrastructure spending, a new visiting forces agreement with France, and deepening entanglement with Japan, Australia, and South Korea.

This is decisive posturing by any measure. Yet the analytical tradition that has long described Philippine foreign policy frames small-state behavior as hedging rather than alignment. As Kuik (2008) first set out and Goh (2008) later refined, "hedging" is a deliberate strategy of keeping options open and refusing binary choices when the cost of guessing wrong is severe. If the conditions that make hedging rational persist, deep economic interdependence with China and a security architecture built around the United States, then the Marcos posture is either a temporary departure from equilibrium or a real repositioning that must be held against considerable headwinds.

Those headwinds are coming into view. Talk of a possible thaw in U.S.–China relations, whether driven by transactional instincts, mutual fatigue, or the costs of continued decoupling, raises a question that Philippine strategic literature has not treated seriously: what happens to Manila's posture if Washington and Beijing find a working equilibrium? Much recent commentary treats the Marcos posture as settled fact and debates its wisdom; far less attention has gone to whether the posture is robust to a change in the very condition that made it attractive, an American willingness to confront Beijing. The objective is to specify what a thaw would mean materially for Manila, identify where the current posture is most exposed, and derive the strategic options that follow.

The question matters for three reasons. First, Philippine alignment has shifted dramatically across the last three administrations. This suggests that what looks decisive in 2026 may be more contingent than its proponents claim. Second, the architecture supporting current policy has been assembled with surprising speed and may not carry the political ballast to survive a domestic recalibration. Third, ASEAN's room tends to shrink when great powers reach an accommodation, leaving smaller states with less space for the multi-vector diplomacy that defines hedging. More broadly, if a state that has gone further than any neighbor toward open alignment cannot sustain that posture through a thaw, the limits of small-state balancing in a genuinely bipolar system are tighter than the current enthusiasm for minilateralism suggests.

Stated briefly, the argument runs as follows. The current posture is decisive in tone and consequential in signaling, but rests on a narrower material base than its symbolism implies. A genuine thaw between Washington and Beijing would expose three weaknesses at once: 1) the narrowing of ASEAN's diplomatic room, 2) the domestic contest over alignment, and 3) the gap between commitments and deployed capability. Manila's most durable path is not to give up decisiveness but to redefine it, anchoring deterrence in structures that outlast shifts in U.S. appetite and in capabilities that do not depend on permanent American attention.

Literature Review And The Gap This Study Addresses

The concept of hedging emerged in the mid-2000s to describe what Southeast Asian states appeared to be doing as China rose. Kuik (2008, 162) defined hedging as adopting mutually counteracting positions to capture the gains of engagement with a rising power while preserving the option to balance against it. He later unpacked the returns-maximizing and risk-contingency elements any hedging posture combines (Kuik 2016), and extended the framework to domestic determinants in how elites decide what to hedge against (Kuik 2024). Goh (2005; 2008) developed a complementary account in which Southeast Asian states enmesh great powers in regional institutions to avoid the trade-offs balancing and bandwagoning would force.

A second strand pushes back on the concept's breadth. Lim and Cooper (2015) argued hedging has been stretched to cover almost any mix of engagement and risk management. They redefined it more narrowly as signaling that deliberately generates ambiguity about a state's shared security interests, with genuine hedging occurring only where treaty alliances and live territorial disputes have not already pushed states toward balancing. This is directly relevant here since the Philippines combines both features. Ciorciari and Haacke (2019) argued that hedging's effectiveness depends on the quality of a state's threat assessment and the real availability of protective options, not merely ties to more than one great power. Jones and Jenne (2022) add that domestic political calculation and leader preference have proven better predictors of apparent strategic shifts than any consistent risk-management logic.

A third strand connects hedging to alliance-politics theory: Snyder (1984) identified the twin risks of entrapment and abandonment; Walt (1987) reframed alliance formation around the balance of threat rather than raw power; and Pape (2005) added soft balancing, constraining a stronger power through institutions and diplomacy without directly confronting its military preponderance. Together these suggest the Philippine choice is best understood as movement along a spectrum defined by entrapment risk and signal cost, rather than a binary between hedging and balancing.

At the regional level, ASEAN-centrality norms that let smaller states manage great-power competition collectively help explain why a narrowing of ASEAN's diplomatic space would matter for a state that has relied on regional cover (Acharya 2014). A further strand concerns hedging's economic dimension, which the Philippine case underplays relative to Malaysia, Vietnam, or Singapore: Jones and Jenne (2022, 214) note hedging increasingly means managing exposure across supply chains, not merely balancing security commitments, and Manila's almost entirely security-centric posture narrows its options relative to neighbors that kept the fuller, multi-track version of hedging.

The Philippine-specific scholarship pulls in different directions. De Castro (2015; 2020; 2025) has tracked the country's movement from legalism under Aquino through appeasement under Duterte to what he reads as soft balancing under Marcos; Arugay and Baviera (2021) and Baviera (2012) stress domestic politics in driving these swings, while Misalucha-Willoughby and Medillo (2021) examine the alliance's repeated renegotiation. What unites this work is an emphasis on explaining shifts that have already occurred.

A persisting gap remains: the literature explains why Philippine alignment has changed and debates how to classify the current posture, yet, it has not systematically asked whether that posture is robust to a warming of U.S.–China relations. This paper addresses that gap by combining the narrower, trade-off-centered definition of hedging with the entrapment-abandonment frame and applying both to a forward-looking analysis of the Marcos posture under a plausible great-power accommodation.

The Theoretical Frame: What Hedging Means When The Poles Move

For the Philippines, hedging has always had a particular geometry: economic ties with China deepening since the 1990s alongside a formal security architecture resting on the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty. This “dual track” has been described not as a weakness, but a coherent exercise in risk management (Baviera 2012, 10).

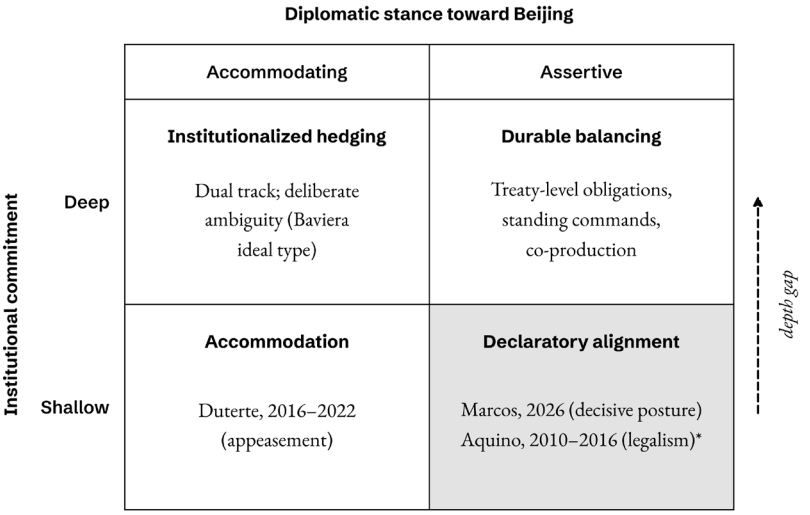
The puzzle in 2026 is that Marcos has walked away from that geometry. He has not cut economic ties with China, but the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept names Chinese coercion as the central threat, EDCA expansion has been sold as first-island-chain deterrence, and the 2016 arbitral award has been pulled back to the center of diplomacy (De Castro 2025, 221). One reading, advanced by De Castro (2025, 221), holds the threat environment has changed enough to make hedging untenable, making balancing, or soft balancing (Pape 2005, 10), the rational response. A second holds the posture remains hedged in substance even as rhetoric

hardens, since Manila keeps seeking engagement with Beijing (Thean 2026). A third, developed here, is that the posture is in transition between hedging and a thinner alignment that has not yet built the institutional ballast to count as true balancing.

The narrower definition offered by Lim and Cooper (2015, 700) sharpens the stakes: if hedging is the deliberate generation of ambiguity about shared security interests, the Marcos posture is notable precisely for removing that ambiguity through costly signals that reduce the optionality hedging is meant to preserve. If the posture is hedging in new clothes, a U.S.–China thaw poses limited risk; if it is genuine alignment, a thaw exposes Manila to having committed to one pole just as the polarity weakens. The variable that matters is institutional commitment, not rhetorical volume.

Here the alliance-politics frame is useful. Snyder (1984, 466) identified the twin dangers of entrapment and abandonment; Walt (1987, 22) adds that what drives alignment is perceived threat, shaped by proximity, capability, and intention, rather than raw power. On that reading, Manila's shift is rational: a near, capable, apparently revisionist China justifies accepting greater entrapment risk to reduce abandonment risk. The Marcos posture is, in effect, a bet about which of Snyder's two dangers is more pressing now, a bet with mixed historical precedent, since American commitment has tracked the perceived severity of the regional threat far more than any fixed treaty obligation. Weaken the assumption that U.S. commitment is durable and the calculation reverses. Figure 1 sorts these postures along the two dimensions structuring the rest of the paper.

Figure 1. Hedging, balancing, and the Marcos posture. Columns capture diplomatic stance toward Beijing; rows capture the durability of the institutional commitments underpinning that stance. The Marcos posture falls in the shaded cell. The dashed arrow marks the shift the paper argues for: closing the depth gap rather than relaxing the posture.



** Aquino sits close to the vertical midline; see the discussion in the text.*

The Marcos posture sits in the assertive column but the shallow row, the combination the rest of this paper treats as fragile: a state that talks like a balancer, but is institutionalized like a hedger carries the audience costs of the former without the structural protection of the latter. Closing that gap means converting declaratory commitments into durable arrangements, treaty-level obligations, standing commands, co-production agreements, that are costly for any successor to unwind. Until then, the posture remains reversible by decree rather than locked in by structure.

From Aquino To Marcos: A Decade of Strategic Whiplash

The swings in Philippine alignment across the last three administrations are striking in scale and speed. Comparative work notes that Philippine responses to Chinese maritime strategy have varied widely even though Chinese behavior has been broadly consistent (Arugay and Baviera 2021, 203-206). The anomaly framing the analysis is this: if structural conditions explain alignment, why does policy change so sharply with each president?

Aquino chose a legal route, filing arbitration against China in 2013; the case produced the 2016 award rejecting China's nine-dash-line claim. He paired this with an active alliance posture, including the original EDCA signed in 2014, though whether to call that balancing or a sharper form of hedging remains contested (De Castro 2015, 85). Chinese investment, tourism, and trade all grew through the Aquino years even as arbitration proceeded, exactly what the classical definition of hedging would predict.

Duterte reversed course abruptly, playing down the award and questioning the U.S. alliance within months of taking office in 2016, an appeasement strategy tied to his domestic infrastructure agenda (De Castro 2020, 95-99). The bet paid off poorly: pledged Chinese financing stalled or was redirected, and Chinese maritime militia activity continued undiminished around Scarborough and Second Thomas Shoal. Consistent with Walt (1987, 22), accommodation did little to reduce a threat driven by proximity and capability rather than Manila's own conduct.

Marcos's reversal is no less abrupt: within eighteen months he revived the award, grew EDCA from five to nine sites, and adopted a stance sharply at odds with Duterte's accommodating tone (Misalucha-Willoughby and Medillo 2021, 82), which the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept codified doctrinally by 2024. Yet Marcos has not mirrored Duterte's reversal economically; trade with China remains substantial. This selective decoupling, hard on security, undisturbed on commerce, is itself a form of hedging by another name, even as the security component reads as unambiguous alignment.

This whiplash matters for two reasons. First, it suggests Philippine alignment tracks executive preference more closely than structural conditions: Chinese maritime strategy did not fundamentally shift across the Aquino–Duterte–Marcos sequence, yet Philippine responses did (Arugay and Baviera 2021, 203-206). Second, it implies the institutional ballast that would normally steady alignment has not run deep enough to constrain executive discretion, since the original EDCA lay dormant under Duterte before Marcos revived it, while the Visiting Forces Agreement has periodically faced threats of abrogation. This is the path-dependence problem in reverse: where Lim and Cooper (2015, 700) expect treaty ties and territorial disputes to lock states into balancing, the Philippine alliance has been loosely enough institutionalized that successive presidents could loosen or tighten it almost at will. The Duterte camp, though weakened by impeachment proceedings against Vice President Sara Duterte, retains a substantial base (Thompson 2024), and the 2028 elections are likely to bring some recalibration whoever wins.

The Architecture of Decisive Posturing

To judge whether the current posture can hold under stress, it helps to break it into parts: doctrine, basing, minilateralism, defense industry, and public diplomacy. Each responds differently to political and structural change, and this unevenness is the analytical key to the rest of the paper.

Doctrine, through the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept, is the most explicit statement of strategic intent, committing the Armed Forces to distributed maritime defense suited to denying a larger adversary access to Philippine waters (Chang 2025). It is cheap to declare and expensive to implement: the Re-Horizon 3 roadmap envisions a shift toward territorial defense, but Philippine procurement has historically been slow, leaving the doctrine closer to intent than completed transformation.

Basing has moved faster. Growing EDCA from five to nine sites, with several near Taiwan, has been paired with U.S. missile and uncrewed-system deployments and USD 144 million in infrastructure Indo-Pacific Defense Forum 2026). The footprint is more permanent physically than it is legally: EDCA can be renegotiated by a future administration, and local reception at the newest sites has been mixed, giving future administrations more leverage than national announcements suggest.

Minilateralism is the most novel and durable element. The Squad arrangement with the United States, Japan, and Australia, the France visiting forces agreement, and growing trilateral exercises spread security ties beyond exclusive reliance on Washington (Sato 2025), and because no single bilateral relationship anchors it, Japanese, Australian, French, and Korean engagement may persist even if U.S. attention drifts. In Pape's

(2005, 10) terms, a dense minilateral web is a form of soft balancing that constrains Chinese conduct without any one partner shouldering the entire burden.

Defense-industrial development is the slowest element. The Self-Reliant Defense Posture program remains modest, and though recent tie-ups with Korean, Japanese, and Indian firms show intent, the horizon for meaningful output is measured in decades; the Maharlika Investment Fund's governance and optics remain contested (Rabena 2024). South Korea took roughly three decades to move from importing platforms to exporting fighter aircraft; nothing suggests the Philippines will move faster, and fiscal competition from disaster response will keep crowding out investment.

Public diplomacy under Marcos has been notably assertive. The Coast Guard's transparency initiative, publicizing Chinese grey-zone activity through video and social media, has reshaped the information environment around South China Sea incidents (Tarriela 2024). It is institutionally light, a successor could deprioritize it within weeks, though the documentary record it has generated outlasts any single administration's willingness to publicize it.

The overall picture is a posture broad in scope but uneven in depth. Its most visible parts, doctrine and rhetoric, are the most easily reversed; its most durable parts, minilateral partnerships and indigenous industry, are the least mature; basing sits in between. Table 1 summarizes this unevenness.

Table 1. The five elements of decisive posturing, ranked by institutional depth and by ease of reversal. Doctrine and public diplomacy are high in visibility but low in depth; minilateralism and indigenous capability are high in potential durability but low in maturity; basing occupies the middle of both scales.

Element	Function in the posture	Institutional depth	Ease of reversal
Doctrine (CADC)	Codifies strategic intent; names the threat and the operating concept	Low	High
Public diplomacy	Shapes the information environment around maritime incidents	Low	High
Basing (EDCA)	Provides physical access and forward infrastructure	Medium	Medium
Minilateralism	Spreads security ties across several partners; soft balancing	Medium (rising)	Low
Indigenous capability	Builds deterrent capacity independent of U.S. presence	Low (immature)	Low

This unevenness is the structural reason to expect a thaw to produce not immediate collapse but gradual erosion. Basing and minilateral exercises will continue, but the rhetorical edge may soften and doctrinal commitments may be quietly diluted. In other words, the components most exposed to a thaw are precisely those that signal resolve at the cost of entrapment risk, while the components that reduce abandonment risk over the long run are the least developed (Snyder 1984, 466).

The Détente Scenario: What Would U.S.-China Warming Actually Look Like?

Forecasting U.S.–China relations is hazardous, so the more useful move is to specify what warming would mean materially for the Philippines. Several variants deserve attention: a comprehensive trade deal that lowers confrontational rhetoric without changing the security competition (Glaser and Scobell 2025); a Taiwan *modus vivendi* that would weaken the rationale for the thickened forward posture justifying Manila's acceptance of entrapment risk; a "G2 lite" arrangement in which Washington and Beijing manage rivalry through high-level dialogue without resolving underlying issues, the most likely variant, which tends to narrow the diplomatic space available to smaller states; and a partial, reversible thaw confined to specific irritants that leaves the security competition essentially untouched, the most historically common pattern since 2018, under which the Philippines may face limited direct pressure to alter its posture.

For ASEAN, warming between Washington and Beijing cuts both ways: lower tension reduces the chance of catastrophic escalation, but it can also shrink the leverage smaller states gain from being courted by both sides and strain the consensus-based centrality on which ASEAN's collective influence rests (Acharya 2014, 58). Any improvement in U.S.–China relations could narrow ASEAN's room if Beijing concludes accommodation with Washington buys it greater latitude in contested waters (Thean 2026).

The Philippine position under such a scenario is delicate for three reasons: first, Manila's deterrence credibility erodes faster than its capability if U.S. willingness to confront Chinese coercion diminishes; second, the rhetorical assertiveness Marcos has built in creates audience costs that make softening politically expensive and holding firm without U.S. backing operationally dangerous; and third, the Code of Conduct negotiations Marcos prioritized during the 2026 ASEAN chairmanship become harder if China feels less constrained (Rachmann 2026). Regional comparators sharpen the point: Vietnam's far more diversified hedge and Indonesia's ASEAN-centered diplomacy give them more room to absorb a thaw than the Philippines, which has tied its credibility more tightly to one relationship than either neighbor.

Sequencing matters too: the doctrine, basing, and minilateral architecture were all built during a period of sharpening rivalry, so a thaw before these institutions consolidate could leave Manila with the costs of visible alignment without mature deterrent capability. Whether political will at home stays steady through that window is the question the next section takes up.

Domestic Constraints and Strategic Options

The political economy of hedging

Philippine foreign policy is especially exposed to domestic turbulence. Three dynamics constrain the sustainability of the current posture. The first is the political weakening of the Marcos administration: by late 2025 it was navigating a major corruption scandal tied to flood-control projects and falling approval ratings (Dressel and Bonoan 2025), pressures that shrink the bandwidth available for sustained posturing. The second is the coalitional politics of the Marcos–Duterte split: the breakdown of the 2022 coalition has produced impeachment proceedings against Sara Duterte and a wider realignment, and a return to power by figures from that camp would likely bring substantial recalibration (Thompson 2024, 801-803). The third is the structure of business-elite preferences: sectors with significant Chinese exposure have a material interest in stable relations that the smaller defense firms benefiting from the current alignment do not offset.

China has remained among the Philippines' largest trading partners for over a decade, and bilateral trade has grown even through the period of sharpened security rhetoric, consistent with the selective-decoupling reading offered earlier; exposed business associations have voiced concern that security-driven friction could invite economic retaliation. Public opinion is more complex than is sometimes assumed. Showing low favorability toward China alongside skepticism about U.S. military presence, may quickly tip the balance. The constitutional dimension matters too, since debates about foreign-ownership restrictions carry significant implications for the political economy of alignment (La Vina and Aceron 2023), and disinformation targeting both pro- and anti-alignment narratives makes public opinion more manipulable in the short run than survey trends suggest. Taken together, this is a constraint structure more permissive of recalibration than the current rhetoric suggests, since the institutional locks that would make decisive posturing self-sustaining are still being built.

Four options under a thaw

The Philippines faces four broad options. The first is to double down, sustaining current rhetoric regardless of shifting dynamics, which carries audience-cost benefits

but risks asserting a posture the alliance is not fully prepared to back. The second is pragmatic recalibration, roughly the path Duterte pursued; the record suggests this does not deliver the benefits its proponents promise, since China has read Philippine accommodation as weakness (De Castro 2020, 95-99), and joint-development arrangements risk validating Chinese claims (Nguyen 2026).

The third is to lean harder into minilateralism, treating the U.S.–Philippine relationship as one element of a broader Asian security architecture. Japan, Australia, South Korea, France, and the United Kingdom all have material interests in Philippine maritime security, and the France visiting forces agreement and growing trilateral exercises suggest this architecture is moving from aspiration to substance (Sato 2025). For Pape (2005, 10) , distributed soft balancing reduces dependence on any single relationship; it is also the cheapest option to sustain politically, since it rarely triggers the nationalist sensitivities a large American troop presence can provoke. The fourth is to invest aggressively in indigenous capability, prioritizing inexpensive asymmetric capabilities over costly conventional platforms the Philippines cannot afford in quantity; the constraints are fiscal and political, but of the four options this yields the most durable independence.

Manila is unlikely to pursue any of these in pure form. The most probable outcome blends minilateralism, indigenous capability, and selective recalibration. Lean toward recalibration and the posture built under Marcos erodes rapidly; lean toward minilateralism and capability and the architecture may consolidate even under softer rhetoric, which sits better with the country's long-term interests. Decisive posturing as currently practiced is performative as much as structural, and sustaining it requires either continued executive attention or the maturation of institutions that make it self-perpetuating. The first is not guaranteed; the second is not yet complete.

Conclusion

The question this paper has engaged is whether the Philippines can sustain decisive posturing if U.S.–China relations warm. The answer is conditional: sustaining the rhetoric is unlikely, but sustaining the substance is possible with deliberate investment in the institutional and material foundations of strategic autonomy.

Three observations bear emphasis. First, the current posture is decisive in tone but uneven in depth: doctrinal and rhetorical components are visible and reversible, minilateral and industrial ones are durable but immature, and basing sits in between. Second, the historical pattern of Philippine alignment suggests executive discretion drives posture far more than structural conditions do, making the post-2028 posture highly uncertain, regardless of what unfolds between Washington and Beijing. Third, the most defensible path is not to abandon decisiveness but to redefine it: decisiveness

dependent on sustained U.S. attention is fragile, while decisiveness anchored in minilateral partnerships, indigenous capability, and institutional permanence that survives executive turnover is durable.

A fourth observation follows. The choice Manila faces is between two theories of what makes decisiveness credible: one treats it as a function of rhetorical consistency, cheap to assert and abandon; the other as a function of sunk institutional investment, harder to build but far harder for any successor to simply talk away. The findings here favor the second theory, since rhetoric alone has already proven, across three administrations, the most reversible part of Philippine grand strategy.

These findings speak to a wider debate. The narrower, trade-off-centered reading of hedging advanced by Lim and Cooper (2015, 700) implies a state combining a treaty alliance with a live territorial dispute will tend toward balancing rather than genuine hedging, and the Philippine case broadly bears this out, but also qualifies it: where alliance ties are loosely institutionalized, as in Manila, the path dependence supposed to lock a state into balancing is weak, and executive preference can override it. The depth of institutionalization, not merely the presence of an alliance or a dispute, determines whether a balancing posture endures.

The study has limits. It is a single-case, qualitative analysis built on secondary sources and public reporting, several of which describe very recent and still-developing events and should be read as provisional. The détente scenarios are heuristic rather than predictive, and the paper treats a thaw as an exogenous shock rather than modelling how it would come about. A comparative study alongside Vietnam and Indonesia, a closer analysis of the defense-industrial base, and a study tracking ASEAN's collective behavior through any actual U.S.–China warming are reasonable targets for future work.

The bipolar decade this discussion addresses will not, in all likelihood, be cleanly bipolar. For a state of the Philippines' size, the wiser approach is to build a posture that performs across plausible scenarios. If decisive posturing can be made cycle-resilient, the answer to the central question is yes. If it cannot, the Philippines will find itself, sometime in the late 2020s or early 2030s, recalibrating downward in ways that look familiar from the Duterte period.

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Tit for tat in the Grey-zone? The Maritime Domain, Multilateral Exercises and Chinese Responses in the South China Sea

Georgi Engelbrecht[1]

1 Senior Analyst, International Crisis Group
gengelbrecht@crisisgroup.org

the Philippine Navy guided-missile frigate BRP Antonio Luna (FFG15) leading a division tactics formation during a bilateral Maritime Cooperative Activity (MCA) between the Armed Forces of the Philippines and U.S. Pacific Command in the West Philippine Sea near Bajo de Masinloc (Scarborough Shoal) on June 27-28, 2026.

Armed Forces of the Philippines Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=1499949598839908&set=pcb.1499950068839861



Abstract

This paper evaluates the thinking that allied multilateral military exercises in the South China Sea serve as an effective mechanism to complicate or deter Chinese revisions to the regional status quo in general and Beijing's maritime assertion in the West Philippine Sea in particular. Utilising an empirical dataset from 2022 to mid-2026, this study traces the behavioral correlation between expanded allied maneuvers such as various Balikatan iterations and other joint drills, and Chinese maritime activities. The paper examines whether visible displays of allied resolve restrain Beijing's ambitions or continue to alter its operational calculus. Ultimately, this study assesses the frequencies of "grey-zone" activities, rammings, and maritime militia deployments relative to allied operational timelines, offering a critical assessment of how multilateral power projection relates to Beijing's hybrid maritime activities.

Keywords: Maritime disputes; West Philippine Sea; deterrence: grey-zone activities

Introduction

> “I am more afraid of our own blunders than of the enemy's devices.”
>
> - Thucydides

> "Many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others."
>
> - Robert Jervis

The South China Sea has emerged as one of the most volatile and consequential geopolitical flashpoints of the 21st century (Taylor 2018). Encompassing a vital maritime highway bordered by China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei, this body of water is a convergence point where the foreign policies of small states, global economic interests and superpower ambitions collide. As competing territorial claims intersect with the shifting balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and great power competition, the question remains whether tensions will remain controlled and under the threshold of armed conflict or will further escalate.

The South China Sea is a semi-enclosed sea resembling other maritime spaces such as the Black Sea, the East China Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea or the Baltic Sea (Austin 2018). It occupies one third of China’s mainland coastline, is a vital part of the maritime life of Vietnam, and has important resources for the Philippines (International Crisis Group 2021 b). Hanoi and Beijing further benefit from their coastal position and can project force into the maritime domain that is also sustained by their land forces and bases, and not only maritime supply lines (Wu 2018). This alone makes its strategic geography receptive to various defense maneuvers as well as a space to project power.

At the core of the sea's global significance is its role as an indispensable artery for international trade as the South China Sea is a major source of global economic trade and an artery of international commerce; at least ten billion oil barrels and other critical energy supplies for major Asian economies traverse the area per day (International Crisis Group 2021 a). The economic security of the global marketplace relies heavily on the uninterrupted freedom of navigation through its vital chokepoints, such as the Strait of Malacca. This has once again gained resonance in the last months with the impact of the Middle East crisis (Kuok 2026). Any disruption to these shipping lanes would trigger catastrophic ripple effects across global supply chains, transforming local territorial disputes into an immediate crisis for the global economy. Out of all geopolitical flashpoints, it is the South China Sea that might feature the highest risk of an armed clash between the United States and

China in the short term.[2] That being said, a confrontation at sea is also considered being less likely in the long term than the other major dynamic in the region across the Bashi Channel around Taiwan.

According to some policymakers, academics and journalists, these dynamics in the South China Sea have allegedly triggered an unprecedented wave of militarization, shifting the region's security dynamics (Regilme 2023). Competing claimants, most notably China through its "nine-dash line" doctrine, have aggressively sought to establish their dominance at sea, pushing the boundaries of the use of force. These activities range from coercive behaviour at sea to constructing expansive artificial islands to fortifying them with advanced radar systems, runways, and anti-ship missile batteries. This rapid build-up has drawn sharp resistance from neighboring Southeast Asian nations (and sometimes resulted in smaller-scale activity) and prompted a degree of a counterresponse from global powers like the United States, which, at least until recently, routinely conducted Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to challenge excessive claims. Noteworthy, while the area is always listed as one of the top global flashpoints, it has been still relatively calm over the last years with no major outbreak of hostilities.

The Philippines remains one of the most affected claimants in the dispute. Geography and history gave Manila a tough hand to deal with, even though its strategic location is also of major strategic advantage. The archipelago is also an area suited for power projection by the United States and has been named as "the largest unsinkable aircraft carrier" in the Pacific (International Crisis Group 2021 b). During the Korean and Vietnam Wars, it served as a key staging ground for American troops. Manila's claims in the South China Sea rest on international law, specifically the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The Philippines asserts exclusive rights to exploit marine resources within its 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), designated as the West Philippine Sea. To enforce this physical footprint, Manila currently occupies nine features in the Spratly Islands, most notably Thitu (Pag-asa) Island, where it maintains military outposts and civilian infrastructure. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague validated Manila's stance by invalidating Beijing's broad historical claims.

Despite the South China Sea dispute's focus area around the Paracels in the first years of the 2010s, the locus shifted towards the Philippines in the latter half of the decade and continues to occupy policymakers in Manila since. More worryingly, however, tensions in the South China Sea have been rising for months. The first half of 2024

2 Online interview, diplomat, 29 July 2020; Russian Asia expert, 18 August 2020.

was dominated by several maritime incidents, and after a relative calm in 2025, the current year has been marked by tensions once again (Grossman 2026).

A Security Dilemma

With its rapid military modernization over the past four decades, China has become the dominant power in the South China Sea; China's navy has already surpassed the U.S. in ship numbers (Sharpe 2026). To Beijing, U.S. military activity in the South China Sea is evidence of an effort to encircle and/or block it. China has complained of an increase in surveillance flights near its coast and a so-called extraterritorial presence of non-Asian powers. The China-U.S. rivalry and the unsettling of the region's security order complicate policy for ASEAN claimants and member states.

The strategic friction in the South China Sea has increasingly manifested itself through discourse, securitization and flashpoints. High-intensity military exercises and tit-for-tat maneuvers further appear to complicate the landscape which still remains below the threshold of armed conflict. International relations literature offers competing theoretical lenses to explain the underlying logic of this dynamic. Realist scholars view the friction through the framework of a security dilemma, arguing that China's regional assertiveness and the subsequent counterbalancing by the United States and its allies are structural inevitabilities driven by a struggle for hegemony – an indicator of the anarchic nature of the international system - that ultimately increases the risk of conflict. Liberal institutionalists and legal scholars focus on the breakdown of normative frameworks, pointing out that the rejection of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling undermined UNCLOS. Literature broadly agrees that without binding crisis-management mechanisms, the dominant operational logic will remain driven by deterrence rather than diplomacy and may further escalate.

A key element of this operational logic is the rapid modernization and deployment of naval power. The region has become a dense theater for grey-zone warfare and conventional naval buildup, including sophisticated blue-water navies, expansive maritime militias, and coast guard fleets (Sacks 2022). The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), now the world's largest navy by ship count, uses its numerical advantage alongside advanced anti-ship capabilities to restrict access within the first island chain (Elleman 2025). In response, the United States Navy and its regional partners have intensified their presence and deployed carrier strike groups and reinforcing sub-surface capabilities to maintain standard operational access, turning the South China Sea into one of the world's most heavily armed maritime environments. Despite a relative U.S.-China détente throughout 2025 and 2026, Washington remains committed to its alliance partner the Philippines.

To understand China's perspective on the military geography of the South China Sea, it is also crucial to examine its strategic landscape through a "single defining contingency"—Taiwan at the northern edge, which serves as the primary operational mission for its armed forces—and "two key threats": a mid-level challenge from forward-deployed U.S. forces across East Asia, and the broader regional security dynamics spanning the South China Sea, East China Sea, and Yellow Sea (Austin 2018). In contrast, China sees the challenge coming from sovereignty and maritime disputes with some of its ASEAN neighbors as a lesser concern, which has been characterized by very low levels of military activity for decades. As an observer shared, for China "security beats economics, and even the environment. And the South China Sea is a gateway."[3] The South China Sea, East China Sea, and Yellow Sea border three U.S. treaty allies: Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. Not surprisingly, some in Tokyo and Washington view the entire area as "one theatre" (Kawakami 2025).

Conversely, for the Philippines, the South China Sea is an issue of first concern. The contested waters, which Manila designates as the West Philippine Sea, lie directly within its EEZ, meaning the friction does not take place in a distant theater, but directly on the nation's maritime doorstep. There are differences in terms of economic, political and societal impact variables that affect Manila, but the sea's relevance is without doubt. Thus, while Beijing views the sea through the macro-lens of global superpower competition, Manila approaches it as an immediate, existential struggle for territorial integrity and resource security. It is also a key security interest although in recent years, the strategic and security establishment recognized the importance of the Philippines' east and north.

The intensity of the dispute between the Philippines and China is further defined by a deep asymmetry in how the actors perceive the geographic and strategic stakes. For China, the South China Sea represents arguably a second theatre—a vital buffer zone, a shield for its nuclear submarine bastion, and a steppingstone for long-range power projection toward the wider Pacific, especially Taiwan.[4] The tit-for-tat dynamic is seen strongly across the Taiwan Strait. For instance, in August 2022 and April 2023, in response to high-level exchanges between Taiwanese and U.S. officials, Beijing conducted large military exercises around Taiwan, simulating the initial stages of an invasion. (International Crisis Group, 2025). Many analysts think that the "exercise gap" will be increasingly bridged by simulating relevant scenarios for the PLA. And

3 Interview, Filipino-Chinese analyst, 5 September 2020.

4 For some observers, the likelihood of such a scenario is rather in the 2030s than 2020s. Author's interviews, December 2025-January 2026.

yet, Beijing dominates the strategic geography of its southern coastline and can shape the pressure it wants to exert in several areas.

The Different Shades of the Grey Zone

Rather than escalating into traditional, open warfare, maritime conflicts in the South China Sea exist along a highly volatile grey-zone continuum, with simmering tensions flaring up along particular features and the maritime areas surrounding them. This operational spectrum spans from diplomatic protests and cartographic signaling (also visible in the actions of other claimants and about other issues such as the Sabah factor involving Malaysia and the Philippines) to physical, non-lethal coercion at sea (McLaughlin 2023). For instance, by utilizing the China Coast Guard (CCG) and a vast maritime militia instead of the regular navy, Beijing deliberately operates just below the threshold of armed conflict. This makes an effective response fairly difficult. A key operational challenge, for instance, was Manila's struggle to counter Beijing's takeover of the Scarborough Shoal in 2012 (Erickson 2022). China's use of the coast guard, which remains under the control of the Central Military Commission, also makes it difficult to find an adequate tactical response.

Some commentators believe that there is no proper response to the grey-zone challenge.[5] Freedom of Navigation Operations in the disputed waters under U.S. President Barack Obama were an effort to assert international law and freedom of navigation, but it did not deter China from constructing three artificial islands. China's diverse strategy toolkit–(para) military, legal, political—and tactics towards the South China Sea cannot be matched by unilateral Philippine countermoves either. This logically raises the question to what extent deterrence is possible at sea.

Yet, at least in the Philippine context, there have been some examples of relative success. In 2016, a display of American capabilities checked Beijing's ambitions at Scarborough Shoal, a disputed feature well within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone. As Chinese survey ships signaled preparations to dredge and pave the reef into another militarized outpost, Washington appeared to have drawn a red line. The Obama administration paired diplomatic warnings with a deliberate show of force and dispatched attack jets. In the end, Beijing shunned reclamation. On another occasion, former U.S. president Biden signaled to Chinese president Xi Jinping that it would stand by the Philippines in case of an effort to push a small Philippine Marine garrison out of the BRP Sierra Madre (Strangio 2024). Still, Chinese coercion short of combat operations continued without a halt.

5 Interview with U.S. academic, 12 February 2025.

Overall, China has used a variety of tactics in the Philippine EEZ at various points at sea, whether in the Spratlys, the vicinity of Scarborough Shoal, or in waters east of Luzon. This continuum relies at present mostly on aggressive swarming, high-pressure water cannons and dangerous blocking maneuvers designed to alter the status quo on the water without triggering explicit legal or military tripwires. "The goal is always to intimidate," said an expert.[6] This has led to a status in which conventional deterrence holds, but the grey-zone continues to exert pressure on the Philippines. Manila's response has been predominantly in the information space and short of substantial responses, given the lack of capabilities that could match Beijing.

Maritime Exercises through Time

Modern military exercises combine strategic messaging to real and potential adversaries (and sometimes allies) with operational readiness to maintain regional stability. Joint drills also build interoperability by aligning tactics, communication protocols, and equipment across allied forces, ensuring they can fight together effectively. Beyond training and the build-up of "warfighting potential" (Norberg 2023), these displays serve as signaling, demonstrating military capability and political resolve. By publicly showing high combat readiness, allied nations attempt to create a powerful deterrent against potential aggression, raising the cost of conflict while simultaneously reassuring partners of their security commitments and stability (Clem 2018). A case in point for the topic's importance is a very recent example: President Donald Trump's abrupt order to the Pentagon to scale back joint U.S.-South Korea exercises illustrated how quickly these objectives can be upended. Citing costs, his relationship with Kim Jong Un, and Seoul's refusal to join U.S. operations against Iran, the decision directly compromises alliance readiness and risks undercutting the strong deterrence required against an increasingly capable North Korea.

Historically, Philippine military engagements operated along two primary axes: bilateral drills with its treaty ally under the banner of *Balikatan*—or "shoulder-to-shoulder"—and regional exercises alongside its fellow ASEAN neighbors. A former defense official from a Western government said:

> There is a strong history of disaster stuff and militaries in the region. A lot of the cooperative activities (and exercises) are about disaster relief, on paper anyway, to avoid upsetting the other actors in the region. I was part of early ARF discussions on this stuff in 2005. People wanted to do other things

6 Interview, retired US naval officer, 10 September 2020.

> between militaries, but disaster relief was the only thing that everyone could agree on! And it included dual-purpose equipment to the military sometimes.[7]

During the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte, when Manila tried to tilt towards Beijing and downplayed the alliance, military naval exercises were put on hold (International Crisis Group 2021 b). Foreign Secretary Locsin implied that such a measure would be a combination of deterrence and de-escalation to set the ground for a Sino-Philippine rapprochement. This mirrors a school of thought that considers some exercises as unnecessary and too provocative (Clem 2018). Military exercises of ASEAN members, such as the Philippines, with outside actors were deemed provocative by China; Beijing tried to include this thinking in various discussions on the draft of a code of conduct for the South China Sea. According to a senior officer, this "interference in the Code of Conduct provisions (...) is also an infringement of our sovereignty."[8] The Philippines already knew back then that the alliance with the U.S. and the undeniable gains it provides also depend on the decision to operate it.

Perhaps not surprisingly, in the last year of Duterte, Manila returned to its traditional alliance posture. In his closing months, Duterte walked back his earlier hostility toward Washington—abandoning the termination of the Visiting Forces Agreement and re-engaging in major bilateral security frameworks—after his "independent foreign policy" failed to yield expected Chinese economic concessions or temper Beijing's grey-zone activities in the South China Sea. The Marcos Jr. administration subsequently repositioned the alliance with the U.S. and the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty as the core of the national defense architecture.

Central to this foreign policy restoration has been the expansion of multilateral security cooperation and military exercises. Under Marcos Jr., the flagship annual Balikatan drills with the United States evolved into multi-domain exercises featuring thousands of troops, high-tier firepower integration, and live-sink exercises, while expanding to include observers and combat units from regional allies such as Japan and Australia.[9] Concurrently, Manila operationalized the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) by opening new strategic sites facing Taiwan and the South China Sea.[10]

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7 Interview, diplomat, 13 September 2020.

8 Interview with a military officer, Manila, 16 October 2020.

9 That being said, an earlier Balikatan exercise in 2012 also featured Palawan as a key location.

10 One purpose of EDCA would be to pre-position American equipment, rotational troops, and supplies in facilities on Philippine bases. The purpose of using those would depend on an agreement by both allies and could be used for a natural disaster, an event in the South China Sea, or Taiwan.

By embedding Philippine defense forces into a network of multilateral maritime patrols and collaborative defense exercises with Washington and Tokyo, Marcos Jr. effectively abandoned his predecessor's conciliatory hedging strategy in favor of collective deterrence, emphasizing Manila's historic role as a crucial node in the Indo-Pacific's rules-based security order. Relatedly, former U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines Mary-Kay Clarkson described military exercises as "signs of commitment" with an implicit deterrent effect.[11] This leveraging of links and relationships has been considered a useful strategy given the peculiar situation of the Philippines.[12] Leveraging strategies ties with partners and practical expressions of these ties have resulted in a series of drills across various points of the Philippine EEZ and beyond.

The role of international allies has also reshaped the strategic calculus, shifting the focus toward deterrence and capacity building. For the Philippines' primary ally, the United States, alongside regional partners like Japan and Australia, the strategic aim is to reinforce Manila's maritime resilience while carefully managing operations to avoid directly provoking hostilities. This has led to a major wave of support, for example, providing the Philippine Coast Guard with advanced patrol vessels, radar infrastructure and joint training to better withstand frontline pressures. There has also been naval procurement of note: in recent years, the country's military acquisitions have focused on its navy, air force and coastal defense capabilities to better deal with threats coming from the South China Sea. As a result, the alliance framework seeks to raise the political and strategic costs of coercion for Beijing. This coordinated backing ensures that Manila does not have to face Beijing on its own, anchoring the grey zone struggle in a sturdier balance of power.

On a technical level, Philippine contingents in multilateral drills also do well. Korean-built FA-50 light fighters now routinely fly joint combat drills with Western allies, while guided-missile frigates like the BRP Antonio Luna and BRP Miguel Malvar have clinched third-place finishes in RIMPAC's live-fire competitions (Custodio 2026).

Allied exercises are also scenario-based. They integrate unmanned systems, electronic warfare, and joint command structures directly inside contested exclusive economic zones to prepare for real-world contingencies. Many consider this a mutually

11 Ray Powell and Jim Carouso, hosts, "Why Should We Care About the U.S.-Philippine Alliance? with Amb. MaryKay Carlson," 20 May 2026, in Why Should We Care About the Indo-Pacific?, podcast, audio, 51:00, https://podcasts.apple.com/no/podcast/why-should-we-care-about-the-u-s-philippine-alliance/id1739675546?i=1000768805428.

12 Interview, diplomat, Manila, 19 July 2024.

beneficial arrangement for the Philippines, but others show that other states de facto "use" the country.[13]

China has also dramatically scaled up its military maneuvers, conducting over a hundred annual exercises within the theater, focusing intensely on sensitive choke points and contested flashpoints like Scarborough Shoal. Most of its operations, however, seem to focus on the area around the Taiwan Strait, once again mirroring its inherent strategic calculus. Most of these drills attempt to continuously exert pressure on Taiwan and, in some cases, react to statements or actions that are perceived to be provocative (Saunders et al. 2019). But since the Trump 2.0 administration, drills appear to test Washington's reactions and affirm Beijing's position that China and the U.S. are in a détente and that America would not react too forcefully.[14] In other words, the objective is to continue testing the waters. To a lesser degree, this also appears to be the dynamic in the South China Sea, even if China chooses where and what to do based on its escalation dominance around the Spratlys and Paracels.[15]China's strategic calculus remains deeply shaped by its enduring apprehension of US-led containment and encirclement but also, for now, a détente with Washington during Trump 2.0. The United States appear to speak out less on maritime issues involving Beijing, even if it involves the Philippines (Prétat 2026).

Despite signs of coalition-building in the Indo-Pacific and a stronger military exercise footprint, Beijing continues to work on a strategically favorable environment in the South China Sea. Beijing has resumed construction in the area of the Paracel Islands and appears to have built structures on Antelope Reef and Yangon Island. Apart from projecting power towards the coast of Vietnam and asserting its perceived rights, such construction is also likely to play a role in the medium-term should there be a Taiwan contingency (RFI 2026). It also continues to communicate to Manila in various ways that the United States is unreliable.

13 Interview, former military officer, 20 March 2026.

14 Interview, source from Taiwan, 20 August 2026.

15 China's recent island-building activity at Antelope Reef marks its most significant land reclamation project in the South China Sea since 2017. Located in the Paracel Islands, the formerly submerged feature has been rapidly reshaped through extensive dredging into a massive artificial island spanning roughly 1,500 acres. Satellite imagery reveals deep-water port infrastructure, a long-range wharf, helicopter pads, and a flattened perimeter designed to accommodate a military-grade airfield. Beijing frames the development as civilian infrastructure, regional security analysts view the scale of the outpost as a strategic move to fortify China's power projection, surveillance reach, and sea-denial capabilities across the northern South China Sea.

Escalation Cycles or Shadow Boxing?

Exercises increasingly mimic immediate battle conditions and explicitly test adversary thresholds. Patterns of this dynamic usually occur when the U.S. and the Philippines integrate advanced long-range missile systems during joint drills, simulating the denial of access to strategic straits and parts of the key terrain. Beijing immediately countered by launching large-scale combat readiness patrols and live-fire naval exercises that effectively encircled the same features. This dynamic peaked in mid-2026 when tensions between Chinese and Philippine forces near Second Thomas Shoal were followed within days by multi-domain, five-day joint drills featuring U.S., Japanese, and Philippine warships, along with surveillance aircraft and fighter jets. The transition from standard navigation drills to integrated, reactive war-gaming has erased the buffer between routine training and active deterrence.

Most of the literature on exercises, perceptions, and escalation dynamics is drawn from the Eastern European theatre, particularly in the context of tensions between Russia and the European Union, and not in Asia's maritime zones. Many analyses and assessments have also focused on dynamics in the Taiwan strait and the scope of Beijing's maritime exercises.

At first glance, one might think that while these encounters also take place in the grey-zone below the threshold of conventional warfare, there is a risk that minor tactical friction may spiral into high-stakes geopolitical standoffs. But empirically, the amount and location of military drills do not automatically risk the level of potential conflict. But neither are they effective deterrent strategies per se. In the words of someone close to operational planning, "exercises fulfill their purpose; they are good training for us and our partners, and even our branches benefit from working together. But how can this work as a deterrent against China? Beijing just does what it does."[16] In the end, as Clem puts it, "the exercise is the message" (Clem 2018).

Going deeper into drill dynamics, it is significant that between 2022 and 2026, maritime military activity across the West Philippine Sea underwent a transformation shaped by expanding operational complexity and a variation of maneuvers amid a complicated regional posture. Bilateral engagements between the Philippines and the United States, such as early iterations of the Balikatan exercises and initial joint maritime patrols, expanded into broad multinational frameworks. Of note is the Balikatan 2025, during which China allegedly sent coast guard troops to Sandy Cay to install its flag. A commentator considered this as a form of "retaliation" against the exercises (Peng 2025).

16 Interview, retired naval officer, 13 August 2026.

The author's dataset definitely identifies an increasing number of exercises, yet it is not equal to a causal loop of escalation. Instead, it appears that Philippine and Chinese engagements are pursued in parallel with occasional linkages that may prompt a shift in tactical behaviour. More broadly, while there is a general acknowledgment of increased number of military exercises in the region, conflict incidents and accidental encounters do not appear to be driven by exercise dynamics (Erästö, Su, and Wan 2024).

From Manila's point of view, over the last five years, these operations brought together defense forces from Australia, Japan, Canada, France, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand to conduct combined exercises within the Philippine EEZ. Parallel to this growing coalition, training drills evolved from basic surface security maneuvers to high-intensity warfare, incorporating live-fire ship-sinking events, advanced anti-submarine warfare, and sophisticated air-defense networks integrated with long-range Typhon and Tomahawk missile tracking systems. By 2026, large-scale exercises like Balikatan have effectively shifted from cooperative training into multinational missions for regional defense and an endorsement of forward naval presence of Philippine allies - which is also an element of deterrence according to some authors (Gerson and Whiteneck 2009). This can be construed as an effort to achieve deterrence through a key instrument of displaying naval power and taking advantage of an infrastructure that "signals an intent" to be activated during wartime (Mazarr 2018). In the words of a scholar of Balikatan, for instance, "the Balikatan exercises allow the USA a smarter way to signal their presence" (Eadie 2015, 206).

This possibly triggered, at first glance, a direct action-reaction dynamic with the PLA, which appears to have frequently counter-programmed allied maneuvers. Chinese naval and air forces responded to some exercises with aggressive shadow patrols, anti-access blockade rehearsals, swarming tactics around contested features like Scarborough Shoal and Sabina Shoal, and the deployment of aircraft carrier strike groups alongside missile-armed long-range bombers. Consequently, the dataset illustrates a clear trajectory toward restrained escalation, where regular multilateral naval presence meets unilateral power projection in disputed waters. A Chinese commentator also highlighted how "U.S.-Philippine joint patrols" are "followed by Chinese patrols" (Yi 2026). Apart from Washington's key role in these drills, Beijing also considers Japanese participation a major provocation. Yet neither the military nor the political dimension of either exercise appears to be driving the actions from the other side. They are all better understood as elements of the power play in the South China Sea (political) and respecting the boosting of capacities (military).

The logic of exercises in the South China Sea, specifically involving the Philippines, is thus contingent on basic axioms. First, China considers Taiwan its primary area of operations. Second, China remains conventionally deterred by the U.S.-Philippine

alliance but undeterred in its other actions. Third, as China has tried to find a modus vivendi with President Trump in his second administration, it shuns away from going beyond its usual playbook of coercion below the level of armed conflict. Fourth, until the U.S.-Philippine alliance took off in 2023, along with the number of maritime maneuvers, China and the allies pursued their drills separately. An editorial in the Global Times also made a point that military exercises; for instance, Southern Theatre Command's drills east of Luzon, are "in accordance with the needs of the security situation, the theater troops will routinely organize relevant military activities to safeguard national sovereignty and security as well as regional peace and stability" (Wang, 2026). Thus, there appears to be no major empirical proof that exercise dynamics alone significantly contribute to security dilemmas at sea. The operational tempo of Chinese, Philippine and U.S. exercises are all within the average range with peaks (and some lows), and despite Balikatan exercises around Taiwan, Beijing has not responded with a stronger than usual provocative answer. Moreover, recent scholarship on Chinese escalation dynamics often roots it in bilateral factors between the claimant state (such as the Philippines) and China – not necessarily in the role of external factors (Luo 2022).

Still, some analysts and observers believe military exercises in the modern South China Sea serve a dual purpose: they function as a primary mechanism for deterrence while simultaneously acting as apossible accelerant for crisis. For U.S. allies, these drills are essential for building practical interoperability and capacity, signaling to Beijing that a move against one is a move against a unified front. For China, these drills in the wider South China Seaproject domestic strength, normalize its heavy maritime footprint, and project a denial-of-access envelope. It is unlikely that either of the actors will change their perceptions despite a quantitative shift in drills.

A critical caveat is, of course, Trump 2.0. One observer shared that Washington's commitment was ambiguous even before Trump 2.0, and that "strong rhetorical statements of support" are complemented by "a few naval exercises for show."[17] Exact expectations from the ally remain fluid, as the key test for the alliance, an episode invoking the Mutual Defence Treaty, has not been tested. For many observers, it is widely understood that FONOPS and other countries' presence is better than nothing, but for some Philippine observers, this is not enough given the ongoing incursions. The dilemma of how to respond to the grey-zone remains, and multilateral exercises may show signalling and resolve but lack a direct deterrent impact. Exercises with allies may be part of the strategy but are not a panacea, and neither is the most provocative driver of tensions with China.

17 Interview, 6 September 2020.

Ways Forward

The situation in the South China Sea remains both predictable and unexpected in the near term, even if no conflict actor genuinely wants war. On the one hand, all actors do not want to overstep certain boundaries. Manila uses several measures to push back against China; while Beijing decisively wants to remain below the threshold of armed conflict. The United States is currently relatively zoomed out of the grander picture despite its increased military cooperation with the Philippines. But confidence in the long-standing security order in Southeast Asia is declining, raising uncertainty.

There are several options for the Philippines. First, to strengthen interoperability with allies and partners, but also between the different Philippine military branches, the drills' scope needs to be expanded. Collaborative planning is also essential beyond Washington with other partners, but also among the different Philippine military branches. This could happen, for example, by conducting exercises around all seven Philippine maritime straits, periphery areas in the east, southeast and south, or simulating a broader range of scenarios beyond a maritime contingency around the Spratlys. Second, Manila should also include its ASEAN neighbors in maritime exercises such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Military-to-military engagement with these states exists, and the costs would not be very high. In addition, this regional engagement can further strengthen the nucleus of ASEAN to improve defense capabilities. It would also signal that Manila's boost of defense capabilities does not pose a threat. Third, there is also an opportunity for minilateral coalitions with the critical node of Tokyo-Canberra as a possible axis. Here, defense cooperation would only be the beginning and needs to note a protracted campaign of attrition as the most likely scenario in the maritime contest in East Asia (Gady 2025, 207).

Conclusion

Military exercises deliver distinct tactical advantages alongside specific strategic risks. On one hand, they validate operational readiness, improve tactical interoperability among participating forces, and establish a visible deterrent presence to signal alliance commitments. Large-scale deployments also increase the likelihood of unexpectedencounters, heighten diplomatic friction with neighboring states and absorb substantial financial and hardware resources. Against this backdrop, the Philippines no longer has the weakest navy in Southeast Asia. Driven by joint military exercises and faster efforts to modernize, the nation appears primed to continue defending its interests through deterrence, diplomacy, lawfare, and self-reliance. Ultimately, however, both China and the U.S. have an obligation to avoid conflict that would drag the wider region in its wake, which has implications for their "three-body problem" engagement with the Philippines. Even as great powers maneuver, the core tension remains unchanged, and the South China Sea's blue waters look likely to remain troubled.

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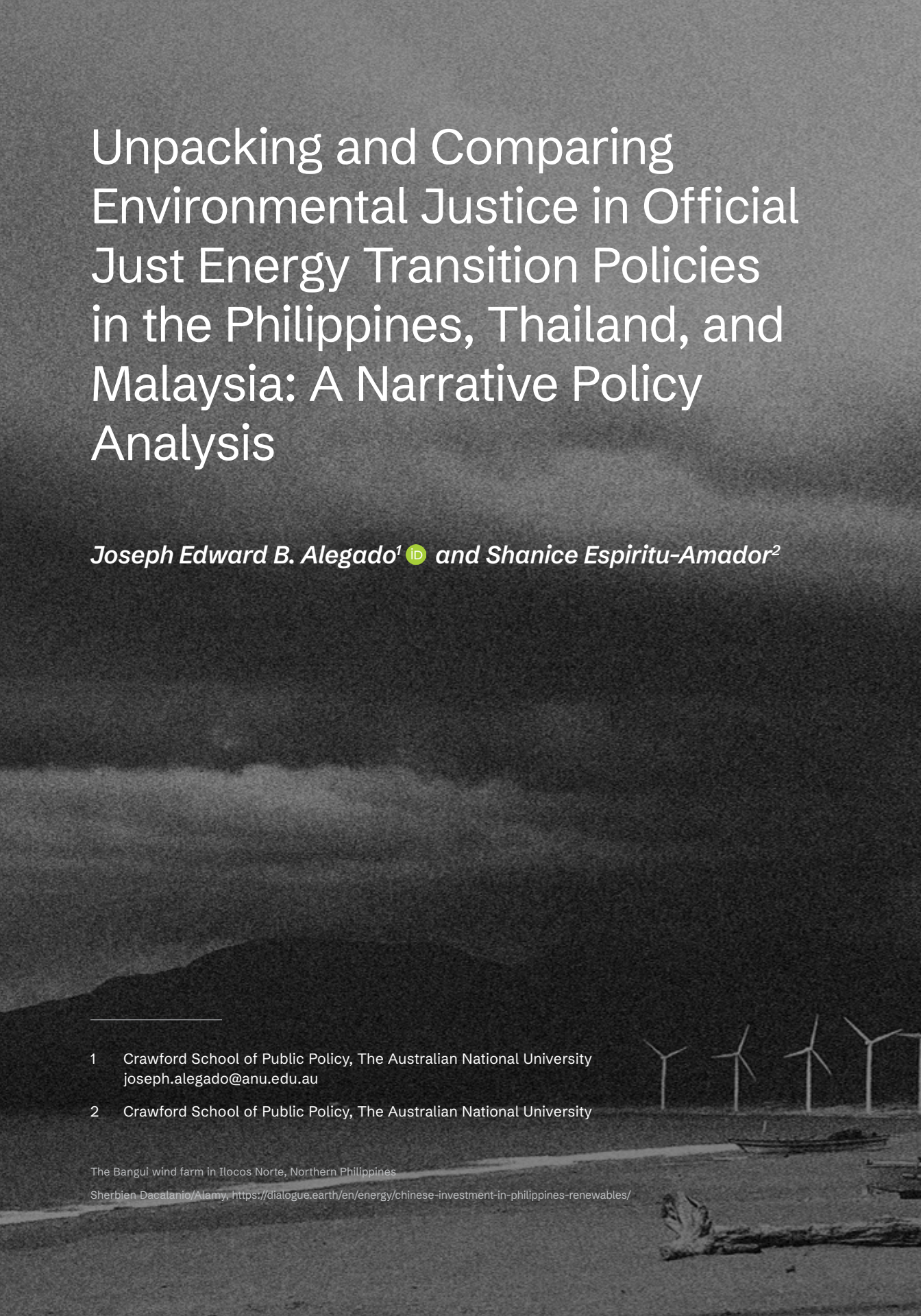
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Unpacking and Comparing Environmental Justice in Official Just Energy Transition Policies in the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia: A Narrative Policy Analysis

Joseph Edward B. Alegado[1] *and Shanice Espiritu-Amador*[2]

1 Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University
joseph.alegado@anu.edu.au

2 Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University



The Bangui wind farm in Ilocos Norte, Northern Philippines

Sherbien Dacalanio/Alamy, https://dialogue.earth/en/energy/chinese-investment-in-philippines-renewables/



Abstract

The paper problematizes the incorporation of environmental justice (EJ) principles into climate policy narratives particularly, Just Energy Transition (JET) plans in the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia. Using narrative policy analysis, the paper reveals three key findings: 1) the "cast of characters" in just transition narratives in the three countries examined are caught between a trajectory of economic growth vs. ensuring justice; 2) procedural and distributive EJ are present while recognition and restorative are somehow invisible and 3) without clear targets and defined pathways in achieving JET the processes by which EJ can be achieved in these roadmaps are unclear.

Keywords: comparative, environmental justice, just energy transition, Southeast Asia, narrative policy analysis, climate policy

Highlights

- Using the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), the plot, setting, and characters in official energy transition narratives reveal the extent to which environmental justice is incorporated into policies.
- The narratives reveal that the energy transition in Southeast Asian countries is still primarily government-led and focused on economic factors like job creation and energy sustainability.
- Distributional and procedural justice are most evident in official narratives, while recognition and restorative justice are virtually absent throughout.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the 2015 Paris climate agreement, the need for decarbonization has increased in different regions, each with a variegated economic and socio-political context. In Southeast Asia, the region has seen different interests, namely economic benefits, civil society advocacy, and democratic space in initiatives towards energy transition (Sovacool 2017; Hughes and Lipscy 2013). Given that most Southeast Asian countries are climate vulnerable, there is pressure coming from various groups for these countries to incorporate just transition in their country-level policies while balancing the economy, the environment, and existing vulnerabilities.

This study uses the Narrative Policy Framework to interrogate how official government narratives showcase environmental justice principles in the three countries across Southeast Asia. As Roe (1994) has elucidated, a narrative policy analysis allows us to uncover the metanarrative behind the framing of policies, as well as the "elements" of the story – plot, main characters, villain, and setting. We interrogated how environmental justice principles—distributive, procedural, recognition, and restorative (Schlosberg 2007), in particular—are embedded or not into country-level policies in select Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand. In the absence of uniform national policies, we looked into plans, roadmaps, and other pronouncements to further answer the research question. We argue the need to reframe energy transition policies and proposals in these countries to explicitly embed environmental justice principles—via inclusive decision-making, rights recognition, targeted compensation and benefit sharing, and mechanisms to remediate historical environmental damage.

The succeeding sections are outlined below: a literature review to set out the state of play of current literature on environmental justice especially on energy transition initiatives and policies in Southeast Asia. It is then followed by the methodology and the framework that we have utilized. We then discuss and analyze the findings. Finally, the conclusion section recaps the main and argument and provides implications for future research.

Literature Review

Environmental Justice and Just Energy Transition

Environmental justice (EJ) emerged in the United States in the 1980s from grassroots struggles against the disproportionate impacts of hazardous waste facilities in communities of color. While early EJ scholarship focused primarily on distributive inequities—namely, the unequal exposure of marginalized communities to

environmental harms—subsequent theoretical developments expanded the scope of the framework.

Building on political theory, Schlosberg (2007) argues that environmental justice cannot be reduced to distribution alone. Instead, he advances a multidimensional framework encompassing distribution, recognition, participation (procedural justice), and capabilities. Justice, in this view, requires not only equitable allocation of environmental benefits and burdens but also the recognition of marginalized identities, meaningful participation in decision-making processes, and the protection of community capabilities to flourish. Schlosberg (2013) further highlights how environmental injustice is deeply entangled with structural racism, where communities of color are systematically associated with pollution, toxicity, and degraded environments. Moreover, Schlosberg (2013) also called for expanding EJ scholarship beyond its U.S. origins, acknowledging the "globalized and transnational" nature of environmental harms.

Building on EJ scholarship, Darren McCauley and Raphael Heffron (2018) articulate a framework for energy justice, identifying four core dimensions:

- Distributional justice: addressing inequities in access to energy services and exposure to energy-related harms;
- Recognition justice: acknowledging historically marginalized and vulnerable communities;
- Procedural justice: ensuring fairness and inclusivity in energy decision-making processes;
- Restorative justice: repairing past harms caused by energy systems.

As such, energy justice extends EJ into the governance of energy production, distribution, and consumption, providing an analytical lens for examining decarbonization processes. Sovacool et al. (2016) argue that energy systems reproduce structural inequalities unless explicitly designed to address justice concerns. Over the past decade, energy transition scholarship has expanded rapidly, focusing on decarbonization pathways, technological innovation, policy instruments, and market mechanisms (Geels et al. 2017). However, critics argue that mainstream transition discourse often privileges techno-economic efficiency, carbon metrics, and financial viability while underemphasizing social equity and historical injustice (Newell and Mulvaney 2013). In response, the concept of a just energy transition has gained prominence.

The term "just transition" originates in labor movements in North America, particularly among trade unions concerned about worker displacement during environmental regulation. Bird and Lawton (2009) define just transition as a framework that protects jobs in vulnerable industries while ensuring that new low-carbon sectors provide decent work characterized by fair wages, safe conditions, and career progression. The International Labour Organization (2016) further institutionalized the concept through guidelines emphasizing social dialogue, worker protection, skills development, and inclusive growth.

Contemporary just transition discourse expands beyond labor protections to encompass broader questions of distributive, procedural, and recognition justice in decarbonization processes (Heffron and McCauley 2018). Importantly, in many Global South contexts, just transition is also linked to human rights concerns, Indigenous land struggles, and climate vulnerability.

Environmental Justice in Just Transition Policies and Regulation

While the concept of environmental justice has been around for decades, translating its dimensions into environmental policy frameworks and design is an increasingly growing field of study, as the concept has emerged as a central framework within just transition. In the past, policy design focused on more technical regulation and economic outcomes, which placed marginalized communities at a disadvantage. As mentioned earlier, this gave rise to environmental justice, a concept that ensured that people, especially marginalized communities, are placed at the heart of environmental policy (Villa et al. 2020).

The principles of environmental justice applied to the field of energy transition have been studied for some time, as their integration into government environmental policies and regulations has become more apparent in recent years. However, as Elliott and Setyowati (2020) discuss, there is a need to make justice principles more explicit in policies and implementation processes to ensure that socially equitable outcomes are promoted and achieved. This is in part due to just transition moving away from "labor environmentalism" or the engagement of laborers on environmental issues in the past (Cha 2020), to a "jobs vs. environment" debate (Brown and Spiegel 2019), which has implications for how environmental justice principles are understood in practice and applied. Worall and Whitley (2018) have observed that much of the social processes mentioned in policy documents ultimately focus on economic development and the expansion of the power sector rather than achieving social justice through just transition.

Despite the proliferation of environmental justice considerations across policy and academic scholarship, questions on how justice-based considerations are conceptualized and implemented throughout policy remain. For instance, scholars have assessed how certain types of EJ dimensions—namely procedural justice—were more explicit across policies, compared with other forms such as distributive, recognitional, and restorative justice (Méndez-Barrientos et al. 2024; Ulibarri et al. 2022), which are just as equally critical frameworks (McCauley and Heffron 2018). These gaps raise concerns about how EJ dimensions are defined in policy, how the interrelated nature of EJ concepts is disregarded as only specific dimensions are considered, and how this exacerbates inequalities due to unconsidered factors within policymaking. Mendez-Barrientos et al. (2024) echo this within their research that reviewed policy and academic documents around the Colorado River Basin, which showed that a lack of restorative justice limits more ambitious programs for meaningful reform, and the underrepresentation of recognitional and restorative justice hampers the effectiveness of reparation efforts, part of which are applied features of distributive justice. This call for a more nuanced and integrated understanding of environmental justice is particularly important for the just transition conversation. As McCauley and Heffron (2018) discussed in their paper, integrating restorative justice through the act of environmental restoration processes, there is an opportunity to elevate the just transition argument from green jobs to the promotion of fairness and equity.

Within the framework of policy design, clear, straightforward tools like environmental and social impact assessments have been placed in attempts to incorporate EJ across standard procedures. However, in reality, the multi-layered, complex and compounding nature of EJ poses difficulties in the way it is embedded into policy processes, and even more difficulty translating it into meaningful outcomes. While there has been literature dissecting this difficulty across environmental laws and policies, in the field of just energy transition, discussions on how policy design and roadmaps reflect true considerations of EJ are scarce.

Methodology

Case Selection

Southeast Asia presents a complex landscape for just energy transition, shaped by diverse political systems, development trajectories, and geographic conditions (Setyowati 2021; Sovacool 2017). Governance capacity, democratic quality, and state autonomy significantly influence transition pathways, particularly in how environmental justice principles are institutionalized within policy frameworks (Hughes and Lipscy 2013; Lockwood 2013).

We specifically focused on three Southeast Asian countries: Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia These countries do not have international renewable energy financing agreements, yet they are part of the top five producers of carbon emissions in Southeast Asia (Hu and Weng 2024). We deliberately limited the criteria in order to further unpack how domestic narratives help shape their energy transition pathways of these countries. Because of the wide variety of documents available, we prioritized national-level documents on renewable energy and explicit energy transition plans by ministries and departments. The documents studied are in English, dating from 2015 onwards until this year with present drafts available.

These documents were then coded according to narrative elements found within the Narrative Policy Analysis Framework, namely key actors as heroes, victims, and villains, setting (contexts affecting the JET), and plot (key events, identified problems, and features of reforms, critiques on JET policies). We have left out the discussion on the moral of the story, as not all documents provide a clear moral, and there is difficulty identifying morals through documentary review. The NPF provides a structured approach to analyzing the different narratives various actors use to propel their own policy solutions, where interactions and relationships across actors can be detailed and further explored (Kuenzler 2021). This type of approach allows us to glean elements of environmental justice across actions, interactions, and policy solutions forwarded by JET actors. Additional codes that allowed for a fuller picture were used to show areas where EJ was more prominent or lacking. One acknowledgement that the authors have is the breadth of how policy narratives, especially in a highly relevant and contested topic, have rapidly shifted across recent years, with several of the countries in our scope coming up with more comprehensive just transition frameworks. Moreover, the current discussion provides but an overview of each country's efforts through existing policy documents. However, we acknowledge that other methods such as surveys and interviews may reveal a deeper, more comprehensive picture of JET especially in identifying the "moral" of the story. We do anticipate, however, that many of the forthcoming document drafts that we have considered may change the just energy transition landscape once released in the near future.

By employing a Narrative Policy Framework, this study moves beyond descriptive policy comparison and instead unpacks the layered meanings embedded within official transition plans. Specifically, it identifies: (1) the dominant plots structuring just transition discourse; (2) the allocation of character roles across stakeholders; and (3) the socio-political settings within which these narratives are situated.

Results: Plot Setting and Characters for Each Country

Philippines

Plot

The roots of the just energy transition in the Philippines lie in its history and a heavily privatized energy sector, which will be provided as a backdrop to the narrative. The Philippines has always had a perennial problem of overreliance on oil-based energy sources, amidst a largely unaddressed growing energy demand. This has resulted in energy shortages and unequal electricity access throughout the country, especially in the 1990s. However, because of the lack of success in managing the energy sector and the urgent need to find long-term solutions for escalating fiscal deficits that the government held, the landmark law "Electric Power Industry Reform Act of 2001" (EPIRA) was passed which allowed the privatization of government energy assets. This surrendering of government responsibility in the energy sector and the stepping in of private sector actors to primarily lead the development of energy sources in the Philippines is the overarching context where the just energy transition is situated.

In more recent years, the issue frame championed by the government centered on economic growth. This frame highlights that the just energy transition is a means for economic development through increased investment by the private sector, which consequently leads to job opportunities and increased access to electricity. This is a frame that the Department of Energy (DOE) describes as a "partnership" for economic growth and opportunity under the Philippine Energy Plan 2023–2050:

> Along with policy and regulatory reforms, investment opportunities and incentives will also be expanded to foster an environment conducive to greater private sector investments in the promotion and integration of renewables, including the adoption of alternative fuels and emerging energy technologies (DOE 2025a, 1).

This narrative of collaboration for economic growth was also manifested through increasing access of private actors towards renewable energy projects. A pivotal point where this happened was when the Department of Energy actively clarified the Republic Act 9548 or "Renewable Energy Act of 2008" which originally only allowed for 40 percent foreign ownership of companies that engage in the exploration, development, and utilization of the country's renewable energy in its Implementing Rules and Regulations. This reigning perspective changed by the release of a DOE department circular issued in 2022 that lifted limitations on foreign

citizens and entities that would like to participate in the Philippine renewable energy sector (DOE 2022a). This action not only signified a welcome call for a wider variety of investors to infuse capital which builds on economic development narratives but also portrayed the openness of the energy sector towards active private sector participation and competition (DOE 2025b, 40). One thing to note would be how values on equity and access are linked to employment and investment opportunities that would uplift communities, especially in rural areas (DOE 2022b, 16).

The response to this clarification was well-received by foreign investors and the private sector, to the point that the DOE continued to actively promote the fiscal incentives embedded in the Renewable Energy Act as a signal to encourage more private sector investment.

Along this narrative of private sector investment reveals a narrative of the energy transition as a complement to existing fossil fuel energy sources, not as a replacement for it. The DOE in the Philippine Energy Plan that was released in 2025 highlighted the following statement.

> Moreover, in the sustainable energy's perspective, the energy transition in the country does not eliminate the use of fossil fuels but ensures that energy systems are sufficient, provide access for all, and environmental sustainability. Thus, maximizing the gains and benefits from RE resources and technologies increase indigenous energy sources, thus reducing energy import dependency (DOE 2025a, 95).

The latest angle that the government is championing shows some promise towards a comprehensive just energy transition through a JET framework draft (DENR 2026). However, this is spearheaded by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), a minor actor in the government's long-term policy-setting space for energy. While there are clear attempts to move towards a more dedicated, comprehensive JET agenda, the challenges remain on integrating these frameworks across key departments and agencies who oversee the shift towards renewable energy.

Setting

Part of the difficulties in providing electrical access to most of the Philippines is in part due to its archipelagic nature with over 7,000 islands, where scattered communities are found across both urban and rural areas. The push towards the transition has been advocated by the DOE as one of the best means of providing access, especially to rural areas separated by islands (DOE 2025a, 105).

Characters

Several policy actors have risen and faded in policy influence across time, one example being the National Power Corporation which once held almost-total monopoly over energy generation during the 1930s to the 1970s under heavy nationalization perspectives. After EPIRA, the influence of government actors such as the DOE and agencies subsumed under it like the NPC and the National Electrification Administration (NEA) have been reassigned to handle regulatory oversight. From previously being identified as villains by the public due to the inability to solve the energy shortages that resulted in blackouts in the 1990s, there was a noticeable change in direction as the government along with the private sector have framed themselves as solvers of the escalating energy crisis by allowing the sale of unprofitable government assets and making the market more competitive, therefore allowing more widespread access to energy. This coalition strategy is the same one being utilized today especially in terms of transition financing, where the Philippine Energy Plan (PEP) identifies as needing a total of PHP 19,646.0 billion (or USD 357.218 billion at 2022 prices) (DOE 2025a, 29) under a clean energy scenario.

The actors that dominate the energy space after EPIRA to today's discussions are private sector corporations that own majority of power generation in the Philippines, though the Philippine government exercises regulatory oversight. A concurrent emerging actor is the DENR, which has recently convened a just energy transition framework in response to concerns of environmental and community risks that have risen from affected communities such as indigenous and climate groups, and the Philippine transport sector. Apart from this, there is an emphasis of a whole-of-society approach in which international partners, civil society, and stakeholders play an active role in ensuring that the just energy transition is achieved (DOE 2025a, 32). Under the DOE, the public is framed as recipients of benefits of the just energy transition, which slightly differs from the proposed just transition framework under the DENR where the public are not only recipients but active shapers of policy (DENR 2026, 4).

Thailand

Plot

The story of JET in Thailand is a fairly recent one, yet its roots spring from the 1990s when the Thai government recognized that overlapping functions of various energy agencies impacted outcomes and efforts to address the perpetual energy crisis (MOE 2015a). In a retrospective retelling of the Ministry of Energy's (MOE) origins, there was an acknowledgement on the role of energy security as a means for economic development in the 1980s, as well as the adverse impacts of a continued reliance on imported energy towards "Thailand's financial and fiscal systems, as well as private and public sectors" (Thai MOE 2015a).

Alongside identifying the energy crisis problem was a recognition that there was a need to "support private sector participation in the domestic energy business," while also ensuring that the public also reap benefits from domestic sources of energy, among these identified being renewable energy (MOE 2015a) which the government has promoted since 1989 (DEDE 2015). Thus, the first landmark measure created by the Thai government to address issue of energy insecurity was the creation of the Ministry of Energy in 2002 in order to organize current initiatives and efforts forwarded by various agencies, effectively pushing for a narrative of consolidating power and existing initiatives that would propel Thailand's energy transition.

While the terminology of JET is not apparent in Thai energy policy documents, there was a careful construction across the years of what a sustainable energy scenario for Thailand would look like that hinted towards a sustainable energy transition. Ultimately, a narrative of collaboration primarily with other countries emerged as one of the highlights of Thai energy policy in the following years. This narrative was headlined by the development of a hydroelectric project now known as the Xayaburi Hydroelectric Power Project, a diversion dam that was constructed in the Xayaburi province in Lao PDR (EPPO 2016a). The dam started construction in March 2012 and started its operations in 2019 under a power purchase agreement between the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) and Electricite Du Laos (EDL), Thailand's and Laos' state corporations responsible for electric power generation and transmission. The Thai MOE hailed the success of the project not only due to locking in competitive energy prices for the next 29 years after 2019, but also as a means of furthering relationships across neighboring countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia, and China, but most especially Lao PDR, where the dam is located. In fact, the MOE and the EGAT hailed the Xayaburi hydropower project as a way of boosting and promoting "economic and social relations of the two countries" (EPPO 2016a).

In more recent years, the Thai government has pushed more aggressively for a low-carbon society which is a frame that aligns with global energy trends of addressing global warming. Under the most recent official Power Development Plan 2015-2036 (PDP2015), the concerns framed by the government were primarily domestic, such as "coping with increasing power demand" for energy security, "maintaining appropriate costs of power generation for ... economic competitiveness" and "lessening carbon dioxide intensity..." (EPPO 2015, 1-1). However, under a draft of the proposed revised Power Development Plan (PDP2024), there is a visible shift across government direction where the goal lies beyond addressing domestic concerns but also global concerns global warming and greenhouse gas emissions.

> While the revised plan attempts to respond to changes in energy production with the rise of renewables and other global considerations, the concerns on fuel diversification, maintaining appropriate power costs, and ensuring power reliability across areas in Thailand remain (EPPO 2015, 5-2 – 5-5).

Setting

As in the Philippines, the setting for the narrative is Thailand itself. This is important to consider given the country's shifts from viewing the energy transition as a way of addressing domestic concerns towards a frame of seeing the country as part of a global initiative tackling global warming and carbon emissions.

Thailand's geographical setting is also integral to the plot considering the number of agreements it has across neighboring countries, which the Philippines does not have. These arrangements are significant as they sustain and enable Thailand's initiatives towards the energy transition. Thailand shares borders with four other countries, namely Myanmar, Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Malaysia, where power-sharing and power purchase agreements based off renewable energy sources continue to exist (EPPO 2016b).

Characters

Similar to the Philippines, there is no clear villain across the narratives. However, the Thai MOE and its attached agencies such as the Energy Planning and Policy Office (EPPO), the Department of Alternative Energy Development and Efficiency (DEDE), the Energy Regulatory Commission (ERC) and the EGAT portray themselves as heroes working cooperatively to address the energy crisis.

The government as a whole portrays itself as forward-thinking by creating the 20-year energy plans that will address energy prices that will affect "quality of life and the country's competitiveness" (EPPO 2015, 3-2). In contrast to Philippine documents, the public is framed as an active participant in the process through an emphasis on public hearings, drafts and consultations for the creation of the plan as well as detailing which parts of the public hearing process have been accomplished for particular energy projects (EPPO 2015, 5-4), however, the impact of the transition is unclear, leaving their roles in the narrative open-ended and vague.

Considering the context of Thailand where majority of the energy sector is still state-owned, the private sector has been identified as an emerging hero in the shift towards renewable energy, and while it does not feature as heavily in contrast to the Philippines, the private sector is expected to play a larger role in renewable energy investment in the updated plans by the MOE.

Malaysia

Plot

The story of Malaysia's transition, similar to Philippines and Thailand, is tied to heavy industrialization in the 1980s when the country gradually transitioned from an agricultural and commodity-based economy to one that prioritized manufacturing and services (Malaysian MOE 2023, 9). This transition naturally necessitated a constantly growing demand for power. However, unlike the two previous countries, the reserves of natural gas and crude oil found in Malaysia became a primary source of development for the country, with implications for both the general workforce and the economy. According to the National Energy Policy 2022-2040 (DTN), 28 percent of GDP, 25 percent of the total Malaysian workforce, 31 percent of fiscal income, and 13 percent of total export value can be attributed to the energy sector on various ends (EPU 2022, 10; Malaysian MOE 2023, 10).

Since 1979, the government has attempted to address the energy trilemma of energy security, energy affordability, and environmental sustainability through a series of laws such as the "Renewable Energy Act and Sustainable Energy Development Authority Act of 2011," and policies such as the "Five Fuel Diversification Policy 2000," "National Renewable Policy and Action Plan 2010," and "the National Energy Efficiency Action Plan 2015" (EPU 2022, 18-19). While there is no singular energy transition policy, over time, these acts and policies were designed to build robust frameworks that supported progress towards the shift in energy sources. Despite this, the fossil fuel industry has remained persistent. In 2020, the share of renewable energy across Malaysia's national installed capacity mix remained below global and regional averages (SEDA 2021, 2) and renewables only comprised a mere 3.9 percent in Malaysia's energy supply mix (Malaysian MOE 2023, 10).

As such, the narratives stressed by government present a call for urgent action as the main reason for the shift. The government identified three distinct frames for undergoing what the National Energy Transition Roadmap (NETR) calls a "Responsible Transition" (RT) (Malaysian MOE 2023, 8): climate commitments as a responsible member of the international community (i.e. the Paris Agreement), domestic requirements such as the need to ensure affordability and energy security, and the emerging economic opportunities present in renewable energy technologies (Malaysian MOE 2023, 13).

In 2021, Malaysia committed to an unconditional reduction of 45 percent in greenhouse gas emission intensity by 2030 through its Nationally Determined Contribution and a further 60 percent in 2035 (SEDA 2021, 3). While this commitment reinforced the shift towards RE sources, in 2022, a European Union

climate policy called the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) was enacted that placed levies on carbon-heavy products. This change was significant as 57 percent of Malaysia's total exports would be impacted (Malaysian MOE 2023, 13). These events only further fueled the shift to sustainable energy materialized through the National Energy Transition Roadmap in 2023. The document, which was the first document to directly address the Malaysian energy transition was spearheaded by the Ministry of Economy alongside the Steering and Technical Committees consisting of other key Ministries, agencies, and members of the private sector. (Malaysian MOE 2023, 15-16)

As the most recent development along Malaysia's energy transition story, despite the challenges that remain in weaning the Malaysian economy off fossil fuels, the story ends at an aspirational point through an ambitious roadmap that attempts to, as the NETR affirms, "fundamentally transform Malaysia's economy and livelihoods for a stronger and more resilient future."

Setting

Malaysia's "geographical location, climate, and rich agricultural activity" (SEDA 2021, 3) is a highly emphasized element in the Responsible Transition narrative, which only supports the case towards the utilization of renewable energy. A few examples outlined are the high year-round solar irradiation for solar power due to Malaysia being near the equator, the abundance of palm oil and agricultural waste that can be converted into bioenergy power sources, and more than a hundred river basins for small-scale hydropower generation (SEDA 2021, XIII, 3). The setting is strongly framed as an "advantage" due to the country's "strategic location (Malaysian MOE 2023, 10).

The sharing of borders with several other ASEAN countries is also seen by Malaysia as a tool for cooperation, particularly through the Lao PDR-Thailand-Malaysia-Singapore Power Integration Project (LTMS-PIP) that would allow cross-border power trade under the ASEAN Power Grid Initiative. As stated in the NETR, the electricity exchange system will provide opportunities for Malaysia to position itself as a regional hub for renewable energy (Malaysian MOE 2023, 19).

Characters

The government's strong role as the prime mover and trailblazer in the energy transition is evident across the narrative, which has influenced the narrative's overall aspirational tone. Unlike the Philippines or Thailand where most energy transition plans are still operationalized by the energy departments or ministries, the Responsible Transition in Malaysia is spearheaded by the Ministry of Economy

alongside the Steering and Technical Committees. This effectively frames the whole of government working together as heroes through its primary tool, the Responsible Transition pathway (Malaysian MOE 2023, 65). Just like the Philippines and Thailand, there are no identified villains to the narrative.

Across Malaysia's official narratives, there is an extensive discussion of the rakyat, or the people as stakeholders and beneficiaries. These benefits are identified to materialize through employment in green jobs, access to electrification and affordable energy, and increased quality of life through lower emissions (EPU 2022, 45). Workers particularly in diminishing industries such as GHG-intensive sectors are identified as victims who will need targeted training and upskilling initiatives. Therefore, special attention is directed towards planning and reskilling programs for the "affected workforce."

While not part of the broader narrative, there is brief mention of local non-government organizations (NGOs) and communities as concerned stakeholders regarding environmental aspects and "native customary rights, ancestral lands, and livelihoods." These characters are framed as stakeholders of large hydropower projects due to "consensus being achieved through two-way communication" (SEDA 2021, 51).

Discussion

In the previous section, we have provided the findings of our analysis on key policy documents in the three Southeast Asian countries we identified. Using the Narrative Policy Framework, we were able to unpack the various official narratives across just transition plans embedded in these policies and the evolving contexts of the just energy transition processes in these countries. In this section, we highlight three key insights based on the initial findings with clear implications on the energy transition trajectories of the countries we examined:

The Overarching Plot and Cast of Characters in the Just Transition

As seen in the findings, the overall plot of just transition in Southeast Asia seems to be based on past energy crises or impending ones due to heavy fossil fuel dependency. However, emerging opportunities of a global market through renewables as well as global commitments propelled the just transition narrative forward. These link to most literature cited that in most developing countries, just energy transition seems to be a battleground of ideals across energy security, economic development, and environmental sustainability wherein the State is caught in between these trajectories.

A good example is present in the "energy trilemma" presented by Malaysia where the transition attempts to balance sustainability, affordability (equity), and energy security.

Considering that the study focused on official government narratives, the overarching "hero" of the stories are governments, particularly ministries and departments that provided a wide-ranging and aspirational perspective towards energy transition. While the involvement of other actors such as businesses and the public varied from one country to another, there was a general consensus that the energy transition is primarily led by government direction, with the intention to boost economies and take advantage of emerging markets.

This configuration reflects broader patterns observed in emerging markets, where decarbonization strategies tend to prioritize sector expansion and economic growth over social justice dimensions (Worrall et al. 2018). Our findings extend this insight by demonstrating how such priorities are narratively institutionalized. Justice language is incorporated, but it is subordinated to competitiveness and investment imperatives. This is particularly seen in both the Philippines and Thailand, the two countries where just transition has not been formalized and are instead inferred across energy policy documents.

Another consideration is how official narratives fail to discuss and shed light on critical and meaningful discussions on environmental issues as the influence of private sector actors (particularly oligarchic interests in the Philippines) on the pace of the shift towards renewables, and complaints of environmental justice across communities impacted by renewable energy projects (such as the Xayaburi hydropower project in Thailand).

Elements of Environmental Justice Principles in Just Transition

In the preceding section, we have shown how a narrative policy analysis can be used to further unpack how environmental justice principles are incorporated or not in the just energy frameworks of select Southeast Asian countries. In this subsection, we extend the analysis further by looking into the principles of environmental justice.

Principles of environmental justice in particular procedural and distributive can be seen in the plans of the three Southeast Asian countries analyzed. Yet, recognition and restorative are somehow invisible in the draft frameworks. In the Philippines, there seem to be more gravitation towards recognition and restorative principles. Yet, as discussed earlier, these processes seem to be tokenistic rather than being geared towards genuine participation.

1. Procedural Justice

All cases reference stakeholder engagement, multi-sectoral consultation, or social dialogue. However, participation is largely consultative rather than co-decisional. Civil society organizations, labor representatives, and affected communities are invited into discussions but rarely granted institutionalized authority over transition design or monitoring. This pattern aligns with critiques that just transition processes risk becoming procedurally thin—invoking participation without redistributing power (Schlosberg 2007). In the Philippines, references to workers and local communities are more explicit, yet formal guarantees of shared governance remain limited. Participation thus functions more as legitimizing discourse than as structural transformation.

2. Distributive Justice

Distributive elements are more visible. Policy documents frequently reference green job creation, retraining programs, and social protection measures. However, distribution is framed prospectively focused on future opportunities in renewable sectors rather than retrospectively addressing accumulated environmental burdens.

Classical EJ literature emphasizes correcting disproportionate harms experienced by marginalized communities (Bullard 2000; Walker 2012). In the Southeast Asian cases, the absence of explicit burden-mapping or targeted compensation mechanisms suggests that distributive justice remains growth-oriented rather than corrective. Benefits are promised in aggregate, with limited specificity regarding who bears short-term costs.

3. Recognition Justice

Restorative justice is the least developed dimension. There is minimal acknowledgment of historical environmental harm, state responsibility for fossil fuel lock-in, or corporate accountability for pollution. Transition is framed as forward-looking transformation rather than reparative justice.

The absence of restorative framing has important implications. Without recognition of prior harm, there is little normative foundation for compensation, remediation funds, or reparations. In energy justice terms, corrective justice is overshadowed by distributive and procedural aspirations (McCauley and Heffron 2018). This narrows the moral scope of just transition to managing future risks rather than rectifying structural inequities.

Overall, EJ principles are incorporated hierarchically: procedural commitments are visible yet shallow; distributive commitments are unequal; recognition is partial;

restorative justice is mostly visible. Without clear targets and defined pathways in achieving just energy transition, the processes by which environmental justice principles can be achieved in these roadmaps are unclear. From a comparative perspective, this suggests that JET frameworks in these three countries remain in an early institutionalization phase. They are normatively aligned with global climate policy discourses but are not yet deeply embedded in domestic welfare regimes or labor protection systems. Justice remains discursively present but institutionally thin.

Conclusion

This study has started with the intention to investigate how environmental justice is embedded in the official grand narratives of three Southeast Asian countries. Recognizing the differences in terms of socio-political, geographic, and cultural contexts, we used Narrative policy analysis to bring out the specific contexts in our country case studies. Further, we were also able to unpack the "plot," "settings," and the "characters," interwoven in official just energy transition initiatives. In doing this, this paper contributes to a better understanding of climate policy narratives in Southeast Asia.

One acknowledgement that the authors have is the breadth of how policy narratives especially in a highly relevant and contested topic have significantly shifted across recent years especially with international commitments. Moreover, the current discussion provides but an overview of each country's efforts by view of existing policy documents. However, we recognize that other methods such as surveys and interviews may reveal a deeper, more comprehensive picture of the JET. We do anticipate, however, that these are roadmaps that are to be supplemented by other key documents in the years to come. Future studies can dig deeper into other policy documents of these Southeast Asian countries we examined which can offer a more robust picture of the official narratives of just energy transition in each country.

Examining the narratives, the cast of characters embedded in just energy transition policies in these countries gives an overall picture of structural inequalities on how these JET policies are being framed and constructed. Yet, we also acknowledge that beyond the official policy narratives, there are also "invisibilized" stories of resistance such as environmental harms done to communities affected by large-scale renewable energy infrastructure or power imbalances between more powerful actors like corporations and government vis-a-vis communities.

Thus, we argue the need to reframe energy transition policies and proposals in these countries to more explicitly embed environmental justice principles—via inclusive decision-making, rights recognition, targeted compensation and benefit sharing, and mechanisms to remediate historical environmental damage.

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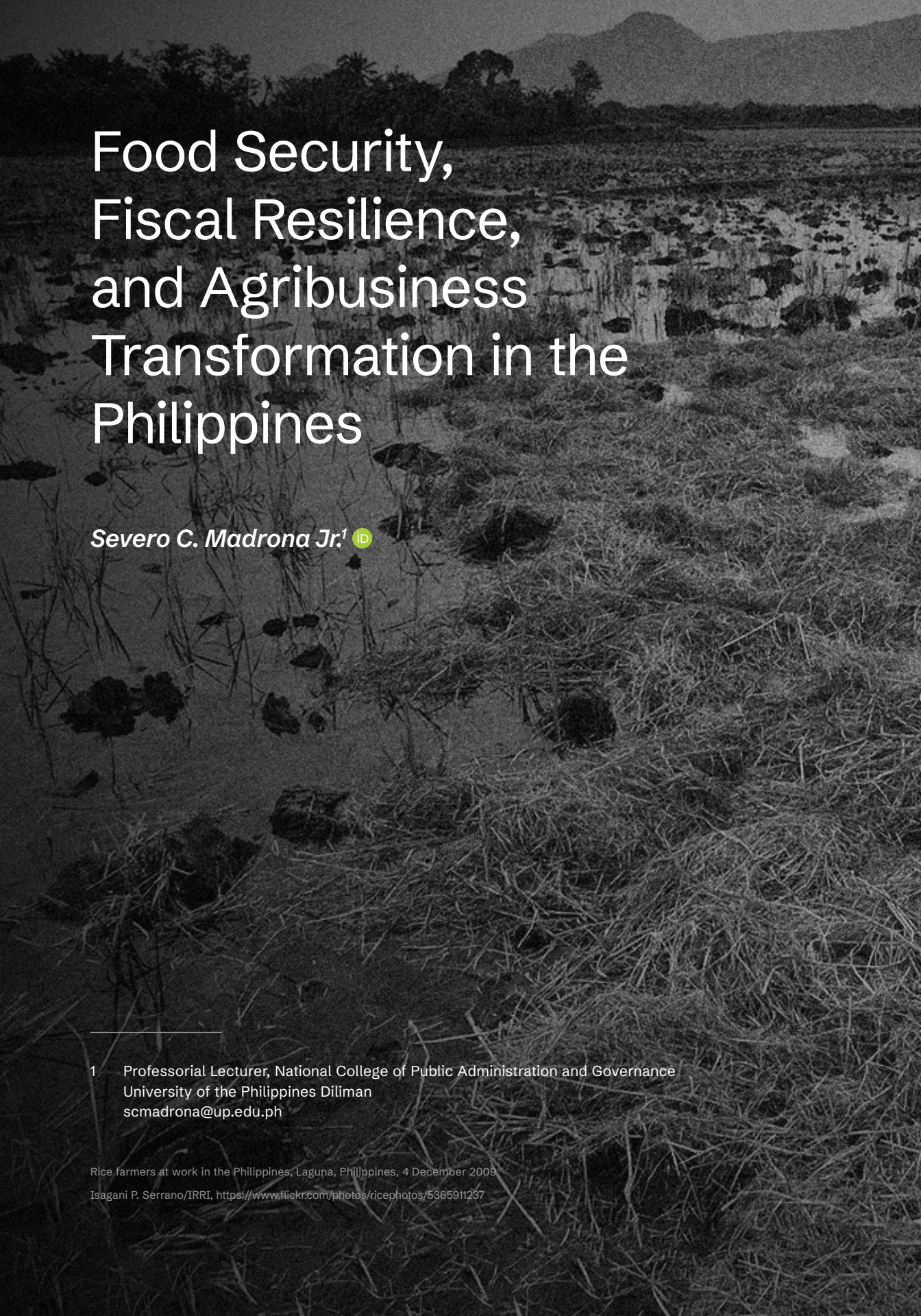
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Food Security, Fiscal Resilience, and Agribusiness Transformation in the Philippines

Severo C. Madrona Jr.[1]

1 Professorial Lecturer, National College of Public Administration and Governance
University of the Philippines Diliman
scmadrona@up.edu.ph



Rice farmers at work in the Philippines, Laguna, Philippines, 4 December 2009
Isagani P. Serrano/IRRI, https://www.flickr.com/photos/ricephotos/5365911237



Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between public fiscal management and agribusiness transformation in the Philippines amid rising geopolitical instability, supply chain disruptions, and climate-related vulnerabilities. Global tensions affecting energy markets and international trade routes increasingly expose the fragility of food import-dependent economies, raising urgent questions about the fiscal and institutional foundations of national food security. Despite longstanding agricultural programs and rural development initiatives, structural weaknesses in public expenditure management, infrastructure investment, procurement systems, and local implementation persist, constraining agribusiness modernization and agricultural productivity in the Philippines.

Using a mixed-methods qualitative-dominant approach, the study analyzes agricultural expenditure patterns, fiscal governance mechanisms, and institutional coordination across national agencies and local governments from 2016 to 2026. The research combines documentary analysis of budgetary and audit reports with comparative analysis of Southeast Asian institutions and selected stakeholder interviews. It argues that food security should no longer be treated solely as an agricultural concern but must be understood as a broader issue of economic resilience, governance capacity, and strategic state planning.

The paper proposes a Public Fiscal Management and Food Resilience Framework integrating climate-responsive investment, adaptive fiscal governance, rural infrastructure development, and agribusiness modernization. By situating agribusiness transformation within the broader context of fiscal resilience and institutional capacity, the study contributes to emerging interdisciplinary debates on how developing states can strengthen food sovereignty and long-term economic stability in an increasingly uncertain global environment.

Keywords: Food Security, Public Fiscal Management, Agribusiness Transformation, Economic Resilience, Climate Adaptation

Introduction

Food security in the Philippines can no longer be treated principally as a problem of agricultural production. The country continues to confront weaknesses in agricultural productivity, capital formation, farm structure, diversification, infrastructure, and market integration, while remaining exposed to climate-related disruptions and volatility in international food and agricultural input markets. Assessments of Philippine food security continue to identify problems of availability, accessibility, affordability, and stability despite sustained public intervention in agriculture and food systems (Galang 2022). Rural transformation has likewise proceeded unevenly across regions, indicating that the benefits of agricultural and economic development have not been spatially uniform (Quilloy and Sombilla 2025).

This persistence is important because Philippine agriculture has not lacked government expenditure. Public resources have financed irrigation, farm-to-market roads, mechanization, commodity programs, producer assistance, research, extension, credit, and other interventions intended to increase production, support rural livelihoods, and improve food security. The policy question is therefore more demanding than the question of how much the government spends on agriculture. It is whether the public fiscal system allocates and manages those resources in ways that address the structural constraints preventing agricultural transformation.

The Philippine condition is characterized as an agricultural trap associated with slow productivity growth, weak capital formation, fragmented farmholdings, limited diversification, and policy incentives that do not necessarily promote structural transformation (Briones 2025). This diagnosis has important implications for public fiscal management. If the principal constraint were simply inadequate annual funding, progressively larger appropriations might reasonably be expected to generate proportionate improvements. Where the constraints are structural, however, expenditure effectiveness depends on its composition, sequencing, implementation, and ability to induce longer-term productivity and investment.

Agribusiness transformation further broadens the fiscal question. Agricultural development extends beyond primary production to the network connecting farmers with inputs, technology, finance, storage, processing, transportation, distribution, information, and markets. Some persistent weaknesses are in Philippine agricultural value chains (Adriano and Adriano 2022). Philippine studies likewise highlight the importance of infrastructure and extension services in improving productivity and market participation (Banawag et al. 2025; Vergara et al. 2025). Public expenditure consequently affects not only farm output but also the conditions under which agriculture can move toward higher-value economic activity.

This perspective places expenditure quality at the center of food-security policy. Different categories of agricultural spending perform different functions. Direct assistance can protect farmers from immediate losses or input-price shocks. Consumer support may temporarily improve food access. Irrigation, roads, research, extension, post-harvest systems, and market infrastructure can build productive capacity whose benefits extend beyond the year of expenditure. Under limited fiscal space, these purposes compete for resources. The relevant public fiscal management (PFM) issue is therefore not whether one category is intrinsically superior to another, but whether the composition of expenditure appropriately balances immediate food-security needs with the investments necessary to reduce future vulnerability.

The decentralized structure of agricultural service delivery adds another fiscal dimension. The Local Government Code devolved important agricultural functions to local government units, while the fiscal effects of the Mandanas-Garcia ruling increased the resources available to LGUs and renewed attention to the assignment of functions between national and local governments. Recent Philippine research nevertheless finds continuing differences between formal functional assignments, actual expenditures, institutional capacity, and the services performed by LGUs (Juco, Manasan, and Maddawin 2026). Greater fiscal transfers therefore do not by themselves resolve deficits in personnel, technical capability, planning, procurement, implementation, monitoring, and accountability.

Climate change compounds these fiscal challenges. Philippine agriculture is exposed to extreme weather that can simultaneously damage production and infrastructure, reduce household incomes, and increase government expenditure on rehabilitation, social assistance, and other interventions. Galang and Briones (2024) demonstrate the vulnerability of Philippine agriculture to climate change, while Rivera, Miral, and Ruiz (2024; 2026) situate climate vulnerability within the broader condition of Philippine public finance. Food security therefore requires a fiscal system capable of responding to shocks without repeatedly sacrificing investments essential to future productive capacity.

Against this background, the paper addresses three questions:

1. How has public fiscal management affected agricultural development, food security, and agribusiness transformation in the Philippines from 2016 to 2026?

2. What fiscal, institutional, and implementation constraints have limited the effectiveness of public investments in agriculture and food-system resilience?

3. Which PFM reforms can strengthen food resilience and accelerate agribusiness transformation amid geopolitical, supply chain, and climate-related risks?

The paper argues that the central fiscal challenge confronting Philippine food security lies not simply in the amount appropriated to agriculture, but in the capacity of the public fiscal system to allocate scarce resources strategically, execute expenditure effectively, coordinate responsibilities across institutions and levels of government, adapt to fiscal and food-system shocks, and evaluate whether spending produces intended outcomes. Food security, from this perspective, is as much an expression of fiscal and institutional capacity as of agricultural capacity.

Public Fiscal Management, Food Security, and Agribusiness Transformation

Public Fiscal Management and Expenditure Quality

Public fiscal management provides an appropriate analytical framework for agricultural policy because appropriation is only the beginning of the process through which public resources acquire developmental value. Appropriations authorize expenditure. They do not establish that a project was implemented, that infrastructure was completed, that beneficiaries were reached, or that productivity was improved. Fiscal performance must therefore be evaluated through the processes by which authorized resources are obligated, procured, implemented, disbursed, and ultimately converted into outputs and outcomes.

This distinction is particularly important in agriculture because the sector combines capital-intensive projects with recurrent programs, transfers, subsidies, credit interventions, and technical services implemented by institutions with widely varying capabilities. Infrastructure may be constrained by inadequate project preparation, engineering, procurement, contractor performance, or monitoring. Input-support programs may encounter problems of targeting, beneficiary identification, timing, and distribution. Extension services depend on personnel and operating resources. Expenditure performance must therefore be assessed in relation to the institutional requirements of the financed activity.

Three dimensions of expenditure quality are especially relevant. First, allocative efficiency concerns whether scarce resources are distributed among competing uses in a manner consistent with public priorities and expected developmental returns. Second, operational efficiency concerns whether programs and projects are delivered at reasonable cost and within appropriate timeframes. Third, expenditure effectiveness concerns whether outputs actually contribute to the intended economic or social objective. These distinctions prevent obligation and disbursement rates from becoming substitutes for substantive evaluation.

Philippine agricultural transformation reinforces the importance of allocation. Briones (2025) identifies structural constraints that cannot be addressed adequately through short-term production support alone. Quilloy and Sombilla (2025) similarly emphasize the importance of institutions, policies, and investment in rural transformation. Agricultural PFM must therefore consider whether the composition and sequencing of expenditure address the binding constraints to productivity and transformation.

Agribusiness Transformation as a Fiscal Policy Objective

Agribusiness provides a more demanding measure of fiscal effectiveness than farm output alone. Agricultural value creation occurs through storage, processing, logistics, financing, marketing, technology, and integration into domestic and international markets. Adriano and Adriano (2022) show that Philippine agriculture and fisheries continue to face obstacles in moving upward in the value chain. Such weaknesses limit the extent to which increases in primary production can be translated into higher incomes, investment, and more sophisticated commercial activity.

Public expenditure can address some of these constraints directly. Irrigation and water management improve production reliability. Farm-to-market roads and other connectivity investments reduce the physical cost of market participation. Research and extension support technological diffusion. Post-harvest and storage systems can reduce losses and facilitate value addition. Training, information, and institutional development can improve the ability of producers to participate in higher-value markets. The Philippine Agricultural and Fisheries Extension System illustrates that formal institutional arrangements alone are insufficient where LGUs lack vehicles, technical personnel, and operating resources (Vergara et al. 2025).

The role of fiscal policy is therefore partly catalytic. Government need not substitute for private investment throughout the value chain. It can finance public goods and address market failures that otherwise discourage private activity. Infrastructure, knowledge, connectivity, and institutional capacity can reduce transaction costs and risk. Public expenditure should accordingly be assessed partly by whether it creates conditions for private agricultural and agribusiness investment to expand.

Fiscal Decentralization and Institutional Capacity

The decentralization of agricultural functions creates an additional PFM problem because fiscal decentralization is effective only when expenditure responsibilities, financing, and institutional capacity are reasonably aligned. Juco, Maddawin, and Manasan (2024) identify continuing issues in the assignment of functions under the Philippine decentralized regime. They further show that expanded financing

following the Mandanas-Garcia ruling has not eliminated the differences between formal assignments and actual implementation (Juco, Manasan, and Maddawin 2026).

Fiscal resources and institutional capacity are not equivalent. An LGU may receive greater revenue yet remain constrained by technical staffing, planning, procurement, implementation, or monitoring. Conversely, devolving functions without adequate financing can create an underfunded expenditure responsibility. Effective decentralization therefore requires alignment among what an LGU is expected to perform, the resources available to it, and the capacity required to transform those resources into services.

Differences among LGUs must also be recognized. Uniform functional assignments can yield uneven results where revenue bases, personnel, technical capability, geography, and agricultural conditions vary considerably. National agencies consequently retain important roles in standards, technical assistance, information systems, infrastructure coordination, and capacity development even where front-line services are devolved.

Fiscal Resilience and Research Approach

Climate and external economic shocks make agricultural fiscal management inherently forward-looking. Severe weather can destroy crops, damage irrigation and roads, reduce incomes, raise prices, and create immediate demands on public expenditure. International disruptions can similarly affect food, fertilizer, fuel, and machinery prices. These pressures can arise when government revenues and fiscal space are already constrained.

Galang and Briones (2024) identify the vulnerability of Philippine agriculture to climate change. Rivera, Miral, and Ruiz (2024) examine its implications for fiscal health and explicitly frame climate change as a public-finance challenge requiring fiscal resilience (Rivera, Miral, and Ruiz 2026). The relevant response therefore extends beyond disaster appropriations. It requires anticipating risk, having financing capacity, and incorporating resilience into ordinary expenditure planning.

The study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach covering 2016 to 2026. Documentary analysis draws on Philippine agricultural, fiscal, audit-related; decentralization, climate, food-security, and agribusiness materials assembled for the study. Quantitative fiscal and agricultural indicators are used descriptively and supported by the supplied sources. The paper does not infer causality merely because expenditure and agricultural outcomes moved together. Comparative evidence is used only to illuminate mechanisms and is not treated as evidence of Philippine quantitative effects.

The analytical framework developed here focuses on five institutional capacities: 1) allocative capacity concerns the strategic distribution of scarce resources; 2) execution capacity concerns the ability to transform appropriations into functioning programs and assets; 3) coordinative capacity concerns the alignment of national, local, and private actors; 4) adaptive capacity concerns the ability to respond to shocks without undermining long-term investment; and 5) evaluative capacity concerns the use of performance evidence to influence subsequent resource allocation.

Philippine Agricultural Fiscal Governance, 2016–2026

Expansion and Composition of Agricultural Expenditure

Philippine agricultural fiscal policy during the period under review reflected a substantial commitment of public resources, although fiscal aggregates must be interpreted carefully because published figures may refer variously to the Department of Agriculture (DA), the wider agricultural sector, proposed budgets, the National Expenditure Program, or enacted appropriations. Public fiscal management analysis must distinguish among these stages because proposals, authorizations, obligations, and actual expenditure are not interchangeable.

The composition of expenditure nevertheless demonstrates enduring policy priorities. Agricultural budgets finance commodity support, irrigation, farm-to-market roads, mechanization, research, extension, credit, and related interventions. Briones and Quilinguing (2026) emphasize that food security involves access to safe and nutritious food as well as a stable food supply, which helps explain why agricultural fiscal policy is expected to simultaneously increase production, protect rural incomes, support affordability, modernize agriculture, and respond to shocks.

Infrastructure occupies an important place in this expenditure structure. Banawag et al. (2025) examine the relationship between agricultural productivity and infrastructure development through DA-DPWH convergence in Upper Kalinga, underscoring the value of aligning public infrastructure with agricultural development. Irrigation remains similarly important because reliable water supply affects production, productivity, and resilience. Mechanization, research, extension, and credit address other constraints affecting technological change and market participation.

The diversified character of the agricultural budget raises an allocative problem. The government cannot maximize every objective independently. Direct assistance and subsidies may be needed to address immediate welfare or production pressures, while infrastructure and knowledge investments produce benefits over longer periods.

These expenditures should therefore be assessed according to the fiscal and economic functions they perform and their place within a broader strategy of food security and agricultural transformation.

Budget Execution and the Conversion of Appropriations into Results

Budget execution provides perhaps the clearest demonstration of the difference between fiscal commitment and fiscal performance. Secondary reports in the supplied materials describing Commission on Audit (COA) findings identified approximately PHP 9.8 billion in Department of Agriculture funds that remained unspent (Rivas 2021) and approximately PHP 4.88 billion in unliquidated fund transfers (BusinessWorld 2019). These figures should be treated as secondary accounts of COA findings, as the original audit reports are not among the materials used in this paper.

Their fiscal significance nevertheless extends beyond the amounts involved. Unobligated appropriations can indicate weaknesses in readiness, procurement, scheduling, or implementation capacity. Unliquidated transfers present a different accountability problem because funds may already have left the transferring agency while documentation establishing their proper use remains incomplete. Both conditions weaken the connection between legislative authorization and actual public-service delivery.

Consequently, absorptive capacity is central to agricultural PFM. Expanding an agency's appropriation more rapidly than its technical, procurement, financial-management, and monitoring capabilities can increase the risk of delayed or ineffective implementation. This does not imply that additional resources are unnecessary. It means that the binding fiscal constraint may lie partly in implementation capability rather than solely in the size of the budget ceiling.

Sectoral outcomes must also be interpreted carefully. Bartelet et al. (2025) find that Philippine rice production performance varies substantially across regions and is shaped by structural and development conditions. Weather, technology, land use, markets, infrastructure, and public intervention interact. Agricultural growth cannot, therefore, be mechanically attributed to annual fiscal expansion. A more defensible fiscal inquiry examines whether expenditure produced intended intermediate outputs and whether those outputs addressed identified constraints.

Procurement, Project Preparation, and Public Investment Management

Capital expenditure exposes weaknesses in public investment management particularly clearly. Roads, irrigation, post-harvest facilities, and other infrastructure require adequate design, realistic costing, procurement readiness, construction management, monitoring, and maintenance. Failure at any stage can delay expenditure, increase project costs, or reduce the productive value of the completed asset.

Espina et al. (2026) directly examine cost overruns and structural-quality outcomes in selected Philippine farm-to-market road projects. The significance of cost overruns is both fiscal and engineering. Additional resources required to complete an underestimated project reduce the government's capacity to finance other investments. Weak project preparation, therefore, affects allocative efficiency by changing the actual fiscal cost of the asset after resources have already been committed.

Hence, budget utilization alone is an incomplete performance measure for capital expenditure. Obligation and disbursement are necessary, but the objective is not to spend appropriations as rapidly as possible. Public investment should produce economically justified and functional assets within reasonable cost and time parameters. Project readiness should accordingly precede budget inclusion to the extent practicable.

Agricultural investments should also be evaluated as complementary parts of a food system. Roads improve connectivity, but their economic return may be constrained by inadequate storage or market infrastructure. Irrigation can raise output, but greater production does not necessarily increase farm income where marketing constraints remain severe. Mechanization may improve efficiency but depends on financing, maintenance, skills, and appropriate production conditions. Public investment management should therefore consider networks of complementary assets rather than isolated projects.

Fiscal Decentralization after Mandanas-Garcia

Mandanas-Garcia significantly altered the fiscal environment of local governance by expanding the revenue base from which the LGUs' just share in national taxes is computed. The reform created greater fiscal room at the local level and strengthened the financial basis of devolution. It also highlighted the distinction between fiscal transfers and the capacity to perform devolved functions.

Juco, Manasan, and Maddawin (2026) identify uneven utilization of increased local financing and ongoing constraints related to fiscal imbalance, institutional

capacity, enforcement, and the political economy. Their findings are especially relevant to agriculture, where extension, local infrastructure, farmer support, and related services depend heavily on LGU implementation. Vergara et al. (2025) provide a practical illustration through the Philippine Agricultural and Fisheries Extension System (PAFES) implementation in Guimaras, identifying the need for technical personnel, vehicles, and additional operating resources. The implication is not that decentralization is inherently ineffective. Rather, fiscal decentralization must incorporate the administrative capability required to perform expenditure responsibilities. Transfers cannot by themselves produce services where the organizational inputs necessary for implementation are absent.

The national government consequently retains a legitimate role in technical standards, capacity development, information systems, and coordination. This does not require reversing devolution. It requires recognizing that decentralized expenditure frequently depends on national support, and that national programs often, in turn, depend on local implementation.

Agriculture makes this complementarity particularly visible. National infrastructure may require local maintenance and extension support. Local programs may depend upon national irrigation, credit, research, or market infrastructure. Effective fiscal decentralization therefore requires coherent expenditure across levels of government rather than simple institutional separation.

Expenditure Quality and the Transformation Gap

The Philippine agricultural fiscal problem cannot be reduced either to simple underfunding or to generalized expenditure failure. Public resources have financed significant productive assets and services, and Philippine studies underscore the importance of infrastructure, technology, and extension services for agricultural development (Villano et al. 2014; Banawag et al. 2025). At the same time, persistent value-chain weaknesses, implementation constraints, and uneven local capability limit the transformative effect of fiscal expansion.

Adriano and Adriano (2022) provide an important connection between public expenditure and agribusiness transformation. Moving agriculture up the value-added ladder requires conditions that enable production to connect effectively with processing, logistics, finance, technology, and markets. Infrastructure, research, extension, and institutional development are therefore not simply sectoral expenditures. They constitute parts of a broader productive system.

Opportunity cost becomes central in this context. Recurrent programs addressing immediate production or affordability pressures may be necessary, but their

continuation must be evaluated alongside expenditure that can reduce the recurrence of those pressures. A fiscal system that repeatedly finances the consequences of low productivity while failing to address its causes may reproduce the same expenditure demands in future budgets.

The central PFM problem, therefore, concerns the entire process by which fiscal resources are converted into development. Allocation determines whether structural constraints receive priority. Execution determines whether appropriations become services and assets. Public investment management determines the cost and quality of capital formation. Intergovernmental fiscal relations determine whether resources and responsibilities reinforce one another. These factors explain why the size of the agricultural budget alone is an inadequate measure of government effectiveness.

From Agricultural Spending to Fiscal and Food Resilience

Repurposing Expenditure and Improving Allocative Efficiency

Agricultural reform should not be exclusively framed as a demand for continuously larger appropriations. Fiscal space is constrained, and agriculture competes with education, health, infrastructure, social protection, debt service, climate adaptation, and other public priorities. A more sustainable PFM approach asks whether existing agricultural resources can produce greater developmental value through improved allocation.

Sánchez et al. (2026), using comparative evidence from sub-Saharan African countries, show that agricultural budgets can be repurposed across policy instruments to pursue multiple objectives under fiscal constraints. Their quantitative estimates cannot be applied to the Philippines. Their relevance lies instead in the underlying fiscal principle that different allocations within a fixed envelope can produce different outcomes.

For Philippine agriculture, this supports stronger expenditure review. Programs should be assessed according to objectives, implementation performance, distributional consequences, and contribution to productivity or resilience. Weak performance need not result automatically in program abolition. It may justify redesign, better targeting, improved delivery, or reallocation toward complementary investments.

Repurposing also requires avoiding a false choice between subsidies and investment. Direct support may be indispensable during severe shocks. The relevant question is whether recurrent support has become sufficiently entrenched to crowd out

expenditure capable of reducing future vulnerability. Public fiscal management should make that trade-off visible and subject it to periodic evaluation.

Strengthening Public Investment Management

A second priority is to increase the productivity of capital expenditure already devoted to agriculture. Irrigation, roads, storage, post-harvest facilities, logistics, and related infrastructure should be treated as components of an integrated food-system investment strategy. Stronger project preparation, realistic costing, procurement readiness, implementation capability, and maintenance are essential to this approach.

Poorly prepared projects consume fiscal space without necessarily creating the expected quantity or quality of public capital. Cost overruns reduce the capacity to finance other investments, while delayed completion postpones the benefits that originally justified expenditure (Espina et al. 2026).

Investment selection should also reflect complementarity. Infrastructure should be located and prioritized in relation to production systems, value chains, and market opportunities. The convergence examined by Banawag et al. (2025) illustrates the importance of aligning public infrastructure with agricultural development rather than treating infrastructure expenditure as institutionally separate from sectoral objectives.

Such an approach can also strengthen the catalytic function of public investment. Government provision of infrastructure, knowledge, market information, and institutional support can lower the transaction costs and risks faced by private investors. Public expenditure can therefore contribute to agribusiness transformation by creating conditions that make private capital more productive and commercially viable.

Building Adaptive Fiscal Governance

The third reform priority concerns fiscal adaptation to shocks. Climate change makes this particularly urgent. Galang and Briones (2024) identify the risks confronting Philippine agriculture, while Rivera, Miral, and Ruiz (2024) demonstrate the relationship between climate change and fiscal health. They consequently argue for stronger fiscal resilience (Rivera, Miral, and Ruiz 2026).

The central fiscal problem is intertemporal. Disasters and other shocks may require immediate expenditure for relief, rehabilitation, producer support, or food affordability. Where such spending is repeatedly financed through reductions in long-term productive investment, however, current stabilization can increase future vulnerability.

Adaptive fiscal governance should therefore integrate foreseeable risks into medium-term planning. Fiscal buffers, contingency financing, risk-transfer mechanisms, climate-responsive investment, and clearer identification of expenditures that should be protected during fiscal stress can reduce reliance on ad hoc reallocations.

The principle extends beyond climate. Ruiz and Rivera (2026) examine countercyclical fiscal policy in the Philippines under external shocks. Supply-chain disruptions can likewise affect food, fertilizer, fuel, and machinery. Vyas et al. (2021), although not a Philippine fiscal study, demonstrate how shocks can propagate through food supply chains. The relevant lesson is that fiscal planning for food security should recognize the interdependence of domestic production, logistics, trade, and public finance.

Strengthening Intergovernmental Fiscal Governance

The next phase of agricultural devolution should focus less on formal transfers of functions and more on whether responsibilities, financing, and institutional capability are aligned. Mandanas-Garcia expanded the local fiscal room but did not eliminate differences in implementation capability (Juco, Manasan, and Maddawin 2026).

Capacity development should therefore be treated as part of fiscal reform. Local planning, procurement, financial management, technical staffing, monitoring, and extension determine whether devolved resources are translated into effective services. National support may be justified where capability constraints inhibit implementation, but that support should strengthen rather than displace local responsibility.

Greater emphasis should also be placed on shared outcomes. National and local agricultural budgets frequently finance complementary activities, yet institutional budgeting tends to evaluate agencies within organizational boundaries. Food security requires a broader perspective in which expenditures are assessed according to their combined effects on production systems and value chains.

Performance information is essential. Decentralization should not be evaluated solely through the amount transferred or spent. It should also be assessed according to whether assigned services were delivered, infrastructure became functional, intended users were reached, and locally binding constraints were reduced.

A Public Fiscal Management and Food Resilience Framework

The findings support a Public Fiscal Management and Food Resilience Framework based on five mutually reinforcing institutional capacities. The framework is a synthesis developed from the Philippine evidence examined in this paper rather than

a model adopted from any single source. Allocative capacity is the ability to distribute scarce fiscal resources among competing interventions in a manner that balances immediate welfare, productivity, resilience, and long-term transformation. It requires explicit consideration of opportunity cost and willingness to repurpose expenditure when evidence indicates stronger alternative uses.

Execution capacity is the ability to convert appropriations into timely obligations, procurement, disbursements, completed assets, and functioning services. It encompasses project readiness, technical staffing, financial management, procurement, implementation and monitoring. High utilization is relevant but insufficient where expenditure fails to produce intended outputs.

Coordinative capacity is the ability to align expenditure across national agencies, LGUs, and private actors. Agricultural transformation depends on complementarities among infrastructure, technology, finance, extension, processing, logistics, and markets. Coordination is therefore a fiscal and institutional requirement.

Adaptive capacity is the ability to absorb climate, commodity, geopolitical, and supply chain shocks, while protecting strategically important long-term expenditures. It requires risk management, fiscal buffers, and medium-term planning rather than exclusive reliance on post-shock reallocations.

Evaluative capacity is the ability to connect expenditure with implementation, outputs, and outcomes and to use those findings in subsequent budget decisions. Programs producing strong results may justify continuation or expansion. Programs that perform poorly may require redesign, better targeting, or repurposing.

These capacities are interdependent. Efficient allocation has limited value where implementation consistently fails. High execution rates cannot compensate for expenditure directed toward low-value activities. Fiscal devolution cannot succeed where capacity and coordination remain weak. Adaptability becomes short-term when productive investment is repeatedly sacrificed. Evaluation has little effect when its findings do not influence future budgets. Fiscal resilience therefore means more than the ability to finance an emergency. It is the capacity of the fiscal system to preserve the continuity and quality of public action under uncertainty. Applied to agriculture, it requires government to respond to immediate food-security pressures while continually strengthening the productive capacity that makes future shocks less damaging.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Philippine agricultural fiscal governance from 2016 to 2026 demonstrates that food security cannot be adequately assessed by the size of the agricultural budget. The government has financed substantial infrastructure, modernization, producer support, research, extension, and related programs, yet structural problems in productivity, market integration, institutional capability, and implementation remain. The appropriate conclusion is neither that agricultural spending has been broadly ineffective nor that larger budgets alone will resolve these weaknesses. The evidence instead identifies the quality of fiscal management as a critical determinant of the public value obtained from agricultural expenditure.

The first research question concerned how PFM affected agricultural development, food security, and agribusiness transformation. Public expenditure has enabled infrastructure, technology, extension, assistance, and other interventions, but these operate within an agricultural structure characterized by uneven transformation and persistent productivity constraints (Briones 2025; Quilloy and Sombilla 2025). Fiscal policy is most likely to contribute to transformation when resources address structural constraints rather than merely recurring manifestations of those constraints.

The second question focused on fiscal, institutional, and implementation barriers. The evidence identifies weaknesses in execution, project preparation, investment management, value-chain coordination, and decentralized implementation. Mandanas-Garcia is particularly instructive because it demonstrates that additional fiscal resources do not automatically create administrative capability (Juco, Manasan, and Maddawin 2026). Effective decentralization requires alignment among expenditure responsibilities, financing, institutional capacity, and accountability.

The third question dwelled on PFM reform. The findings support a shift from incremental agricultural budgeting toward strategic expenditure management. This includes periodic review and repurposing of expenditure, stronger public investment management, improved intergovernmental coordination, and integration of climate and other fiscal risks into medium-term planning. Comparative research on agricultural-budget repurposing reinforces the importance of expenditure composition, but Philippine decisions must ultimately be based on Philippine performance evidence (Sánchez et al. 2026).

The broader implication is that food resilience should be treated as a fiscal-governance objective. Climate and external shocks require rapid government intervention, but recurrent emergencies should not continuously erode the productive investments necessary to reduce future vulnerability. Philippine research increasingly demonstrates

the connection between climate resilience and fiscal resilience (Galang and Briones 2024; Rivera, Miral, and Ruiz 2024; Rivera, Miral, and Ruiz 2026).

The Public Fiscal Management and Food Resilience Framework proposed in this paper therefore shifts attention from appropriations alone toward the state's allocative, execution, coordinative, adaptive, and evaluative capacities. It also situates agribusiness transformation within PFM by recognizing that government expenditure can provide the infrastructure, institutional conditions, knowledge, and risk reduction necessary for private productive activity to expand.

Food security is consequently more than an agricultural outcome. It is also a measure of state capacity. A fiscally resilient state must be able to meet immediate food-security needs while preserving the investments necessary for future productivity. For the Philippines, the policy imperative is therefore not simply to spend more on agriculture, but to ensure that scarce public resources are strategically selected, competently implemented, coordinated across institutions, protected against foreseeable risks, and continuously reassessed in light of results.

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Green Brain Drain in the Philippines: Dependency, Economic Security, and Challenge to Climate Resilience

Mary Krizangelic J. Cabuslay[1]

1 Department of International Development, Innovation, and Sustainability, Miriam College
cabuslaymk@gmail.com

Filipinos' increasing vulnerability to climate-induced energy disruptions highlights the urgent need for a renewable energy transition. The photo was taken on Friday, September 11, at 8:35 PM in Brgy. Phil-am, Quezon City.



Abstract

Geopolitical tensions and worsening climate impacts have accelerated the green transition, driving a rising demand for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) professionals. As the Philippines navigates its Strategic Outlook for 2030, the country has long struggled to retain its own breed of STEM professionals, and the recent US–Iran conflict has further exposed the nation's vulnerabilities in energy and climate resilience. While the third phase of migration and development represents multidimensional benefits such as household remittances, this paper argues that the continued emigration of Filipino STEM professionals vital to the climate, energy, and environment sectors remains a critical threat to national economic security. Although state programs like the DOST-SEI Balik Scientist Program are valuable for encouraging knowledge transfer, the loss of STEM professionals, or the green brain drain, remains a huge loss of human capital, resulting in a slow climate response and energy transition of the country. This vulnerability is exacerbated by an institutional disconnect where local green career paths remain invisible to a youth demographic whose professional aspirations are already structurally normalized toward migration. Grounded in dependency theory, this paper posits that this phenomenon facilitates a new form of systemic resource extraction, wherein developed nations absorb the Philippines' green human capital to reach their own energy security and climate adaptation goals. This dynamic leaves the domestic state structurally underdeveloped, creating a severe labor bottleneck that paralyzes localized climate resilience and stalls broader regional initiatives, such as the ASEAN Power Grid and ASEAN Energy Transition Agenda. Relying solely on state-sponsored brain circulation programs and educational reforms is insufficient. This study concludes that the Philippines must urgently activate the business–government nexus, fostering strategic partnerships between the government and the private green technology sector to cultivate a competitive domestic innovation ecosystem capable of mobilizing the essential talent required toward its sustainability goals.

Keywords: Green brain drain, Economic security, Climate resilience, ASEAN Energy Transition Agenda

Introduction

The 2020s have seen increasing geopolitical tensions and worsening ecological conditions, including a shift from hyper-globalization to economic protectionism and regional conflicts (Esrawan 2026). This global restructuring is evident in the escalating competition for critical resources for semiconductors and artificial intelligence (AI). While these changing dynamics drive business developments and supply chain de-risking, the world confronts a challenge that disrupts and damages economies worse than before: climate change. This has exposed vulnerabilities of many developing countries in Southeast Asia, especially the Philippines.

Geopolitical tensions and great power competitions that have arisen such as the US–China trade wars and Russian–Ukraine war. In early February, economies experienced a global shock to one of the most used nonrenewable energy sources: crude oil. The conflict escalation between the United States and Iran led to the Strait of Hormuz's closure, resulting in a sharp rise in prices of electricity and other commodities (Fajardo-Jarilla 2026). The Philippines, highly dependent on Iran's oil production, took the hardest hit and is the first to declare an energy security crisis in Southeast Asia (Palatino 2026). This propelled the urgent need to prioritize the transition and diversification to renewable energy (Lalu 2026).

These renewed uncertainties have further shaped and accelerated the green transition (Rusli, 2026). The green economy shift has led to a growing demand for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) professionals to fill the green jobs critical for national energy security and climate resilience. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, n.d.), green jobs are decent jobs that contribute to the preservation, protection, and/or restoration of the environment, and are found across diverse industries, from agriculture to energy and climate action. It is projected that by 2030, around 24 million green jobs will open by adopting sustainable governance in the energy sector (ILO 2018). To address the green jobs boom toward the renewable energy transition and climate adaptation, upskilling, and reskilling opportunities are crucial for producing the green talents needed (Prising 2024).

The Philippines' climate crisis and energy vulnerability drove the acceleration of the national development plans and policies such as the Green Jobs Act of 2016 and the Balik Scientist Program to address the 75 percent shortage of skilled workers toward becoming a "green jobs leader" (Atienza 2025). These programs focus on education, training, compensation, and social service support for Filipino STEM professionals to ensure brain circulation either short term or long term. While the Philippines is known to have a pool of STEM talent (Bosano 2025), the country struggles to retain its own talent. This is called the "green brain drain," which refers to the loss of STEM

talents in environmental science, renewable energy, and sustainability fields from one organization, sector, or country to another, leading to the loss of human capital. Viewed through dependency theory, this phenomenon constitutes a modern form of systemic resource extraction. Developed economies aggressively absorb specialized human capital from developing, climate-vulnerable states to secure their green transition. This is further entrenched by a culture of migration and institutional disconnects that leave Filipino youth unaware of local green opportunities (Kerr et al. 2024). Hence, if the green brain drain is left unchecked, not only will the Philippines' renewable energy transition and climate adaptation and mitigation be slowed but may also hinder its regional role in the ASEAN Energy Transition Agenda and the planned ASEAN Power Grid.

Green Brain Drain of Filipino STEM Professionals

Scholars argue that not all migration constitutes a "brain drain." According to Lowell (2003), migration must qualify as "brain drain" when two conditions are met: a significant loss of the highly educated population, and the adverse economic consequences brought by these outflows. Brain drain is defined to often pull out the best and brightest from their country of origin to seek better career opportunities and reward for their marketability. These are often skilled workers such as researchers, engineers, scientists, and technicians whose expertise and services contribute to boosting global market competition and advancement of technology in the receiving country (Koerting 2018). This helps us better understand the Philippines' case using its historical patterns of migration that have affected science, technology, and potentially green jobs in the modern world.

As a labor-exporting country, the Philippines is known to fill overseas labor shortages. The emigration of highly skilled professionals began in the mid to late 1960s, as scientists, engineers, physicians, teachers, and seamen were recruited abroad, contributing to both the loss of human resources and delays in national development (Miralao 2010). Changes in immigration policies in developed countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and some Middle East economies in the 1970s further increased Filipino worker outflows (Alburo and Abella 2022). Although the Philippines produced a large pool of scientists and engineers, domestic economic development remained sluggish and unable to fully absorb these professionals. Aligning the educational system and labor market with domestic needs would have been key to retaining Filipino STEM talents instead of directing their value elsewhere (Pernia 1976).

However, the outflow of Filipino STEM professionals further intensified from the 1980s, with approximately 23.13 percent of total Filipino STEM workers who migrated by the end of 2010, according to the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) (Legaspi 2008). Another Science Education Institute study revealed that around 17,756, or 59 percent, of Filipino STEM talents, including chemists, physicists, engineers, and life science professionals, had migrated to developed countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States over the preceding 12 years (Domingo 2012). The study attributed this migration to factors including higher salaries, marketability, and stronger research and development support in host countries (Dioquino 2012). This intensified emigration depleted the domestic pool of human capital, contributing to the brain drain that the country continues to experience. Philippine science and technology brain drain had increased by 148 percent, affecting the country's research and development sector (DOST 2011).

The existing literature on brain drain and STEM migration does not necessarily distinguish professionals according to their contribution to the emerging green economy. Simultaneously, the accelerating global transition toward renewable energy, climate adaptation, environmental management, and sustainable infrastructure has increased the strategic importance of specialized STEM expertise. Green jobs require technical knowledge across sectors, including renewable energy, engineering, environmental science, climate research, and related fields. The global demand for these skills therefore creates a particular form of skilled migration that has implications beyond the conventional loss of human capital.

Yet, there is no universally established definition of "green brain drain" as a distinct category within the broader literature on brain drain and skilled migration. This paper therefore develops a working conceptualization based on the intersection of existing scholarship on brain drain, STEM migration, green jobs, climate resilience, and the Philippine development context. In this research, green brain drain refers to the emigration and consequent loss of highly skilled professionals whose knowledge, expertise, and technical abilities are directly relevant to renewable energy, environmental management, climate science, sustainable infrastructure, and other sectors essential to the green transition. The concept therefore emphasizes not simply the movement of STEM professionals abroad, but the loss of strategically relevant human capital especially for climate-vulnerable developing countries.

This distinction is imperative as not all STEM migration constitutes green brain drain. A scientist, engineer, or technology professional becomes relevant to the concept insofar as their expertise contributes to the sectors and capabilities required for the green transition. Green brain may therefore be understood as a subset of broader STEM brain drain in which the international migration of specialized professionals reduces the domestic pool of expertise available to develop, implement,

and sustain climate, environmental, and sustainable projects. With existing migration datasets limitations, this study does not claim to quantify the total number of Filipino green professionals who have migrated abroad. Rather, it uses existing evidence on Filipino STEM migration and the growing demand for green skills and renewable energy expertise, to develop and examine green brain drain as a distinct conceptual and policy problem.

This must also be understood within the structural conditions of the Philippine labor and innovation ecosystem. The migration of green-relevant STEM professionals does not occur independently of domestic conditions. Limited investment in human capital, insufficient research and development infrastructure, constrained domestic career pathways, and a deeply entrenched culture of migration can reduce the country's capacity to retain specialized talent. At the same time, the stronger international demand, higher compensation, advanced research infrastructure, and more predictable career opportunities in developed economies create powerful incentives for Filipino professionals to migrate. Therefore, green brain drain emerges from the interaction between the domestic structural constraints and the international demand for specialized human capital.

This paper consequently proposes the following conceptual framework:

> **Domestic structural constraints**
>
> (underinvestment in human capital + weak R&D and physical ecosystem + limited domestic green career pathways + migration-oriented labor market and culture)
>
> +
>
> **International demand for STEM expertise**
>
> (higher compensation + advanced research infrastructure + stronger career opportunities + green transition demand)
>
> =
>
> **Green Brain Drain**

In this framework, green brain drain refers to the international migration and loss of green-relevant Filipino STEM professionals. Its significance lies not only in the numerical reduction of available workers, but in the loss of specialized knowledge and technical capabilities necessary to absorb, adapt, develop, and locally implement green technologies and projects. Where domestic institutional capacity to retain, replace, or circulate this expertise is weak, the loss of specialized human capital can reduce domestic innovation and absorptive capacity. In this sense, green brain drain represents a human capital constraint on the Philippines' ability to translate

its natural resources, financial investments, and imported technologies into domestic productive and climate-resilient capacity.

The framework does not treat these variables as components of a measurable index. Rather, it presents a proposed structural pathway through which domestic conditions and international demand can contribute to the emergence of green brain drain, and subsequently, constrain domestic green capacity.

This relationship can be summarized as:

> ↑ Green Brain Drain → ↓ Domestic Green Capacity → ↓ Climate-Resilience Capacity

This representation is not a strict mathematical or deterministic relationship. Rather, it represents the paper's proposition that if the institutional capacity to retain, replace, or circulate specialized expertise is weak, then there is increasing losses of green-relevant human capital that can constrain the country's ability to implement its climate and energy initiatives.

Development Plans and Policies on Economic Security and Climate Resilience

Brain drain, however, is not irreversible and a permanent loss to developing nations. Key strategies such as supporting return migration, promoting knowledge transfer, and encouraging direct investments can reverse its impact toward boosting local innovations, strengthening economies, and transforming brain waste and drain into circulation (UN Development Programme [UNDP] 2017). Fulfilling these goals, the Philippines has adapted policies, strategies, and mechanisms to encourage and ensure that Filipino STEM professionals remain or return to the country to serve and share their expertise.

The Philippines introduced the 2016 Green Jobs Act, a pioneering legislation in Southeast Asia to promote sustainable development, create decent jobs, and build climate resilience. This serves as a mechanism to encourage the creation and maintenance of green jobs in the green economy. The Act includes the National Green Jobs Human Resource Development Plan (NGJHRDP) focused on upskilling and reskilling the workforce, providing jobs in the clean energy sector, and facilitating business programs for green jobs (International Energy Agency 2023). It also defined green jobs in the Philippine context as employment that contributes to preserving or restoring the quality of the environment (Son and Gamboa 2024). Another national program revitalized to promote brain circulation is the DOST-SEI Balik Scientist

Program, encouraging overseas Filipino STEM workers to return temporarily or permanently to share their expertise and strengthen the country's capacity in the science and technology field (Ferreras 2025). It promises competitive compensation, daily and housing allowances, access to research and development funding, and comprehensive family and funding support ranging from short-term (15 days to 6 months) to long-term service of 1 to 3 years (DOST, n.d.). This initiative also participates in reshaping the brain drain in contemporary Philippine migration as it invests global expertise, networks, and skills into the local economy (Commission on Filipinos Overseas 2026).

However, these policies remain limited given that the domestic science and innovation ecosystem in the country remains weak. Groups of scientists and STEM advocacy organizations have lamented and pushed for intensified government efforts in providing a comprehensive plan to support the science and technology field, citing the biggest concern on research and development investment, which contributes to a significant gap in research productivity between the Philippines and its neighboring countries (Untalan 2025). This exposes the challenges in sustaining Filipino STEM professionals due to a lack of support in institutions needing adequate funding, advanced facilities and laboratories, and experts for training, which can lead to uncertain career pathways. This has been the enduring insight of many Filipinos as it contributes to the shortage of researchers toward scientific advancement and innovation (Bilyonaryo News Channel Staff 2026). Although President Marcos Jr. has promised to support Filipino STEM professionals whilst urging them to stay and serve the country (Manahan 2022), the country remains to have a relatively low gross research and development expenditure of 0.3 percent of its gross domestic product, far below the global average (Legarde 2025). Institutional capability to absorb scientists and support their expertise and work are critical challenges that must be addressed to ensure brain drain reversal (Abrigo et al. 2021).

As climate change affects the Philippines' economic productivity, the continued loss of Filipino STEM professionals poses a serious risk to the country's ability to be competitive in the green economy and its capacity to ensure energy security and climate resilience both at the domestic and regional level.

Dependency Theory on Filipino STEM Professionals: Unequal Exchange of Human Capital

While these domestic policies present persistent implementation gaps, the migration of Filipino STEM professionals remains a structural issue. To analyze why green brain drain may reflect a structural feature of the global economy rather than an

accidental market failure, this paper draws on the development theories synthesized by Katie Willis (2005) in Theories and Practices of Development. Willis explains that dependency theory, rooted in the structuralist critiques of Latin American scholars and world-systems analysis, rejects the modernization theory assumption that all countries progress in a uniform path toward development. Instead, the global capitalist system is characterized by unequal exchange between wealthy countries or the core and developing nations or the periphery, with the latter remaining structurally dependent on the former (Willis 2005).

In the context of the 21st-century climate and energy crisis, this systematic extraction has evolved. Applying Willis' insights to the Philippines, the state functions as an educational incubator: domestic public and private sectors bear much of the fiscal and social cost of training STEM professionals through state universities and underfunded local institutions. Yet, core economies such as the United States, Canada, and Western Europe can use their greater capital advantages, including higher compensation, advanced research infrastructure, and more accessible career pathways, to attract Filipino STEM professionals. The core therefore no longer relies solely on physical resources, but also benefits from the movement of specialized human capital.

Through this perspective, this loss of human capital has implications beyond domestic labour shortages. If the Philippines bears substantial social and public cost in educating and training STEM professionals, while developed economies subsequently attract these professionals through significantly stronger compensation, infrastructure, and career opportunities, this international mobility of green talent can reproduce an unequal exchange of human capital. The green transition may therefore create a new dimension of dependency in which the Global South supplies not only raw materials and other productive resources, but also the specialized human capital required to achieve the green transition objectives of wealthier economies.

This contemporary dynamic can also be interpreted through the critical literature on "green colonialism," although the present study uses the concept more cautiously rather than equating it directly with classical colonial extraction. Historically, colonial and postcolonial relations involved the extraction of physical resources from the Global South to support accumulation in the Global North. In the contemporary green transition, similar asymmetries may emerge through the movement of strategic knowledge, skills, and human capital (Reyes 2024). The concern is therefore not that international migration is inherently colonial, but that differences in wages, research infrastructure, career opportunities, and institutional capacity may enable wealthier economies to benefit from human capital whose education and development cost have been substantially borne by developing countries. Rather than addressing these deficits solely through domestic educational investments, core nations may reduce

their own training costs by attracting qualified scientists, researchers, and engineers from peripheral states like the Philippines (Alimonda 2022).

The mechanics of green colonialism operate through structural pull factors. Developed nations provide institutional ecosystems characterized by stronger research and development funding, advanced laboratory facilities, competitive salaries, and predictable long-term career opportunities. When Filipino STEM professionals migrate due to these disparities, the Philippines effectively subsidizes the green transitions of wealthier nations through the public resources invested in their education and training. Remittances provide important short-term financial benefits, but they do not necessarily replace the domestic productive capacity lost through continued migration, particularly in a country that has yet to fully industrialize (Maniego 2026).

Willis (2005) emphasizes that this dynamic can lock peripheral states into structural dependence. By absorbing the Philippines' green human capital, developed nations may strengthen their own green transitions while reducing the expertise available for domestic climate resilience. This dynamic can also reinforce the domestic culture of migration, particularly where working abroad is perceived as a pathway to improve one's quality of life (Angelita and Perbawani 2024). The resulting loss of specialized expertise may constrain the Philippines' capacity to develop domestic science, achieve energy security, and strengthen climate resilience.

Untapped Renewable Energy Potential and Domestic Vulnerabilities

The tragedy of the green brain drain becomes even more glaring when evaluated against the staggering magnitude of the Philippines' untapped renewable energy potential. As an archipelago situated along the Pacific Ring of Fire and the typhoon belt, the Philippines possesses immense natural endowments in clean energy sources. According to the Department of Energy (DOE 2024) and the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA 2024), the country holds an estimated 76 gigawatts (GW) of offshore and onshore wind potential, massive solar irradiance averaging 5.1 kWh per square meter daily, and over 4,000 megawatts (MW) of untapped geothermal capacity, positioning the nation as a potential powerhouse in Southeast Asian renewable energy.

However, harnessing these renewable energy resources requires a substantial pool of specialized domestic professionals, including engineers, grid specialists, environmental assessors, project developers, and technical workers capable of designing, implementing, and maintaining renewable energy infrastructure. The Philippine Energy Plan (PEP) outlines targets to increase the share of renewable energy in the power generation mix

to 35 percent by 2030 and 50 percent by 2040 (Agence France-Presse, Morella, and Williams 2026). Yet the sector already faces a deficit of green human capital (Atienza 2025). Another Department of Labor and Employment-Institute for Labor Studies study on 32 renewable energy companies representing approximately 500 workers found that 75 percent of participating companies experienced difficulty filling technical positions (Son 2024). The study identified skills gaps across the sector and emphasized the need to strengthen renewable energy education, training, and industry-academia partnerships.

This evidence strengthens the human capital dimension of the green transition. The challenge is therefore not simply whether the Philippines possesses sufficient renewable energy resources, but whether it has the specialized workforce and institutional capacity required to convert these resources into functioning infrastructure. As green-relevant STEM continues to migrate, these human capital constraints may increase dependence on external technical expertise and foreign firms for project development, engineering, and technology implementation while local communities remain vulnerable to chronic energy poverty and high electricity tariffs.

Confronting the untapped vast domestic natural energy potential of the Philippines may also hinder the development of decade-long projects such as the Malampaya Energy Project, the country's sole source of indigenous, locally-produced renewable energy in Palawan (Paunan 2026) and its search for main renewable energy sources. As one of the lowest installed energy capacities in Southeast Asia (International Monetary Fund 2025), this potential regional consequence does not only affect the Philippines' energy security but also poses a threat to the plans and developments of the ASEAN in strengthening energy security in the region.

Regional Paralysis: The ASEAN Energy Transition Agenda and the Power Grid Bottleneck

The domestic consequences of this dependency do not stop at the Philippine archipelago, but they ripple outward, creating severe bottlenecks for regional cooperation in Southeast Asia. For years, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has championed multilateral frameworks designed to secure regional energy security and independence, most notably the ASEAN Power Grid (APG) and the broader ASEAN Energy Transition Agenda outlined under the ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation (APAEC) (ASEAN Center for Energy 2024). These regional architectures rely heavily on cross-border grid integration, shared technical standards, and coordinated renewable energy investments spanning solar, wind, and geothermal assets.

The ASEAN Power Grid (APG), first conceptualized in the 1990s and continuously updated through successive APAEC iterations, including the current 2026–2030 roadmap, represents a visionary multilateral initiative to interconnect national electricity networks across Southeast Asia. The core objective of the APG is to optimize regional energy resources, allowing surplus renewable energy generated in one member state, such as hydropower in Laos or geothermal potential in Indonesia and the Philippines, to be transmitted across borders to high-demand industrial centers like Singapore and peninsular Malaysia (ASEAN Centre for Energy 2024). Furthermore, the region possesses one of the world's largest untapped solar energy potentials and highlights the importance of innovation, appropriate policy frameworks, and cross-border collaboration in advancing solar deployment (Youth for Energy Southeast Asia 2026). However, realizing this high-voltage, transboundary network demands sophisticated regional cooperation, harmonized regulatory frameworks, and advanced technical engineering capabilities.

Herein lies a potential regional implication of green brain drain. Regional integration depends not only on physical interconnection but also on the technical and institutional capacity of participating states. As projected by IRENA (2025), Southeast Asia requires substantial technical expertise to harmonize national grids and develop capital-intensive renewable infrastructure. When domestic development plans such as the Philippine Energy Plan (PEP) face shortages of the human capital required for infrastructure such as smart grids and offshore wind farms, the country may struggle to fully utilize its energy potential and contribute effectively to regional energy transition commitments. The continued loss of green-relevant STEM professionals may therefore increase reliance on foreign technology providers and external consultants. Green brain drain does not alone determine the success of or failure of the ASEAN Power Grid, but it represents one national human capital constraint that may affect broader regional energy transition initiatives.

Policy Recommendations and the Business–Government Nexus

The underlying challenge is the weakness of the domestic ecosystem that produces, retains, employs, and continuously develops green-relevant human capital. Accordingly, policy interventions should address four interconnected areas: human-capital retention and circulation, domestic green career pathways, research and absorptive capacity, and business–government partnerships.

First, the government should develop a Green Human Capital Retention and Circulation Framework that links existing programs such as the DOST-SEI Balik Scientist Program with longer-term domestic employment and research

opportunities. The state can use diaspora networks visiting scientist arrangements, joint research projects, and industry placements to maintain connections between Filipino STEM professionals abroad and domestic institutions. This approach recognizes that international mobility is not inherently harmful; the policy objective should instead be to ensure that mobility generates knowledge circulation and domestic capacity rather than permanent human capital loss.

Second, the government should strengthen the visibility and accessibility of domestic green career pathways. The Green Jobs act already provides for the identification of green careers, professions, skills, and emerging enterprises while the National Green Jobs Human Resource Development Plan provides a framework for developing the skills required for the green economy. These mechanisms can be strengthened through a coordinated green career information system linking universities, students, employers, and government agencies. Such a system should identify emerging occupations required competencies, domestic employers training pathways, and opportunities for professional advancement. Increasing the visibility and competitiveness of domestic green careers may help counter migration-oriented career expectations by demonstrating that participation in the green transition can also provide viable professional pathways within the Philippines.

Third, the Philippines should prioritize the development of domestic research and absorbed capacity, rather than focusing solely on aggregate R&D expenditure. Increasing investment in research and development should be accompanied by sustained funding for laboratories, research centers, technical personnel, and university-industry collaboration. The objective should be to strengthen the country's capacity to absorb, adapt, localize, and eventually develop green technologies rather than remain dependent on imported expertise. This requires a phased increase in public and private R&D investment alongside institutional reforms that allow universities and research institutions to maintain the physical and technical infrastructure necessary for advanced research

Finally, the government should establish a Green Investment-Talent Partnership Framework for major foreign and domestic investments in renewable energy and other strategic sectors. Firms receiving substantial public incentives or participating in strategically important parties could be required or strongly encouraged to establish partnerships with Philippine universities and research institutions, provide structured technical training and apprenticeships, employ and develop Filipino STEM professionals, and contribute to join research and technology-development activities. When appropriate, technology and knowledge transfers commitments should be incorporated into investment agreements. Such a framework would shift the role of foreign investment from simply supplying capital and technology toward contributing to the development of domestic human and technological capabilities.

Conclusion

The imperative of a renewable energy transition extends beyond technical adjustments; it is a critical challenge for climate-vulnerable states navigating the global economy. As demonstrated throughout this paper, green brain drain in the Philippines is not simply an aggregation of individual migration choices, but a structural issue shaped by global inequality and unequal access to human capital. From a dependency perspective, wealthier economies can benefit from the specialized human capital of peripheral economies, potentially weakening the domestic capacity required to advance climate resilience and the green transition.

While remittances offer important short-term economic benefits, they do not substitute for domestic productive capacity. Addressing this vulnerability demands more than diaspora circulation programs or educational reforms. By redirecting state subsidies away from labor-export facilitation and toward domestic research and development capital expenditure, raising gross R&D expenditure from its current abysmal 0.3 percent closer to the UNESCO global average of 2 percent, the Philippines can begin to strengthen its domestic innovation ecosystem. This should be complemented by stronger business-government partnerships, technology transfer, and career opportunities for Filipino STEM professionals. Anchoring green-relevant talent within a robust domestic innovation ecosystem would strengthen the country's climate resilience, energy security, and contribution to the ASEAN Energy Transition Agenda.

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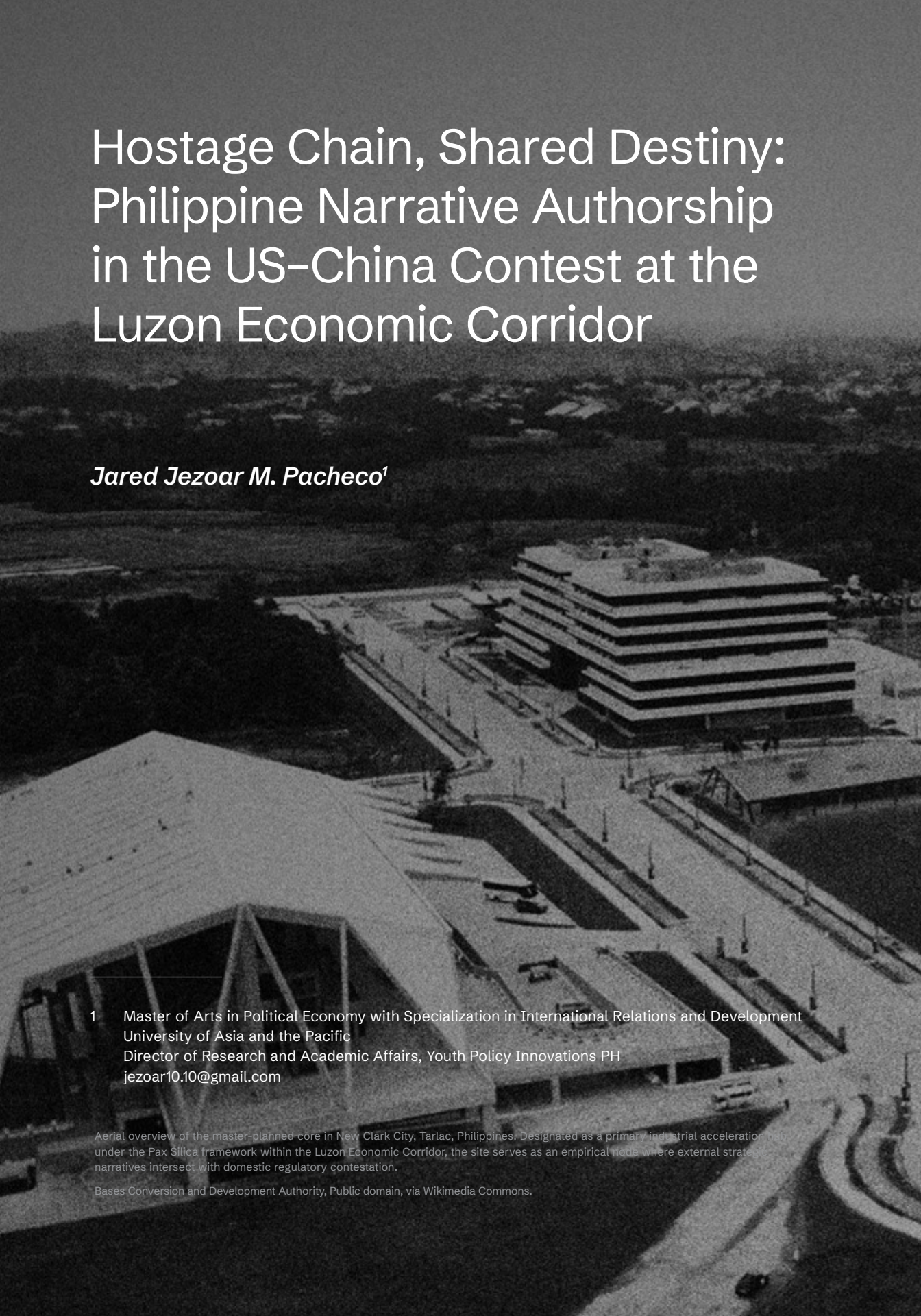
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Hostage Chain, Shared Destiny: Philippine Narrative Authorship in the US–China Contest at the Luzon Economic Corridor

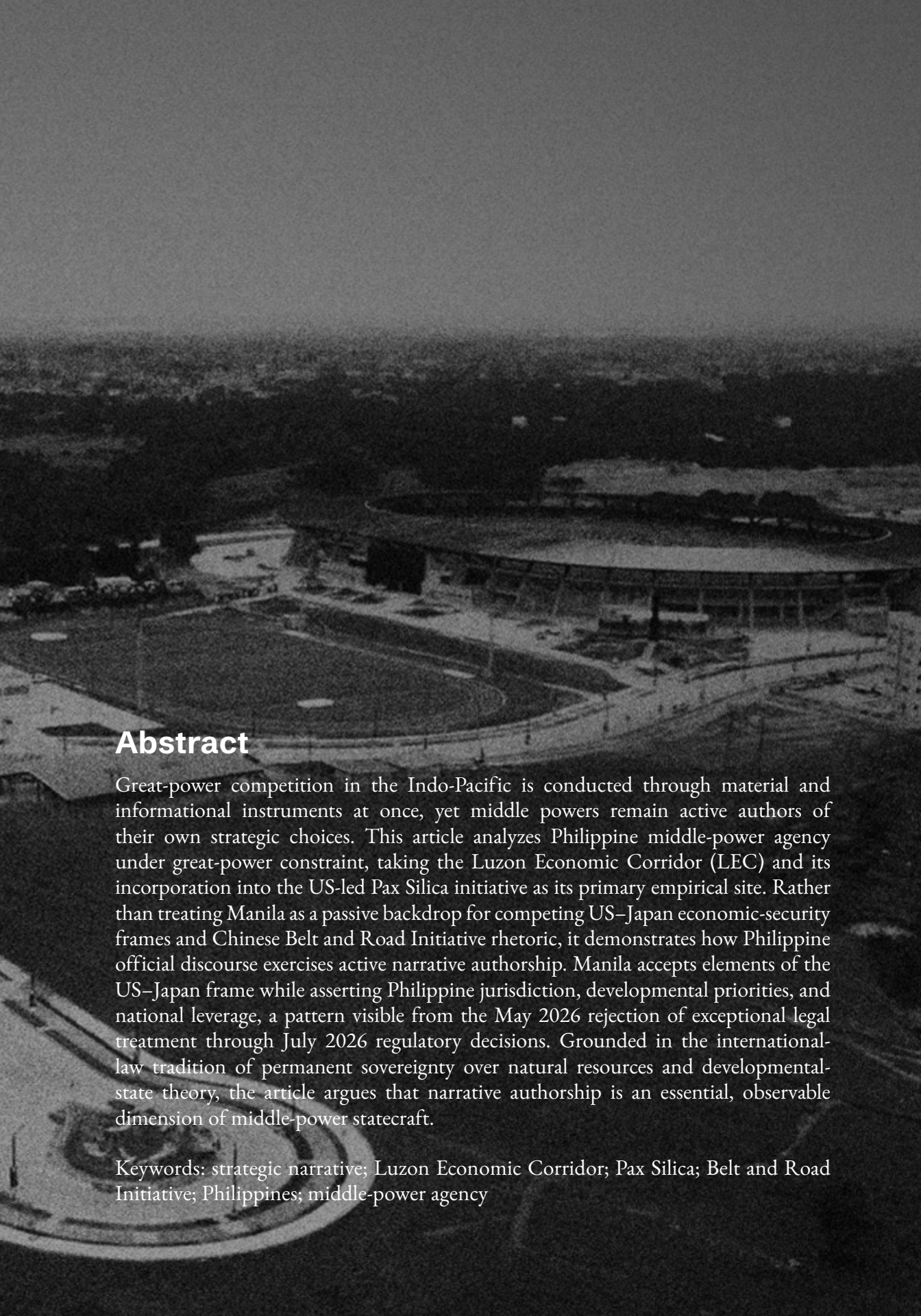
Jared Jezoar M. Pacheco[1]

1 Master of Arts in Political Economy with Specialization in International Relations and Development
University of Asia and the Pacific
Director of Research and Academic Affairs, Youth Policy Innovations PH
jezoar10.10@gmail.com



Aerial overview of the master-planned core in New Clark City, Tarlac, Philippines. Designated as a primary industrial acceleration node under the Pax Silica framework within the Luzon Economic Corridor, the site serves as an empirical node where external strategic narratives intersect with domestic regulatory contestation.

Bases Conversion and Development Authority, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.



Abstract

Great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific is conducted through material and informational instruments at once, yet middle powers remain active authors of their own strategic choices. This article analyzes Philippine middle-power agency under great-power constraint, taking the Luzon Economic Corridor (LEC) and its incorporation into the US-led Pax Silica initiative as its primary empirical site. Rather than treating Manila as a passive backdrop for competing US–Japan economic-security frames and Chinese Belt and Road Initiative rhetoric, it demonstrates how Philippine official discourse exercises active narrative authorship. Manila accepts elements of the US–Japan frame while asserting Philippine jurisdiction, developmental priorities, and national leverage, a pattern visible from the May 2026 rejection of exceptional legal treatment through July 2026 regulatory decisions. Grounded in the international-law tradition of permanent sovereignty over natural resources and developmental-state theory, the article argues that narrative authorship is an essential, observable dimension of middle-power statecraft.

Keywords: strategic narrative; Luzon Economic Corridor; Pax Silica; Belt and Road Initiative; Philippines; middle-power agency

Introduction

States pursuing grand strategy rarely rely on a single instrument of power. Diplomacy, military capability, and economic statecraft remain central, but those instruments also require an account of what they mean and what political future they are meant to serve. Strategic narrative supplies part of that informational work by organizing understandings of the past, present, and future for domestic and international audiences (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2013, 2). Grand strategy therefore depends partly on the interpretive frame through which material means are understood (Brands 2014).

The Luzon Economic Corridor (LEC), linking Subic Bay, Clark, Manila, and Batangas, offers an unusually clear site in which to examine this relationship. Announced at the April 2024 Japan–Philippines–United States summit, the corridor was presented through the language of infrastructure, logistics, clean energy, and semiconductor cooperation, and the trilateral statement located the initiative within a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), describing the three governments as equal partners and trusted friends (Presidential Communications Office [PCO] 2024). By April 2026, the Philippines had joined Pax Silica, a US-led coalition focused on secure semiconductor and artificial-intelligence (AI) supply chains, and New Clark City had been identified for a proposed industrial hub. The two names mark different scales: Pax Silica is the multi-nation coalition, with more than thirty member states by mid-2026 (Villanueva 2026b); the LEC is the trilateral Philippines–Japan–US project site nested within it (Rocamora 2026). An economic corridor had therefore acquired a more explicit economic-security vocabulary without ceasing to be presented in Manila as a development project.

This duality is not incidental, because infrastructure of this kind is inherently open to more than one political reading at once. A port, industrial zone, rail connection, or semiconductor facility can be narrated as commercial development, strategic positioning, or dependence, and which reading comes to dominate is a matter of political contest, since the infrastructure itself settles nothing. US and Japanese discourse increasingly connects supply chains to resilience and protection from coercive dependence. Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) discourse presents infrastructure through a contrasting vocabulary of connectivity, openness, and a community of shared future for mankind (Xi 2017). The Philippines sits at the intersection of these vocabularies, but its official discourse does not simply reproduce either one.

This article analyzes how middle powers author their own terms of engagement when caught within competing great-power narratives, taking the Luzon Economic Corridor as its primary empirical site. Specifically, it asks how Philippine official

discourse selectively adopts, resists, and reframes external economic-security vocabularies to advance national priorities. By examining this discursive space, the study evaluates the scope and mechanisms of middle-power agency within asymmetric security and economic partnerships.

Through the analytical lens of developmental sovereignty, the article centers Philippine middle-power agency, advancing two linked claims. First, while the narrative aligned with the United States and Japan securitizes infrastructure by converting concentrated supply-chain dependence into a protective alignment, made explicit in the "hostage chain" metaphor that US Under Secretary of State Jacob Helberg used in May 2026, Philippine official discourse does not simply absorb this external frame (Helberg 2026). Second, Manila actively asserts its own narrative authorship by accepting material opportunities and rules-based language while resisting exceptional legal treatment, recasting corridor participation as a means of industrial upgrading, sovereign jurisdiction, and national leverage.

That first claim raises an obvious question about the Chinese side of the comparison, which is worth addressing precisely. Beijing has not mounted a sustained LEC-specific countercampaign equivalent to US, Japanese, or Philippine discourse around New Clark City. This article instead treats the BRI's established strategic narrative as the principal alternative infrastructure vocabulary circulating in the same regional space. The comparison is therefore between narrative logics available around infrastructure competition, not symmetrical sets of statements about one project.

The argument contributes to strategic narrative scholarship and Philippine middle-power agency research. Strategic narrative theory's common distinction between narrator and audience can obscure a third position: a state may receive competing external narratives while simultaneously authoring the terms through which it explains its own participation. Philippine foreign-policy scholarship already shows that Manila can act proactively within US-led minilateral arrangements despite material asymmetry (Misalucha-Willoughby 2024; Piasentini and Dell'Era 2024). The LEC case extends that insight into the narrative domain as one observable dimension of agency under constraint, not a general theory of middle powers.

Literature Review

Grand Strategy and the Informational Instrument

Grand strategy scholarship conventionally examines how states integrate diplomatic, military, and economic instruments toward long-term objectives (Brands 2014). Less attention is given to the informational work that makes those instruments intelligible and acceptable to the audiences whose cooperation they require. A trade agreement, military deployment, or diplomatic summit needs a narrative frame to be understood as legitimate rather than aggressive, developmental rather than extractive. This article treats the informational instrument as analytically separable from, but operationally connected to, the material instruments it accompanies.

Strategic Narrative and Narrative Contest

Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle developed strategic narrative theory to explain how political actors use stories about order, identity, and policy to shape expectations and influence behavior. Their framework distinguishes system narratives, which characterize the international order; identity narratives, which define who "we" are; and issue narratives, which give specific policies their meaning (2013, 2; 2017, 6). "Free and open Indo-Pacific" is a system claim, "trusted partners" an identity claim, and "resilient supply chains" an issue claim. Together they place a corridor inside a larger story about order, belonging, and vulnerability. None of this reduces strategic communication to propaganda: narratives can be persuasive without being fabricated. The relevant question is what relationships become easier to justify when infrastructure is described through one vocabulary instead of another; Fairclough's (2003) critical discourse analysis treats word choice, presupposition, and omission as part of social practice.

Securitization as Narrative Mechanism

Strategic narrative theory explains why political actors construct competing accounts of order and identity; securitization theory explains how an issue narrative can acquire the force of security necessity. In the Copenhagen School formulation, an issue becomes securitized when successfully represented as a threat to a valued referent object, permitting measures beyond ordinary political treatment (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 21–26). Balzacq's (2011) processual account is useful here because securitization may accumulate through repeated institutional articulation rather than one dramatic declaration. Supply chains do not suddenly become military objects; they are first described as fragile or coercible, so diversification and preferential partnership become legible as protection. Song's (2015) analysis of the "China threat"

discourse cautions against treating threat language as a neutral transcription of material capability, directing attention to the strategies through which risks become politically salient. Applied to the LEC, this article treats resilience, de-risking, and the "hostage chain" metaphor as linked moves redefining commercial infrastructure as a protective necessity.

China's BRI Narrative and Japan's Narrative Authorship

Chinese official discourse organizes infrastructure through a different narrative grammar. Studies of Xi-era rhetoric identify a sustained effort to present China as a constructive, nonthreatening contributor to international order (Lams 2018). Yang (2021) shows that strategic narratives also support Chinese efforts to shape norms of global governance across several policy domains. Xi Jinping's 2017 Geneva address condensed this grammar into a "community of shared future for mankind" and a call for win-win development (Xi 2017). Corpus-assisted analysis of BRI anniversary coverage likewise finds stronger emphasis on cooperation in participating-country media than in skeptical Western coverage (Zhang and Chen 2026).

Japan deserves separate treatment within the US-aligned pole: its own FOIP and economic-security lineage gives the LEC an institutional genealogy of its own, not merely an amplified American script, as the fuller discussion below traces (Abe 2007, 2016; US–Japan Economic Policy Consultative Committee [EPCC] 2022).

Read together, these literatures leave a gap. Strategic narrative scholarship explains projection and reception, while Philippine foreign-policy studies increasingly emphasize proactive agency inside asymmetric partnerships. Less developed is the position of a state that is simultaneously an audience for competing narratives and an author of its own account of the same arrangement. The LEC makes that position visible through selective adoption, refusal, and recasting of external vocabulary.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis integrates strategic narrative theory and securitization theory without treating them as interchangeable. Strategic narrative theory supplies the organizing architecture: system narratives identify the regional order being proposed, identity narratives define the political community and terms of partnership, and issue narratives frame the LEC, Pax Silica, and BRI as specific policy objects (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2013, 2). Securitization theory is used more narrowly to explain the movement within the US–Japan issue narrative from ordinary supply-chain management toward a language of vulnerability, coercion, and protective alignment (Balzacq 2011).

For the Philippine case, the key concept is narrative authorship. The term implies neither freedom from structural asymmetry nor a wholly original vocabulary; it names observable acts of selective translation: adopting an external term, narrowing its meaning, combining it with a local priority, or refusing an identity claim while remaining inside the broader arrangement. Narrative authorship is therefore treated as one dimension of middle-power agency; it says nothing about whether discourse can override material dependence. This formulation keeps the theoretical claim proportional to a single, recent case.

Philippine narrative authorship also has roots outside strategic narrative theory. Permanent sovereignty over natural resources (Schrijver 1997) is an established principle of international law, developed by newly independent states to assert continuing control over resource extraction on their own territory even where foreign capital dominates production. The recurring claim that assembly-stage participation should give way to higher-value production likewise echoes the developmental-state tradition (Johnson 1982), in which the state actively directs industrial upgrading rather than accepting a fixed position in the international division of labor. Grounding narrative authorship in these established traditions matters because it grants Manila's positioning international legal legitimacy and historical weight. Rather than framing its stance as arbitrary rhetorical pushback, the Philippine state mobilizes recognized principles of international law and economic statecraft to legitimize domestic jurisdiction and value capture. Philippine officials draw on both traditions at once; developmental sovereignty in this article names that fusion rather than a wholly new concept.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative comparative discourse analysis. Strategic narrative theory determines the categories examined, while Fairclough's (2003) textual approach guides close reading of lexical choices, presuppositions, and constitutive absences. Each narrative position is read at the system, identity, and issue levels. Securitization theory is applied only where the language explicitly or cumulatively turns economic dependence into a security problem.

The working corpus contains twenty-one unique public texts spanning April 2024, when the trilateral corridor was announced, through July 2026, when domestic debate had produced public assurances on law, sovereignty, and environmental safeguards. Earlier texts are included only when they establish a narrative lineage the later LEC discourse directly draws upon: Japan's 2007 and 2016 FOIP speeches, the 2022 US–Japan economic-security statement, Japan's 2023 Official Security Assistance (OSA) material, Helberg's December 2025 remarks unveiling Pax Silica, and Xi Jinping's

2017 Geneva speech. Peer-reviewed studies of Chinese and BRI discourse are used as interpretive support, not equivalent primary statements about the LEC.

Texts were included when they contained attributable language directly framing the LEC, Pax Silica, the proposed economic security zone, supply-chain resilience, partnership identity, legal jurisdiction, or Philippine development objectives, or when they established the system narrative behind later issue-level language; duplicate wire copies, unattributed commentary, and bare project announcements were excluded. This purposive procedure keeps the basis of the reading transparent, without claiming statistical or exhaustive coverage.

The analysis locates recurrent vocabulary at the system, identity, or issue level; asks what each term presupposes ("resilience" presumes vulnerability, "like-minded" presumes criteria for inclusion, "win-win" presumes reciprocal gain); and examines Philippine official statements for selective adoption, rejection, or recombination of surrounding vocabularies, with particular attention to moments defining jurisdiction, development objectives, and the country's position in the supply chain. Domestic nonstate texts are analyzed separately as counternarratives shaping the conditions under which the official narrative is defended. The method identifies narrative construction, not reception; claims are limited to comparative narrative logics and Philippine authorship. The resulting corpus and its analytical use are summarized in table 1.

Table 1. Corpus construction and analytical use

Analytical position	Core texts used	Temporal function	Selection logic
US–Japan-aligned	2024 Joint Vision Statement; 2022 EPCC statement; Abe 2007/2016 FOIP speeches; 2023 OSA; 2025–2026 Pax Silica remarks	Foundational system narrative plus 2024–2026 issue narrative	Texts defining order, trusted partnership, resilience, or coercive dependence
Philippine official state narrative	Joint Vision Statement; PNA/BCDA statements; DOE, DTI notices; April–July 2026 zone governance texts	April–July 2026, with 2024 trilateral baseline	Statements defining jurisdiction, industrial upgrading, strategic location, or safeguards
China/BRI alternative	Xi 2017 Geneva speech, read alongside peer-reviewed analyses by Lams (2018), Yang (2021), and Zhang and Chen (2026)	Foundational regional alternative, not LEC-specific exchange	Texts establishing connectivity, inclusion, and shared-future vocabulary

Analytical position	Core texts used	Temporal function	Selection logic
Domestic Philippine counternarratives	GoodElectronics critique (de Guzman 2026); press-reported opposition criticism; Palace safeguards statement; MAP (2026) and business-press commentary	April–July 2026	Texts contesting sovereignty, value capture, environmental effects, or governance

Note: The twenty-one public texts are unique documents; some are used in more than one analytical position. Scholarly works are interpretive sources, not equivalent primary LEC statements. Note: The twenty-one public texts are unique documents; some are used in more than one analytical position. Scholarly works are interpretive sources, not equivalent primary LEC statements. BCDA = Bases Conversion and Development Authority; DOE = Department of Energy; DTI = Department of Trade and Industry; EPCC = US–Japan Economic Policy Consultative Committee; MAP = Management Association of the Philippines; OSA = Official Security Assistance; PNA = Philippine News Agency.

Table 2 sets the resulting comparison side by side, adding a fourth position, domestic Philippine counternarratives, to register the sovereignty and safeguard concerns discussed below.

Table 2. Comparative strategic narrative structure

Narrative position	System narrative	Identity narrative	Issue narrative
US–Japan-aligned	Free and open, rules-based regional order	Trusted, like-minded partners	Resilience, diversification, economic security, de-risking, coercive dependence
China/BRI alternative	Community of shared future; open and inclusive order	Partners and friends without explicit ideological qualification	Connectivity, win-win cooperation, mutual benefit
Philippine official state narrative	Rules-based order joined to national development and strategic location	Sovereign partner under Philippine jurisdiction	Industrial upgrading, leverage, safeguards, developmental sovereignty
Philippine counternarratives	Rules-based order questioned from below; national patrimony at risk	Sovereign citizens and communities, not passive beneficiaries	Sovereignty, environmental and resource safeguards, transparency, value capture

Source: Author's synthesis from sources cited in the text.

Analysis

The US-Japan-Aligned Narrative: From Resilience to the Hostage Chain

At the system level, the US–Japan–Philippines trilateral vocabulary places the LEC inside a free and open Indo-Pacific governed by international law. The 2024 Joint Vision Statement defines the three states as maritime democracies, equal partners, and trusted friends, and links economic cooperation to a regional order built around law, freedom, and shared values (PCO 2024). The corridor is therefore introduced as more than an infrastructure package, situated inside a prior system narrative about legitimate regional order.

The coalition's own name performs this system-level work before any policy document elaborates it. "Pax" invokes a lineage of hegemon-guaranteed order, as in Pax Romana, Pax Britannica, and Pax Americana, in which peace is secured by a dominant power rather than negotiated among equals; "Silica" names the literal commodity at the center of the arrangement. The compound fuses an imperial-order claim to a specific industrial input in a single noun phrase, naturalizing a hegemonic guarantor as the default condition of a secure supply chain, never argued for, simply assumed in the name. The New Clark City site's designation as a "Golden Node" extends the same logic to the issue level (Bases Conversion and Development Authority [BCDA] 2026). The contrast with its rivals is instructive: the BRI's name evokes ancient trade geography rather than a guarantor power, and the LEC's own name is the most technocratic of the three, containing no claim about order or protection at all.

Japan's contribution is visible in the continuity between FOIP and economic-security policy: FOIP supplies the system language of openness and rules, while economic-security policy supplies the issue language of resilience and reduced exposure to coercion. The 2022 US–Japan Economic Policy Consultative Committee statement tied supply-chain diversification to economic security and cooperation with like-minded partners (US–Japan Economic Policy Consultative Committee 2022). Japan's 2023 Official Security Assistance framework added an institutional counterpart, with the Philippines as its first recipient (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023).

At the identity level, words such as "trusted," "like-minded," and "allies" perform boundary work. "Like-minded" is particularly consequential because its criteria remain unstated: it signals political compatibility while leaving decision-makers room to determine what compatibility requires in each sector. Trust therefore becomes an economic category, evaluated not only through price or redundancy but through the political identity of the supplier and the perceived reliability of the state behind it.

At the issue level, the key movement is from vulnerability to protection. The recurring vocabulary of resilient supply chains frames concentration as a latent risk; diversification and de-risking provide the direction of travel, and Pax Silica sharpens this logic. Philippine accession in April 2026 was described as participation in a coalition for secure semiconductor and AI supply chains, with New Clark City presented as the first AI-native industrial acceleration hub under the initiative (Rocamora 2026). The LEC, launched in 2024 as a trilateral economic corridor, had become an institutional node in a more explicit economic-security coalition.

Helberg's May 2026 remarks make the securitizing logic unusually visible, moving from manufacturing reliability and predictable access to thousands of inputs toward the danger of overconcentration and the capacity of states to interrupt supply. The culminating metaphor is stark: "When ninety percent of a critical input comes from one country, you do not have a supply chain. You have a hostage chain" (Helberg 2026). "Hostage" transforms commercial dependence into coercive captivity, implying an actor capable of withholding release even when China is not named, and recasting preferential alignment as escape from coercion rather than simple exclusion.

This securitizing move was also explicitly named on the US side: unveiling Pax Silica in December 2025, four months before the Philippines joined, Under Secretary Helberg framed it as a way to "block China's Belt and Road Initiative" (Helberg, quoted in Foster 2025).

Balzacq's (2011) processual account suggests securitization can accumulate through institutional repetition rather than one decisive speech act. The "hostage chain" formulation is rhetorically dramatic because earlier policy language had already normalized resilience and trusted partnership as ways to discuss supply chains, so that by 2026 an industrial zone can be presented simultaneously as development policy and protection from strategic vulnerability.

Yet the narrative is not seamless. Its language of trusted partnership encounters friction when translated into legal arrangements: public controversy followed disclosure of US requests for special treatment for personnel connected to the New Clark City zone. This tension matters analytically because it marks the point at which an external identity narrative meets Philippine jurisdiction. Manila's response leaves the project intact and narrows only one implication of what partnership should authorize.

The BRI Alternative: Connectivity and Shared Future

The principal Chinese alternative does not begin with supply-chain vulnerability. It begins with interconnection. In Xi Jinping's 2017 Geneva address, the system narrative is organized around a "community of shared future for mankind,"

sovereign equality, openness, and common development (Xi 2017). The phrase enlarges the relevant political community. Where "like-minded partners" marks an in-group through qualification, "mankind" presents the community as universal. The difference is not simply stylistic; it establishes a different default account of interdependence.

At the identity level, BRI discourse favors partner, friend, openness, and inclusion. Lams (2018) finds that Xi-era discourse repeatedly presents China's rise as peaceful and constructive, while Yang (2021) shows that strategic narratives support a broader effort to shape global-governance norms. This rhetoric does not eliminate hierarchy or national interest, but it avoids making ideological similarity an explicit condition of participation, so infrastructure can be narrated as open to states with different political systems.

At the issue level, "win-win cooperation," "mutual benefit," and "connectivity" perform work analogous to resilience and de-risking in the US–Japan narrative: "win-win" treats reciprocal gain as a starting condition, and "connectivity" treats interdependence as productive. Zhang and Chen's (2026) comparative study of BRI anniversary reporting finds that media in participating states relied more heavily on cooperative and developmental language than US and UK outlets did. The BRI is therefore sustained by an interpretive structure as well as by infrastructure finance.

None of this makes the Chinese narrative non-strategic or empirically self-validating. "Shared future" can obscure uneven bargaining power just as "resilience" can obscure the costs of selective separation, and Song's (2015) warning about threat discourse applies symmetrically here. For the Philippine case, the central contrast is that the US–Japan narrative treats concentrated interdependence as a condition to be secured against, while BRI discourse treats connectivity as a condition through which prosperity is produced. This reflects the asymmetry noted earlier: these BRI terms remain a regional vocabulary, not a reply to each LEC announcement. The comparison therefore does not ask which side won an equal rhetorical contest over New Clark City, but what competing meanings of infrastructure are available to Philippine officials.

The Philippine Official State Narrative: Development Through Jurisdiction

Philippine official discourse does not occupy a stable midpoint between the two external narratives; it is more selective. Manila readily adopts the language of a rules-based international order and participates in FOIP-linked trilateral institutions, yet economic agencies repeatedly frame the LEC through logistics and investment. When the Philippines joined Pax Silica in April 2026, the public

explanation emphasized its skilled workforce, geographic centrality, and role in semiconductor and AI supply chains (Rocamora 2026). The security rationale is present, but it does not monopolize the official account.

The developmental emphasis becomes clearer in Finance Secretary Frederick Go's framing of New Clark City: Philippine mineral resources and strategic location, he argued, should not merely support global industries from the margins but should be used to build industries of the future (Philippine News Agency 2026). The US narrative tends to begin with concentrated dependence and ask where trusted capacity can be located; the Philippine formulation begins with peripheral industrial participation and asks how resources and labor can be converted into higher-value production.

The identity narrative is most visible when Manila refuses a category offered by its ally. In May 2026, BCDA president Joshua Bingcang confirmed that the Philippines had rejected a US request for diplomatic immunity and special treatment for personnel connected to the planned zone, stating categorically: "No special arrangement to be accorded to the US government" (quoted in Desiderio and Lee-Brago 2026). He emphasized that the transaction would instead be governed by Philippine law as a regular business development arrangement, an act of narrative authorship in a concrete institutional setting that accepts the alliance while refusing the implication that partnership creates an exceptional legal space.

That refusal changes the meaning of "trusted partner." In the US–Japan identity narrative, trust helps define an exclusive network of economic-security cooperation. In the Philippine official narrative, partnership remains legitimate only within ordinary Philippine jurisdiction. Partnership here names a sovereign contracting party, a status that ally, recipient, and beneficiary all understate. The distinction keeps the arrangement from automatically carrying every legal and symbolic implication of the external narrative that created it.

The immunity refusal recurs across the months that followed: in July 2026, Bingcang told a Malacañang briefing that all facility components complied with Philippine and international law, with officials across the more than thirty Pax Silica members reviewing the same question, a coalition-wide standard rather than a favor to Washington (Villanueva 2026b). The pattern repeats in the land-tenure arrangement, where BCDA used the ordinary, amended Investors' Lease Act rather than a bespoke basing-style deal (Ramirez 2026), and in the Department of Energy's dedicated circular for the project's power requirements (Villanueva 2026a). While individually minor, together these form a sustained pattern.

At the issue level, official Philippine discourse turns from protection toward upgrading. Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro described Pax Silica as an initiative that could strengthen resilience and industrialization (Nepomuceno 2026). Teodoro's formulation absorbs the US–Japan vocabulary of resilience and redirects it toward national development. The desired outcome is not only insulation from disruption but a larger Philippine role in production, technology, and value creation.

Domestic counternarratives complicate this official account and help explain its vocabulary. GoodElectronics Philippines warned that Pax Silica could deepen US strategic access and weaken sovereignty through special governance arrangements (de Guzman 2026). Sovereignty criticism entered mainstream debate during the immunity controversy, and July press coverage raised separate concerns over the project's water and energy footprint (Mendoza 2026). By July, Malacañang was publicly assuring critics of Philippine-law compliance (Esguerra 2026), while the Management Association of the Philippines (2026), welcoming the initiative's industrial potential, called for safeguards on sovereignty and sustainability. These counternarratives should not be collapsed into a single "Philippine narrative"; their importance lies in the pressure they exert on official justification. The immunity refusal answers a historically resonant fear of foreign enclaves; the emphasis on industrial upgrading answers the concern that the Philippines may contribute land and labor while higher-value capabilities remain elsewhere.

This is the developmental sovereignty described above: not a claim that the Philippines has escaped structural dependence, but the effort to present external capital, technology, and market access as resources to be used under Philippine law and for Philippine upgrading; the state accepts rules-based language but insists Philippine law is among the rules that matter, and accepts supply-chain integration while describing the country as a potentially consequential node rather than a passive endpoint. Whether the arrangement delivers industrial transformation remains open. What it shows is what Philippine officials argue participation is for.

Discussion: Narrative Authorship as a Dimension of Middle-Power Agency

The comparison suggests that infrastructure competition in the Indo-Pacific is also a contest over the legitimate meaning of interdependence. The US–Japan-aligned narrative starts from vulnerability: concentrated dependence can be weaponized, so resilience requires diversification. The BRI narrative starts from connectivity: interdependence can generate common development, so inclusion should organize infrastructure cooperation. Each narrative converts a political choice into a practical-seeming response, making either selective alignment or wider connectivity appear as the natural default.

The Philippine case matters because Manila does not function simply as the audience of these claims. Strategic narrative theory's distinction between narrators and audiences is analytically useful, but the LEC shows the roles can overlap: Philippine officials receive US, Japanese, and Chinese narratives while also constructing system, identity, and issue narratives for domestic and international audiences. This is consistent with scholarship treating the Philippines as a proactive participant in minilateral arrangements (Misalucha-Willoughby 2024; Piasentini and Dell'Era 2024) despite material asymmetry and as a state whose middle-power capacity depends partly on political agency.

Narrative authorship adds a specific observable dimension to that agency. Material bargaining is visible in investment terms, jurisdiction, and project design; narrative bargaining is visible in the categories through which those arrangements are justified. The Philippine government can join Pax Silica while rejecting exceptional legal treatment, and accept resilience language while making industrial upgrading the public objective. These discursive acts help constitute and defend material interests as much as they accompany bargaining over them.

That agency cannot be explained without reference to domestic politics: a Philippine government cannot narrate external alignment in a vacuum. Historical memories of US bases, constitutional concerns over sovereignty, environmental risks, and anxieties over remaining in lower-value stages of production limit what partnership can be called and how it can be defended. The May immunity controversy made those limits unusually visible. By July, official and business-sector statements had moved toward a vocabulary of safeguards, transparency, national benefit, value addition, and Philippine law (Esguerra 2026). Narrative adaptation followed political contest.

Even so, the broader implication should be stated cautiously: a state inside a great-power narrative contest may exercise agency through selective translation, adopting external vocabulary, narrowing its meaning, combining it with local priorities, or rejecting specific identity claims. This is authorship under constraint; asymmetry still sets its outer limits. The Philippine case shows that participation in an alignment does not require acceptance of every narrative meaning attached to it.

A skeptical reading would treat this as unremarkable: every state invokes sovereignty when hosting foreign investment, so reassurance of this kind is diplomatic boilerplate, not evidence of narrative authorship. Two features resist that reduction. First, the claims are costly, not cheap: refusing an ally's explicit request for extraterritorial jurisdiction carries diplomatic friction that generic sovereignty rhetoric does not, visible when a US official was reported days later walking the immunity remarks back as taken out of context (Chi 2026). Second, the claims are specific, not vague:

Philippine officials name the statutes governing the arrangement, including the BCDA Charter and the amended Investors' Lease Act, which generic reassurance rarely does. Mainstream commentary has pressed the same demand from outside government, with one business-oriented outlet calling for the full framework agreement to be published and the applicable law, jurisdiction, and tax terms identified (Malindog-Uy 2026). That the pressure comes from business press as well as left-nationalist critics suggests it is broader than ideological opposition to the alliance.

This reframing also clarifies the limits of hedging as an exclusive analytical language. Hedging asks where a state positions itself between competing powers; narrative authorship asks what meaning the state assigns to the position it has chosen. In the LEC case, the Philippines is materially closer to the US–Japan economic-security architecture yet still contests the legal, developmental, and symbolic terms of that alignment. Agency therefore appears inside partnership, not only in the choice between partners.

Conclusion

The Luzon Economic Corridor has become more than a transport and investment initiative. Its incorporation into Pax Silica makes it a visible site where economic development, alliance politics, technology policy, and strategic communication converge. US–Japan-aligned discourse frames that convergence through resilience and protection against coercive dependence, a logic embedded even in the coalition's own name. The BRI's established narrative supplies a different regional grammar built around connectivity and shared future. These are asymmetrical campaigns, yet each supplies a competing way of making infrastructure politically meaningful.

Philippine official discourse is not adequately captured as a passive choice between those narratives. Manila accepts significant parts of the US–Japan economic-security frame but reworks the project around national development, legal jurisdiction, and a claim to greater industrial agency. The rejection of exceptional immunity at New Clark City, reaffirmed through the following months in land-tenure and energy-regulatory decisions, is especially revealing because it separates acceptance of the project from acceptance of every identity claim attached to partnership. Domestic criticism, from both left-nationalist and business-press quarters, further pushes the government to justify Pax Silica through sovereignty, safeguards, and tangible national benefit.

The case therefore identifies narrative authorship, rooted in the permanent-sovereignty and developmental-state traditions as much as in strategic narrative theory, as one observable dimension of middle-power agency. A smaller state can be an audience of great-power narratives while simultaneously producing its own account of order,

identity, and policy. Structural asymmetry persists, and material outcomes may still fall short of official promises. What authorship changes is the terms on which institutions become politically defensible.

Several limitations remain: the Chinese evidence is intentionally asymmetric, the corpus is purposive, and the study does not measure narrative reception. Future research could test reception through interviews or surveys, or extend the framework to other Indo-Pacific infrastructure sites. What the LEC already shows is that contemporary infrastructure is never only concrete, capital, or connectivity; it is also an argument about political order, and the purposes development is meant to serve. The Philippines helped write that argument; it did not just supply the setting.

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Governing Reach, Not Truth: A Structural Approach to Disinformation Regulation

Dominic Vincent Ligot[1], Frances Claire Tayco[2], Carljoe Javier[3], Bill Urrutia[4], Janina Santos[5], Dana Batnag[6], Jenin Velasquez, Grace Salonga, and Carlos Nazareno[7]

1 Founder, Cirrolytix Research Services
doc@ethics.ph

2 CEO, Cirrolytix Research Services

3 Executive Director, Data and AI Ethics PH

4 Fellow, Data and AI Ethics PH

5 Board Member, Democracy.net.ph

6 Board Member, Democracy.net.ph

7 Board Member, Democracy.net.ph

Truth Versus Reach (2026), Dominic Vincent Ligot

Abstract

Disinformation has become a central concern in Philippine public life, particularly during elections and periods of political polarization. Policy responses have largely focused on fact-checking, criminal penalties, and proposals for administrative bodies empowered to identify and suppress "fake news." This paper argues that such content-centric approaches misdiagnose the source of harm and pose serious constitutional risks.

Drawing on empirical research on information diffusion, platform governance, and paid influence operations, the paper reframes disinformation as a structural problem driven by amplification systems, coordinated behavior, and influence-for-hire markets rather than by isolated false statements.

The paper advances three core claims. First, the social harm of disinformation correlates primarily with scale of exposure, which is shaped by algorithmic recommendation systems and coordinated amplification, not by falsity alone. Second, professionalized disinformation operates through economic and organizational structures that resemble covert influence markets, warranting regulatory attention to payment, coordination, and transparency rather than truth adjudication. Third, content-based enforcement by administrative agencies is constitutionally vulnerable under Philippine free-speech doctrine and risks chilling legitimate political expression.

In response, the paper proposes a constitutionally safer regulatory framework that prioritizes structural interventions: regulating amplification mechanisms, imposing disclosure and transparency obligations on paid political influence, targeting coordinated inauthentic behavior, and enhancing platform accountability through process-based duties rather than content control. Content-based adjudication is reserved for courts and applied only to specific, demonstrable harms. By shifting the policy lens from governing truth to governing reach, this approach offers a more effective and rights-respecting path for addressing disinformation in the Philippines, with broader relevance for other democratic systems facing similar challenges.

Keywords: Disinformation; algorithmic amplification; platform governance; freedom of expression; Philippine constitutional law; political advertising; coordinated inauthentic behavior; information integrity; digital regulation

Introduction

The Misplaced Focus of Anti-Disinformation Policy

Concerns about disinformation have become a persistent feature of public debate in the Philippines, particularly in the context of elections, public health crises, and highly polarized political discourse. Reports of coordinated online harassment, covert political advertising, and false or misleading narratives spreading at scale have fueled anxieties about democratic integrity and public trust (Arugay and Baquisal 2022). In response, policymakers, regulators, and civil society actors have increasingly framed disinformation as an urgent threat requiring decisive state intervention (WEF 2026).

The dominant policy responses to this problem, however, tend to converge around a narrow set of tools. These include partnerships with fact-checking organizations, proposals to criminalize the creation or dissemination of "fake news," and calls to establish specialized government bodies tasked with identifying and responding to false information online (Flavia Durach, Bârgăoanu, and Nastasiu 2020). . In the Philippine context, legislative proposals and public commentary frequently emphasize stronger penalties, expanded cybercrime enforcement, and centralized monitoring mechanisms as primary solutions. While these approaches are often motivated by legitimate concerns, they largely operate at the level of individual pieces of content and individual speakers (Aghajari, Baumer, and DiFranzo 2023).

This focus on content and individual liability obscures a deeper structural problem. Contemporary disinformation is rarely harmful simply because a false statement exists; rather, harm arises when particular narratives are systematically amplified, coordinated, and financially supported in ways that dramatically expand their reach and influence (UNESCO 2012). Platform recommendation systems, paid influence operations, and coordinated inauthentic behavior function as force multipliers, transforming marginal or misleading claims into mass-exposure events. Policies centered on fact-checking or criminal punishment of speakers do little to address these amplification systems or the influence markets that sustain them, and may instead heighten risks to free expression by placing the state in the role of arbiter of truth.

This paper argues that effective and constitutionally defensible anti-disinformation policy in the Philippines requires a shift in focus. Rather than concentrating on adjudicating truth or punishing individual speech, regulation should target the structural drivers of scale and impact: reach-enhancing platform mechanisms, coordinated and paid amplification, and the economic and organizational arrangements behind professionalized disinformation campaigns. By regulating amplification, coordination, and influence-for-hire—while leaving contested questions of truth to courts and pluralistic processes—policymakers can better address the real sources of harm without creating a de facto "truth police" that threatens democratic freedoms.

Why Amplification Changes the Harm Equation

A foundational distinction for anti-disinformation policy is the difference between organic speech and amplified speech. Organic speech refers to expression circulating through ordinary, peer-to-peer sharing without systematic boosting, coordination, or payment. Its reach is typically constrained by social proximity, attention limits, and friction in communication (Chao Guo and Saxton 2018).

Amplified speech, by contrast, is deliberately or mechanically elevated through platform features such as algorithmic ranking, recommendation feeds, trending lists, paid promotion, or coordinated sharing networks (Riemer and Peter 2021). This distinction matters because the social harm associated with disinformation is not evenly distributed across all false or misleading claims; it is heavily conditioned by how far, how fast, and to whom such claims are disseminated.

Table 1. Organic Speech vs. Amplified Speech in Digital Information Systems

Dimension	Organic Speech	Amplified Speech
Mode of Distribution	Peer-to-peer sharing within existing social networks (Yang and Chen 2008).	Algorithmic recommendation, paid promotion, coordinated sharing, inauthentic accounts (Burghardt et al. 2023), or platform boosting
Typical Reach	Limited and incremental; constrained by social ties and attention (Harrigan and Achananuparp 2012)	Potentially massive; content can be exposed to millions beyond the originator's network (Riemer and Peter 2021)
Speed of Diffusion	Gradual and uneven	Rapid, often front-loaded during early engagement phases (Xie et al. 2014)
Drivers of Visibility	Personal relationships, relevance to small communities	Engagement metrics, ranking algorithms, coordination strategies, and payment
Role of Platforms	Passive host of user-generated content	Active curator of attention through feeds, rankings, and recommendations (O'Reilly, Strauss, and Mazzucato 2024)
Role of Payment	Generally absent	Often present (political ads, influencer contracts, troll farms, paid boosting) (De Gregorio and Goanta 2022)

Dimension	Organic Speech	Amplified Speech
Coordination	Mostly spontaneous or informal	Frequently organized, synchronized, or strategically engineered
Transparency to Users	Source and intent usually apparent	Source, sponsorship, and coordination often obscured
Risk of Social Harm	Low to moderate; effects remain localized	High; scale can distort public discourse, democratic processes (Lim and Bentley 2022) and even physical harms and threat to life (UNHCR 2024).
Regulatory Relevance	Core protected speech under free-expression doctrines	Regulable conduct affecting reach, markets, and infrastructure (Balkin 2017).
Constitutional Sensitivity	High—direct regulation risks chilling speech	Lower—focus on systems, incentives, and disclosure rather than content
Appropriate Policy Tools	Counter-speech, media literacy, voluntary norms	Transparency, disclosure, coordination limits, algorithmic safeguards

Empirical research consistently shows that amplification mechanisms dramatically alter the dynamics of information spread. Algorithmic recommendation systems can expose content to audiences far beyond the originator's immediate network, while coordinated behavior—sometimes involving paid workers, bots, or influencer networks—can generate rapid cascades that simulate organic popularity. Studies demonstrate that false or misleading content, when amplified, often travels faster and reaches larger audiences than accurate information, particularly in early stages of diffusion. Even when misinformation spreads through long chains of peer-to-peer sharing rather than one-to-many broadcasting, amplification effects can accumulate to produce mass exposure. These dynamics mean that the harm of disinformation is not merely additive but multiplicative, shaped by platform affordances and organized intervention rather than by the falsity of content alone (Krafft and Donovan 2020).

This empirical reality supports a proportionality-based regulatory argument. In constitutional and policy analysis, proportionality requires that regulatory attention and state intervention correspond to the magnitude of harm. If harm correlates most strongly with scale of exposure—rather than with the mere existence of a false statement—then policy should prioritize mechanisms that determine scale. A false claim seen by a few dozen people does not pose the same democratic or social risk as a misleading narrative algorithmically injected into millions of feeds or artificially propelled into prominence through coordinated campaigns. Treating all falsehoods

as equally dangerous obscures this difference and encourages overbroad responses that risk chilling lawful and valuable speech (Van Alstyne, Smith, and Lin 2023).

The implication is that amplification should be understood as a regulable multiplier, not as neutral infrastructure beyond the reach of governance. Platform design choices, recommendation algorithms, and monetized influence practices actively shape information flows and can be adjusted, constrained, or made transparent without requiring the state to determine what is true or false (Ruiz 2023). Recognizing amplification as a multiplier reframes anti-disinformation policy away from content adjudication and toward the regulation of systems and incentives that magnify harm. This reframing lays the groundwork for interventions that are both more effective and more compatible with constitutional protections for free expression.

The Structural Drivers of Disinformation

Algorithmic Recommendation Systems

Algorithmic recommendation systems play a central role in shaping contemporary information environments. Ranking algorithms, personalized feeds, and recommender systems determine which content is made visible, repeated, or effectively buried, often with minimal user awareness (Chan et al. 2025). Rather than merely reflecting user preferences, these systems actively curate attention by prioritizing content predicted to generate engagement—such as clicks, shares, or watch time—thereby exerting a powerful influence over what narratives gain prominence. In practice, this means that visibility is not evenly distributed: a small subset of content receives disproportionate exposure, while most speech remains marginal.

These systems also create feedback loops that are particularly consequential in the early stages of content diffusion. Initial engagement—whether organic or artificially generated—can trigger algorithmic promotion, exposing content to wider audiences and generating further engagement in a self-reinforcing cycle. Research summarized in the literature indicates that such early amplification moments are critical: once content is algorithmically "picked up," subsequent visibility may be driven less by its intrinsic merit or accuracy and more by accumulated engagement signals (Bauman et al. 2025). This dynamic helps explain how misleading or manipulative narratives can rapidly achieve scale even when they originate from obscure sources or fringe communities.

At the same time, it is important to recognize the limits and nuances of algorithmic influence. Algorithms do not operate in a vacuum, nor do they deterministically convert all users into consumers of extreme or false content. User agency, social context, and perceived utility constrain what people ultimately consume and share.

Nonetheless, the evidence supports the conclusion that recommendation systems are dominant levers in structuring reach and visibility. Their influence lies not in dictating beliefs, but in shaping exposure at scale—making them a critical site for policy attention without implying omnipotent control over public opinion (Chavalarias and Panahi 2024).

Paid and Coordinated Influence Operations

Alongside algorithmic systems, paid and coordinated influence operations constitute a second major structural driver of disinformation. In the Philippine context, investigative reporting and academic research document the use of troll farms, influencer networks, and PR-style disinformation campaigns designed to simulate grassroots support, harass critics, or push preferred narratives into mainstream visibility (Ong and Cabañes 2018). These operations are often organized, funded, and strategically managed, blurring the line between political communication and covert manipulation.

Viewed analytically, disinformation in these cases functions as a market for covert influence. Clients—political actors, interest groups, or intermediaries—purchase reach, engagement, and narrative dominance through networks of paid accounts and content creators (Lindquist and Weltevrede 2024). Compensation may flow through formal contracts, informal arrangements, or shell entities, while the resulting content is presented as authentic public opinion. This market structure distinguishes professionalized disinformation from ordinary partisan speech: the core harm arises not from disagreement or persuasion, but from deception about the source, scale, and coordination of influence.

Despite extensive documentation of these practices, enforcement in the Philippines has struggled to keep pace. Existing legal tools—such as libel, cybercrime, or election laws—are ill-suited to tracing financial flows, identifying organizers, or addressing coordinated behavior that stops short of explicit illegality (Magbanua 2022). As a result, organizers and funders of disinformation campaigns often operate with relative impunity, while regulatory attention remains focused on individual posts or low-level actors rather than on the structures that enable influence-for-hire at scale.

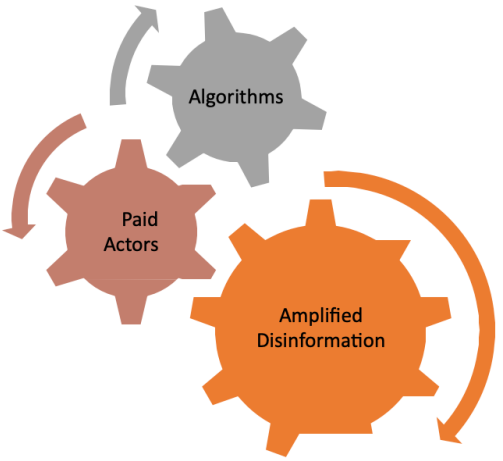
Mutual Reinforcement: Actors Gaming Algorithms

Crucially, algorithmic systems and paid influence operations do not operate independently; they reinforce one another. Skilled disinformation actors actively study and exploit platform affordances, tailoring content, timing, and coordination strategies to maximize algorithmic pickup (Giglietto et al. 2021). Practices such as synchronized posting, engagement brigading, and influencer seeding are designed

to generate the early signals that recommender systems interpret as popularity or relevance. In this way, paid coordination is often aimed less at persuading audiences directly than at manipulating the systems that govern visibility.

Algorithms, in turn, respond mechanically to engagement patterns, often without regard to whether such engagement is organic, coordinated, or financially induced. When systems prioritize signals like rapid interaction or coordinated behavior, they can unintentionally reward manipulation by amplifying content that appears popular, regardless of how that popularity was produced (Terenzi 2024). This bidirectional interaction creates a structural vulnerability: platforms provide the infrastructure for amplification, while paid actors supply the strategic inputs needed to trigger it at scale.

Figure 1. Structural Drivers of Amplified Disinformation



This mutual reinforcement has important regulatory implications. Because the problem lies in coordination strategies and payment-driven manipulation of visibility, regulation can target conduct—such as undisclosed paid amplification, coordinated inauthentic behavior, and the exploitation of recommender systems—without scrutinizing beliefs, opinions, or ideological positions. Focusing on coordination and payment avoids the need for the state to arbitrate truth, while directly addressing the mechanisms through which disinformation achieves disproportionate reach and social impact.

Figure 1 explains the cyclical relationship between paid actors and algorithmic systems.

1. Paid Actors seed engagement into a piece of content through coordinated behavior.
2. The Algorithm interprets this increase in reach and engagement as organic interest from users.

3. The Algorithm further amplifies the content into broader audiences.
4. The audiences engage, validating the algorithm.
5. The whole system then successfully amplifies the piece of content, regardless if it is a form of disinformation or not.
6. The cycle repeats once Paid Actors activate the system.

The Limits and Risks of Content-Centric Responses

Fact-Checking as an Incomplete and Risky Tool

Fact-checking has become one of the most visible and widely endorsed responses to disinformation in the Philippines. Media organizations, civil society groups, and platforms have invested heavily in debunking false claims, monitoring viral narratives, and publishing corrections. These efforts can play a valuable role in improving public understanding and documenting falsehoods, particularly when they are transparent, methodologically rigorous, and independent. However, policy discourse has increasingly treated fact-checking as a primary solution to a problem that is largely structural in nature.

Table 2. Limits and Risks of Fact-Checking as an Anti-Disinformation Strategy

Dimension	Fact-Checking Strength	Structural Limit or Risk
Timing of Intervention	Provides corrective information after false claims circulate	Operates ex post, often after amplification has already caused widespread exposure (Singer et al. 2023)
Effect on Reach	Can inform attentive audiences and journalists	Rarely matches the scale or speed of amplified misinformation
Impact on Belief Formation	May reduce belief in specific false claims among some users	Limited effect in polarized contexts; corrections may be ignored or resisted (Garrett, Nisbet, and Lynchl. 2013)
Addressing Root Causes	Identifies inaccurate content	Does not alter algorithmic amplification, coordination, or payment incentives
Scalability	Effective for high-profile claims	Resource-intensive and unable to keep pace with volume of online content (Arcos et al. 2022)

Dimension	Fact-Checking Strength	Structural Limit or Risk
Epistemic Framing	Signals commitment to accuracy	Encourages binary true/false judgments that oversimplify complex political issues (Uscinski and Butler 2013)
Risk of Political Abuse	Low when voluntary and independent	High when state-mandated or tied to enforcement powers (Wright 2023)
Chilling Effects	Minimal in journalistic settings	Potentially significant if linked to takedowns, penalties, or official labeling (Maron 2022)
Institutional Legitimacy	High for independent media and civil society	Weakened when fact-checking is centralized or state-controlled
Compatibility with Free Speech	Generally compatible as counter-speech	Problematic if used as a trigger for coercive action
Role in Policy Design	Useful supporting tool	Unsuitable as the primary regulatory response

An overreliance on debunking and monitoring risks misdiagnosing the source of harm. Fact-checking intervenes after content has already circulated, often after amplification mechanisms have done their work. Empirical research shows that corrections frequently spread more slowly and less widely than the original misleading claims, limiting their capacity to counteract large-scale exposure. Moreover, fact-checking does little to address why certain narratives achieve disproportionate reach in the first place, leaving untouched the platform designs, coordination strategies, and financial incentives that drive amplification.

There are also nontrivial risks associated with institutionalizing fact-checking as a regulatory centerpiece. In polarized environments, fact-checking can be selectively invoked to delegitimize dissenting views, particularly where definitions of "false" information are vague or politically contested. Binary true–false framings may oversimplify complex policy debates, value judgments, or evolving factual claims, effectively narrowing the space for legitimate disagreement. When fact-checking is tied to takedowns, penalties, or state authority, it can generate chilling effects on journalists, activists, and ordinary users who fear misclassification or reprisal.

For these reasons, fact-checking is best understood as supportive infrastructure rather than a primary regulatory tool (Yarrow 2021). It can inform public debate, supply evidence for accountability processes, and complement broader interventions, but it cannot substitute for policies that address amplification systems and influence markets. Elevating fact-checking to the core of anti-disinformation policy risks both ineffectiveness and overreach.

The Constitutional Problem with a "Truth Police"

Content-centric approaches culminate, at their most extreme, in proposals for centralized bodies empowered to identify fake news and order corrective or punitive measures. In the Philippine context, such proposals raise serious constitutional concerns. The 1987 Constitution provides robust protection for freedom of speech and of the press, and Philippine jurisprudence has repeatedly emphasized that even false or erroneous statements may fall within the protective ambit of free expression, absent a showing of concrete and imminent harm (G.R. No. L-8974; G.R. No.223705; G.R. No.223705) Content-based restrictions are therefore subject to strict scrutiny and must satisfy demanding standards of necessity and proportionality.

A centralized administrative authority tasked with adjudicating truth poses particular dangers under this framework. Vesting an executive agency with the power to determine factual accuracy and impose consequences risks collapsing investigative, prosecutorial, and adjudicative functions into a single institution. This concentration of power undermines procedural safeguards, heightens the risk of political abuse, and creates strong incentives for self-censorship, especially when the government itself is often a party to contested narratives. The problem is not merely theoretical: historical and comparative experience shows that fake news enforcement mechanisms are especially vulnerable to being turned against critics and opposition voices (Lim and Bradshaw 2023).

Courts, by contrast, operate under institutional constraints that make them better suited—though imperfect—for resolving contested factual claims when legal consequences are at stake. Judicial processes incorporate evidentiary standards, adversarial testing, reasoned decisions, and avenues for appeal. While courts are slow and ill-equipped to police the day-to-day circulation of online content, they provide a more legitimate forum for adjudicating specific harms such as defamation, fraud, or unlawful election practices. This division of labor suggests a constitutional boundary: executive agencies may regulate processes and infrastructure, but determinations of truth with coercive effect should remain within the judicial sphere.

Taken together, these limits and risks underscore the need to move beyond content-centric responses. Policies that center on truth adjudication—whether through fact-checking mandates or administrative "truth police"—not only struggle to address the real drivers of disinformation, but also threaten core constitutional commitments (Cuerpo 2022). A shift toward regulating amplification, coordination, and paid influence offers a more effective and legally defensible alternative.

Table 3. Problems with a Centralized "Truth Police" Model

Issue	Description	Constitutional/Policy Risk
Content-Based Regulation	Truth determinations require evaluating the substance and accuracy of speech	Triggers strict scrutiny; high risk of being struck down as unconstitutional
Concentration of Power	Single administrative body investigates, judges, and enforces	Violates separation of powers; undermines checks and balances
Political Capture	Executive agencies operate within political hierarchies	Enables selective enforcement against critics or opposition
Chilling Effects	Unclear standards incentivize self-censorship	Suppresses lawful speech, journalism, and dissent
Epistemic Overreach	Complex or contested claims reduced to binary true/false labels	Distorts democratic debate and pluralism
Lack of Due Process	Administrative determinations may lack adversarial testing	Weakens procedural fairness and legitimacy
Opacity of Decisions	Truth judgments often rely on non-transparent criteria	Erodes public trust and accountability
Speed–Accuracy Tradeoff	Pressure for rapid decisions in online cycles	Increases risk of error and over-removal
Incompatibility with Platform Scale	Vast content volumes exceed adjudicative capacity	Leads to automation or arbitrary enforcement
Role Confusion	State becomes arbiter of knowledge rather than regulator of conduct	Blurs boundary between governance and censorship
Historical Abuse Risk	"Fake news" laws have been misused in comparable jurisdictions	Heightened vulnerability in polarized political environments
Better Institutional Alternatives Exist	Courts and structural regulation offer narrower tools	Truth police is neither necessary nor least restrictive

A Constitutionally Safer Regulatory Shift: From Truth to Reach

A more effective and constitutionally cautious approach to disinformation begins by reframing the problem itself. Rather than treating disinformation primarily as a matter of false beliefs or erroneous speech, it should be understood as a problem of systems and incentives. The most significant harms arise not because individuals hold or express incorrect views, but because certain narratives are engineered to

achieve disproportionate reach through platform design, coordinated behavior, and financial investment. This reframing shifts the regulatory target away from epistemic judgment and toward the structures that shape visibility, scale, and influence in digital public spheres.

Under this approach, regulatory attention focuses on amplification mechanisms that act as multipliers of harm. These include algorithmic ranking and recommendation systems, trending features, paid boosts, and other design choices that determine which content is widely seen. Regulating amplification does not require evaluating the truth or falsity of particular messages; instead, it focuses on how content is elevated, whether such elevation is transparent, and whether safeguards exist to prevent systematic gaming. Measures such as disclosure of amplification criteria, auditing of recommender systems, and limits on automated or coordinated boosting can directly address scale without intruding into the substance of expression.

A second focus is paid political influence. Disinformation campaigns in the Philippines and elsewhere frequently rely on undisclosed financial arrangements, influencer marketing, and influence-for-hire networks that masquerade as organic public opinion (Gaw et al. 2025). Regulation in this area can draw on well-established principles governing political advertising and campaign finance: requiring disclosure of sponsors, intermediaries, and funding sources; prohibiting deceptive practices; and enabling investigation of organizers rather than merely penalizing individual speakers. By treating paid disinformation as a form of regulated conduct rather than protected opinion, policy can target the economic foundations of manipulation while preserving space for genuine political advocacy.

Relatedly, coordinated inauthentic behavior warrants specific regulatory attention. Coordination itself—when undisclosed and deceptive—constitutes a form of conduct that distorts public discourse by creating false signals of consensus or popularity (Jahn, Rendsvig, and Stærk-Østergaard 2023). Requiring platforms to detect, document, and report coordinated campaigns, and to cooperate with lawful investigations into their organization and financing, addresses the mechanics of manipulation without evaluating the ideological content of the messages involved. This focus on coordination avoids the pitfalls of viewpoint discrimination while directly confronting practices designed to game information systems at scale.

Finally, platform transparency and cooperation are essential components of a reach-focused framework. Platforms control the infrastructure through which amplification occurs, yet their systems operate largely as black boxes (Whittaker et al. 2021). Imposing duties of transparency—such as reporting on political advertising, amplification practices, and enforcement against coordinated campaigns—can enable public oversight and informed policymaking. Importantly, these obligations

can be structured to exclude direct content adjudication, reinforcing the principle that regulatory agencies govern processes and safeguards, not truth itself.

Across these domains, the unifying principle is an emphasis on conduct and infrastructure rather than ideology or opinion. By regulating how influence is purchased, coordinated, and amplified, the state can mitigate the most serious harms of disinformation while respecting constitutional protections of free expression (Wood and Ravel 2018). This shift from truth to reach offers a path toward governance that is both more effective in practice and more defensible in law.

Table 4. Speech-Centered vs. Reach-Centered Approaches to Disinformation Regulation

Dimension	Speech-Centered Regulation	Reach-Centered Regulation
Primary Regulatory Target	Individual statements or pieces of content	Amplification mechanisms, coordination, and influence markets
Core Question Asked	"Is this statement true or false?"	"How did this content achieve scale and visibility?"
Regulatory Focus	Content accuracy and speaker liability	Systems, incentives, and conduct affecting reach
Role of the State	Arbiter of truth or falsity	Regulator of processes and infrastructure
Typical Policy Tools	Takedowns, criminal penalties, labeling	Transparency, disclosure, audits, coordination limits
Constitutional Risk	High (content-based restriction; strict scrutiny)	Lower (content-neutral regulation of conduct)
Risk of Censorship	Significant, especially in polarized contexts	Reduced, as beliefs and opinions are not evaluated
Treatment of Paid Influence	Often indirect or overlooked	Central focus (sponsors, intermediaries, funding flows)
Ability to Address Scale	Limited; reactive and case-by-case	Direct; targets amplification ex ante
Institutional Fit	Administrative agencies with broad discretion	Regulators with defined process mandates
Compatibility with Courts	Courts burdened with mass truth disputes	High, by disrupting coordination and incentives
Effectiveness Against Organized Campaigns	Low to moderate	High, by disrupting coordination and incentives
Impact on Legitimate Speech	Chilling effects likely	Legitimate speech largely unaffected

Following the Money: Regulating Paid Disinformation Like Financial Crime

One of the most promising ways to address professionalized disinformation is to treat it not primarily as a speech problem, but as a problem of covert economic activity. Research on information operations increasingly describes disinformation campaigns as market transactions in which clients purchase influence, reach, and narrative dominance through intermediaries, shell entities, and cross-platform networks (Neudert et al. 2019). This structure closely resembles forms of financial crime that rely on concealment, layering, and intermediated transactions (Alkrisheh and Gourari 2025). An analogy to anti–money laundering (AML) frameworks is therefore analytically useful: both domains involve tracing hidden relationships, uncovering beneficial owners, and disrupting illicit or deceptive flows rather than policing individual messages.

Applying this analogy means focusing on the organization and financing of influence-for-hire networks. In the Philippine context, studies and investigations document troll farms, influencer collectives, and PR-style operations that operate through opaque contractual arrangements and informal payment channels. Funds may pass through advertising agencies, marketing firms, or personal accounts, while the resulting political messaging is presented as spontaneous public sentiment. Mapping these networks—who pays, who coordinates, and who ultimately benefits—shifts enforcement away from low-level content producers and toward the actors who design and profit from disinformation campaigns.

Regulatory tools drawn from financial oversight can support this shift. Disclosure requirements can mandate that paid political content, influencer campaigns, and amplification services identify their sponsors and intermediaries. Beneficial ownership rules can require firms engaged in political communication or online influence services to reveal their controlling interests, preventing the use of shell entities to obscure responsibility. Transaction-based oversight—such as reporting thresholds, audit trails, and cooperation between platforms, payment providers, and regulators—can help detect coordinated influence operations without requiring constant content monitoring.

These measures target deception and concealment in economic conduct, not the viewpoints being expressed.

At the same time, safeguards are essential to prevent overreach. Legitimate public relations, advocacy, and political campaigning are lawful forms of expression and association, and many rely on anonymity to protect speakers from retaliation. Financial-style regulation must therefore be carefully scoped to cover covert,

deceptive, and paid amplification rather than ordinary persuasion or volunteer-driven activism. Clear statutory definitions, thresholds tied to scale and payment, procedural protections, and judicial oversight can help ensure that enforcement distinguishes between disinformation-for-hire and constitutionally protected speech. Properly designed, a "follow the money" approach can disrupt the economic foundations of disinformation while preserving the pluralism and anonymity that democratic discourse requires.

Table 5. Conceptual Similarities of Paid Disinformation to Other Financial Crimes and Money Laundering

Dimension	Paid disinformation Disinformation-as-a-Service	Other crimes & money laundering
Core business model	Selling covert influence campaigns as a service (narrative design, inauthentic amplification, ad buying) (Lyngaas 2019).	Selling illegal goods/services (drugs, trafficking, cybercrime) and laundering proceeds through layered financial/commerce activity (UNODC 2026).
Use of intermediaries	Relies on marketing firms, PR shops, bot-farm operators, freelance platforms as facilitators.	Uses professional launderers, money mules, shell-company providers, corrupt gatekeepers as facilitators.
"Laundering" analogue	Information laundering: false content is routed through layers (bots, fake accounts, fringe sites, influencers) until it looks organic and trustworthy.	Money laundering: illicit funds moved through layers of accounts, companies, and transactions until they appear legitimate.
Cross-border operation	Campaign operators, clients, platforms, and audiences often in different jurisdictions; exploits regulatory gaps.	Classic transnational crime structure; exploit differences in enforcement, banking secrecy, and border controls.
Blending with legal activity	Mixes lawful marketing/ PR and paid ads with covert manipulation to obscure intent and responsibility.	Mixes licit trade, real businesses, and fake invoices with illicit proceeds to hide criminal origin.
Use of digital platforms	Depends on social media, ad-tech, search, and messaging apps for distribution and targeting.	Uses online banking, fintech, virtual assets, online gambling, and e-commerce to move and disguise funds.
Professionalization "as a service"	Offers disinformation-as-a-service menus (account farms, botnets, trending manipulation, reputation attacks).	Offers professional money-laundering and cybercrime-as-a-service (cash-out, mule networks, hacking, fraud toolkits).

Dimension	Paid disinformation Disinformation-as-a-Service	Other crimes & money laundering
Exploiting weak governance	Thrives where platform rules, campaign-finance laws, and enforcement are weak or corruptible.	Thrives in weak or corrupt states, and where regulatory asymmetries create "criminogenic" opportunities.
Role in broader crime ecosystem	Can be paid for with illicit proceeds; used to intimidate, discredit investigators, or shape policy in favor of criminals.	Other crimes generate the funds; laundering and corruption protect operations and help expand markets (drugs, trafficking, terrorism).
Evidence trail & attribution	Uses fake identities, cut-outs and plausible deniability, making it hard to link campaigns to paymasters.	Uses shells, nominees, complex transaction chains to sever links between funds and underlying crime.

Platform Accountability Without Content Control

Any effective strategy to address disinformation at scale must account for the central role of social media platforms as governors of digital infrastructure. Platforms design and operate the systems through which amplification occurs, making them unavoidable participants in the problem (Liu 2025). At the same time, imposing content-control obligations on platforms—particularly those requiring truth determinations or discretionary takedowns—raises serious constitutional and democratic concerns. Philippine law nevertheless provides a basis for imposing process-oriented obligations on platforms, grounded in the state's authority to regulate communications infrastructure and commercial activity in the interest of public welfare, without converting platforms into arbiters of truth.

Within this framework, transparency requirements are a central regulatory tool. One area of focus is political advertising. Platforms can be required to maintain public, searchable repositories of political ads, including information on sponsors, intermediaries, targeting criteria, and expenditures. Such disclosure does not restrict speech, but instead equips the public, regulators, and researchers to assess the scale and sources of political influence. Similar logic applies to influencer marketing and paid political content that is not formally classified as advertising but functions as such in practice.

Transparency is also needed with respect to algorithmic amplification. While proprietary interests and technical complexity place limits on full disclosure, platforms can be required to report high-level metrics and risk assessments related

to how recommendation systems shape reach—such as the prevalence of automated amplification, the treatment of coordinated activity, and the safeguards used to prevent gaming. Regular reporting and independent audits can provide oversight of systemic effects without exposing trade secrets or requiring regulators to evaluate individual content decisions.

A third transparency obligation concerns the detection and handling of coordinated campaigns. Platforms already engage in identifying coordinated inauthentic behavior, however, these processes are often opaque and inconsistently enforced. Requiring standardized documentation, reporting, and cooperation with lawful investigations can improve accountability while respecting user rights. The regulatory focus remains on whether platforms maintain reasonable systems to detect and respond to coordination, not on whether particular messages are true or false.

Crucially, these obligations must be paired with clear limits on administrative power. Regulatory bodies should be explicitly barred from making direct truth determinations, ordering content takedowns, or imposing penalties based on the substance of speech absent judicial process. Their mandate should be confined to setting safety and transparency standards, reviewing compliance, and imposing proportionate administrative sanctions for failures of process or disclosure. This boundary preserves constitutional protections while enabling meaningful oversight of platform practices.

Judicial backstops and procedural safeguards are essential to this model. Platforms and affected parties must have access to notice, reasons, and avenues for appeal when regulatory action is taken. Courts remain the appropriate forum for resolving disputes involving defamation, fraud, election offenses, or other content-based harms. By anchoring platform accountability in transparency, cooperation, and judicial review—rather than in content control—this approach seeks to govern the systems that amplify disinformation without undermining the freedoms that democratic communication depends on.

Table 6. Platform Accountability Strategies Without Content Control

Accountability Strategy	Description	Regulatory Purpose	Constitutional Advantage
Political Advertising Transparency	Require public ad libraries disclosing sponsors, intermediaries, targeting criteria, and spend	Expose paid political influence and covert campaigning	Regulates disclosure and conduct, not speech content

Accountability Strategy	Description	Regulatory Purpose	Constitutional Advantage
Influencer & Paid Content Disclosure	Mandate labeling of paid political or issue-based promotions	Prevent deception about the source of influence	Protects audiences without judging viewpoints
Algorithmic Amplification Reporting	Require platforms to publish high-level metrics and risk assessments on amplification practices	Enable oversight of reach and scale dynamics	Avoids content adjudication; focuses on systems
Independent Audits	Periodic third-party audits of amplification and enforcement systems	Verify compliance and systemic risk mitigation	Procedural oversight rather than speech restriction
Detection of Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior	Obligate platforms to maintain systems to identify coordinated campaigns	Disrupt manipulation of visibility signals	Targets deceptive coordination, not ideology
Reporting on Enforcement Actions	Publish aggregate data on actions taken against coordinated campaigns	Increase accountability and consistency	Transparency without coercive content judgments
Platform–Regulator Cooperation	Require cooperation with lawful investigations (e.g., data preservation, subpoenas)	Enable tracing of organizers and funders	Judicially supervised, not discretionary
User Appeal and Redress Mechanisms	Ensure notice, explanation, and appeal for platform actions	Protect user rights and procedural fairness	Aligns with due process principles
Clear Limits on Agency Authority	Statutory prohibition on truth determinations or takedown orders	Prevent administrative overreach	Preserves separation of powers and free expression
Judicial Backstops	Courts resolve disputes involving sanctions or content-based harms	Legitimate adjudication of speech restrictions	Ensures strict scrutiny and evidentiary standards

Sequencing Reform: Structure First, Content Last

A core insight of constitutional free-speech doctrine is that restrictions on expression must be both necessary and narrowly tailored to address a concrete harm. Under Philippine jurisprudence, content-based regulations are subject to strict scrutiny and are permissible only when less speech-restrictive alternatives are inadequate (GR No. 168338; GR No. 252578). This logic has direct implications for anti-disinformation

policy design. If structural interventions can substantially reduce harm without requiring the state to judge truth or suppress speech, then those interventions must be pursued before resorting to content-based sanctions. Sequencing reform in this way is not merely prudent policy; it reflects constitutional necessity.

The first step in this sequence is to regulate reach, incentives, and coordination ex ante. Measures such as transparency requirements for political advertising, disclosure of paid amplification, detection and reporting of coordinated inauthentic behavior, and safeguards around algorithmic amplification target the conditions that allow disinformation to scale. These interventions operate upstream, shaping the environment in which information circulates rather than reacting to individual statements after the fact. By reducing the effectiveness and profitability of large-scale manipulation, structural regulation can prevent many harms from materializing at all, without chilling lawful expression.

Only after such less restrictive measures are in place should the state turn to adjudicating specific content-related harms. When disinformation gives rise to concrete legal injuries—such as defamation, electoral fraud, or unlawful incitement—existing legal frameworks provide mechanisms for redress through the courts. Judicial processes, while slower and more resource-intensive, offer procedural safeguards, evidentiary standards, and avenues for appeal that are essential when speech is subject to sanction. Importantly, this step addresses harms on a case-by-case basis rather than authorizing broad administrative judgments about truth.

This sequencing reduces censorship risk while increasing effectiveness. By prioritizing structural reform, policymakers avoid empowering administrative bodies to engage in discretionary truth enforcement, which is especially dangerous in polarized political environments. At the same time, targeting amplification systems and influence markets addresses the mechanisms that make disinformation socially damaging in the first place. Content-based adjudication remains available as a backstop for serious and individualized harms, but it is no longer the primary or reflexive response. In this way, a "structure first, content last" approach aligns constitutional doctrine with empirical reality, offering a more durable and rights-respecting path for anti-disinformation reform in the Philippines.

Conclusion

Governing Information Flows Without Governing TruthThis paper argued for a fundamental shift in how anti-disinformation policy is conceived and designed in the Philippines. Rather than centering regulation on the identification and suppression of false content, it has reframed disinformation as a problem of information flows, amplification systems, and influence markets. The core contribution lies in

redirecting the policy lens away from truth adjudication and individual speech, and toward the structural mechanisms—algorithmic amplification, paid coordination, and opaque financial arrangements—that transform ordinary claims into socially consequential harms.

For Philippine democracy, this shift carries significant implications. A content-centric approach risks entrenching censorship, chilling political participation, and empowering state actors to police contested narratives, all within a constitutional order that strongly protects free expression (Keller 2021). By contrast, regulating reach, coordination, and paid influence aligns more closely with democratic values and legal doctrine. It targets manipulation rather than dissent, deception rather than disagreement, and systems rather than beliefs. In a political environment marked by polarization and uneven institutional trust, such an approach offers a more credible and legitimate path for addressing disinformation without undermining the freedoms it purports to defend.

The argument also resonates beyond the Philippine context. Many democracies face similar tensions between combating disinformation and preserving free speech, particularly as digital platforms mediate an increasing share of public discourse. The framework developed here—structural regulation first, content adjudication last—offers a model that can inform comparative debates in jurisdictions grappling with the same challenges. While legal doctrines and institutional arrangements differ, the underlying insight remains widely applicable: the most serious harms of disinformation arise from scale and coordination, not from the mere existence of false ideas.

Ultimately, governing information flows without governing truth requires regulatory humility as well as empirical grounding. Policymakers must resist the temptation to resolve epistemic disputes through administrative power and instead focus on measurable, demonstrable drivers of harm.

Empirically informed and constitutionally modest regulation—aimed at transparency, accountability, and the disruption of deceptive influence markets—offers a path forward that is both more effective and more faithful to democratic principles.

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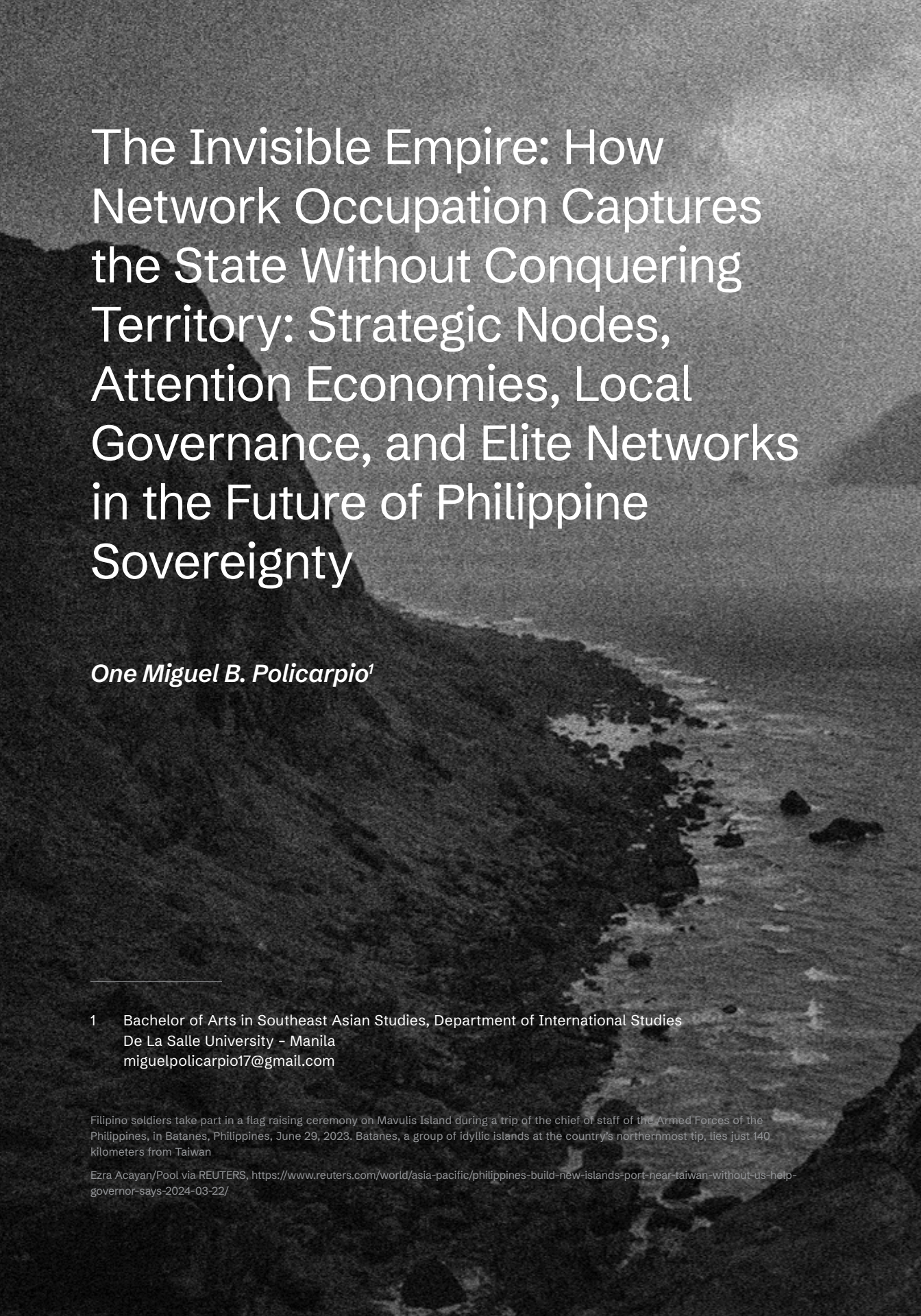
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The Invisible Empire: How Network Occupation Captures the State Without Conquering Territory: Strategic Nodes, Attention Economies, Local Governance, and Elite Networks in the Future of Philippine Sovereignty

One Miguel B. Policarpio[1]

1 Bachelor of Arts in Southeast Asian Studies, Department of International Studies
De La Salle University - Manila
miguelpolicarpio17@gmail.com



Filipino soldiers take part in a flag raising ceremony on Mavulis Island during a trip of the chief of staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, in Batanes, Philippines, June 29, 2023. Batanes, a group of idyllic islands at the country's northernmost tip, lies just 140 kilometers from Taiwan

Ezra Acayan/Pool via REUTERS, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-build-new-islands-port-near-taiwan-without-us-help-governor-says-2024-03-22/



Abstract

Contemporary security debates remain focused on kinetic conceptions of power, such as territorial disputes, military modernization, and great-power rivalry. However, these approaches are increasingly ill-suited for understanding how influence is achieved in the 21st century. This paper argues that by 2030, the most crucial challenge to sovereignty in the Philippines will not arise from formal conquest but from network occupation, which refers to external actors' influence on state behavior by exerting control over key nodes in interlinked systems of food, energy, information, infrastructure, digital platforms, local government, and elite networks. In this respect, the paper advances the concept of the Invisible Empire to understand how this form of power manifests, in which strategic leverage is achieved without annexing territory or directly dominating a state. The paper uses a qualitative case study approach to analyze the cascading effects of the Strait of Hormuz disruption alongside selected Philippine cases on infrastructure, sister-city agreements, digital platforms, and local elites' networks as empirical evidence of how external shocks and influence can proliferate through interconnected systems, impacting public opinion, institutional decision-making, political stability, and commodity pricing to create a more permanent form of strategic dependency. Building on classical realism and the security studies literature, the paper presents the theoretical framework "Network Realism," arguing that strategic advantages derive from controlling critical positions in networks that sustain modern society. Hence, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on national security, economic resilience, hybrid threats, foreign interference, and the future of Philippine sovereignty amid renewed geopolitical competition.

Keywords: network occupation, network realism, invisible empire, Indo-Pacific security, foreign interference

Introduction

Geopolitical competition is a strategic rivalry between states in the quest for power, resources, and influence. States employ a variety of means to achieve their objective. One dominant image of this remains one of armies crossing borders, territories shifting hands, and states' military assets projecting power. Territory has been seen as the main source of state power since the advent of modern realism, with military might being the main tool used by states to pursue national interests and survival in anarchic international systems (Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001). While these continue to explain conventional warfare and territorial disputes, they can be deemed inadequate in a world that is increasingly characterized by globalization, digital interconnectivity, malign foreign influences, and the existence of a nonstate transnational network, where powers and influence are fluid. The renewed great power competition no longer demonstrates power in the pursuit of physical gain, but rather in the arena of increasingly cross-border systems of infrastructure, finance, technology, information, logistics, and governance (Castells 2009; Farrell and Newman 2019).

The Philippines makes a strong case for analyzing this change. The nation's security discourse has been greatly influenced by alliance politics, military modernization, and maritime disputes in the West Philippine Sea, given its location at the epicenter of growing strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific (National Security Council [NSC] 2024). However, a new generation of security issues that operate outside the battlefield is increasingly coexisting with these conventional concerns. For instance, a disruption in the Strait of Hormuz could lead to higher oil prices worldwide, which would then cause domestic fuel price inflation, transportation costs, food prices, and eventually political unrest. Similarly, long-term forms of strategic leverage may be produced without infringing on territorial sovereignty through foreign investments in vital infrastructure, digital platforms that influence public opinion, subnational collaborations between local governments, and transnational elite networks. Together, these developments show that geopolitical competition increasingly operates through interconnected networks rather than direct territorial control, although they are frequently examined separately (Blackwill and Harris 2016; Farrell and Newman 2019).

Recent scholarship emphasizes the growing significance of nonmilitary instruments in statecraft, particularly in the context of hybrid threats and gray-zone competition, in which states leverage a combination of military and nonmilitary tools (Hoffman 2007; Brands 2016). Research shows that geoeconomics and weaponized interdependence utilize global finance and trade networks as means of coercion (Blackwill and Harris 2016). However, these studies often isolate domains such as energy security and economic statecraft without integrating their theoretical

frameworks. This paper posits that modern geopolitical competition focuses on the occupation of strategic nodes within transnational networks—rather than physical territories—which significantly influence political and economic systems. This phenomenon, termed network occupation, leads to the concept of an Invisible Empire, in which formal sovereignty is maintained but strategic autonomy diminishes due to network dependencies. Building on neoclassical realism, the paper introduces network realism, which articulates how systemic pressures interact with domestic variables embedded in these networks, thereby enriching the understanding of influence in contemporary international relations (Rose 1998).

This paper explores how external actors influence the Philippines, utilizing "network occupation" without seeking territorial conquest. It addresses three key questions: how to conceptualize strategic nodes within a network realist framework, the mechanisms by which dependencies in energy, information, and governance yield geopolitical leverage, and the effects on Philippine sovereignty and national security amid heightened competition in the Indo-Pacific. The study contributes to neoclassical realist literature by emphasizing strategic networks and nodes, while unifying concepts from hybrid threats, geoeconomics, and cognitive security. Ultimately, it posits that by 2030, the primary threat to Philippine sovereignty may stem from the gradual loss of strategic autonomy due to the occupation of essential interconnected networks, rather than direct conquest.

Literature Review

Realism, Neorealism, and Neoclassical Realism

Scholarly interest in power, sovereignty, and state behavior within an increasingly interconnected international system has been rekindled by the changing nature of strategic competition. Realism remains one of the most important theoretical traditions for understanding international politics, even as globalization, technological advancement, and economic interdependence have changed how states compete. Realism has consistently highlighted that the international system is marked by anarchy, compelling states to seek survival by accumulating and projecting power, from its classical roots to its modern neoclassical variant (Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979). However, the increasing prominence of digital infrastructures, transnational networks, and hybrid forms of competition raises significant questions about whether traditional realist presumptions remain adequate for understanding the evolving geopolitical power structure. This section examines the development of realist theory and argues that while Neoclassical Realism greatly expands realism's explanatory capacity by adding domestic intervening variables, it pays relatively little attention to the strategic importance of transnational networks that increasingly mediate global competition.

Hans Morgenthau (1948) articulated the term "classical realism," which holds that international politics is a never-ending struggle for dominance rooted in human frailty. States aim to maximize power and security in anarchic international environments because people have an innate desire to dominate. While military prowess and territorial control are the main tools states use to maintain their sovereignty and ensure their survival, national interest, defined in terms of power, becomes the guiding principle of foreign policy. Because it established the enduring connection among power, security, and the pursuit of national interests, Morgenthau's framework remains fundamental. Its focus on human nature, however, offers little explanatory power for comprehending modern forms of strategic competition that increasingly function through digital technologies, transnational governance structures, and economic interdependence rather than direct military conflict.

Neorealism, or structural realism, shifted the basis away from human nature and towards the structure of the international system. Waltz (1979) argues that international politics is inherently anarchic, lacking a global order or system capable of monitoring and enforcing it among sovereign states. States strive for survival in anarchic environments by maximizing their relative security and balancing against threats. As a result, patterns of cooperation, conflict, and alliance formation are largely determined by the distribution of material capabilities throughout the international system. Therefore, by prioritizing systemic constraints over internal political factors, neorealism provides a parsimonious explanation of state behavior.

Despite its theoretical argument, it cannot explain why states behave differently in nations with comparable structural circumstances. Different foreign policy strategies are often adopted by states with similar capabilities and facing similar external threats, indicating that systemic pressures alone cannot explain foreign policy outcomes (Rose 1998). Furthermore, economic statecraft, technological standards, digital platforms, and information ecosystems—all of which function outside of the territorial logic that structural realist theory has historically emphasized—are increasingly used in modern geopolitical competition. Neorealism offers fewer analytical tools for comprehending how competition is transferred into domestic political decision-making through increasingly interconnected global networks, even though it successfully explains why competition endures under anarchy.

By reintroducing domestic-level variables into realist analysis, neoclassical realism emerged as a significant response to these constraints. According to Rose (1998), systemic pressures influence state behavior only after being filtered through intervening variables like state institutions, elite perceptions, bureaucratic capacity, and domestic political structures.

Furthermore, the renewed great power competition unfolds differently via economic statecraft, technological innovations, digital platforms, and information systems that operate outside territorial boundaries. Building on this understanding, Zakaria (1998) shows that state power and institutional capacity play a major role in states' capacity to transform national resources into foreign policy capabilities. Similar to how Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell (2016) develop neoclassical realism into a comprehensive theoretical framework that methodically connects international structural incentives with domestic political processes, Schweller (2006) highlights how domestic political coalitions and elite consensus shape governments' responses to external threats.

Neoclassical realism highlights the impact of domestic factors such as institutions and leadership on international outcomes, alongside systemic power dynamics. While explaining varied state strategies under similar pressures, it overlooks the role of transnational networks increasingly relevant in strategic competition. In the current geopolitical landscape, influence transcends military power, encompassing energy, finance, and technology. The theory needs further development to integrate these networked forms of power, which are essential for understanding the interplay between domestic and international politics.

This paper argues that an extension of neoclassical realism proposes network realism as a framework that uses strategic networks and systems as a variable linking systems to domestic political outcomes. In doing so, this retains the fundamental elements of realism while expanding the analytical theory to interpret geopolitical competition in a networked society.

Hybrid Threats, Geoeconomics and Weaponized Interdependence

Scholars are reevaluating the tools that states use to achieve their strategic goals in light of the evolving nature of international competition. While military force, deterrence, and territorial conquest are the main focuses of traditional realist theories, modern geopolitical rivalry increasingly occurs below the threshold of conventional warfare. To influence adversaries without engaging in direct armed conflict, states now employ a combination of military, economic, informational, technological, diplomatic, and cyber tools. The ideas of hybrid threats and gray-zone competition, which both aim to explain how strategic goals are pursued through multifaceted and often opaque forms of coercion, have emerged from this evolution.

The term "hybrid warfare" was first used by Frank Hoffman in 2007 to characterize conflicts in which irregular tactics, cyber activities, terrorism, criminal networks, and information operations are combined with conventional military operations.

By exploiting target states' political, economic, and social weaknesses, hybrid strategies enhance military capabilities rather than supplanting conventional warfare. Hoffman's framework shows how the battlefield has grown to encompass financial systems, media ecosystems, cyberspace, and public opinion in addition to physical territory. Because influence increasingly depends on the capacity to manipulate multiple domains at once, military superiority alone no longer ensures strategic advantage.

Building on this perspective, Michael Mazarr (2015) argues that a significant portion of contemporary strategic competition occurs in the gray zone—the space between peace and open warfare—where states deliberately employ coercive measures below the threshold at which military retaliation is likely. These strategies include influence campaigns, legal warfare, political meddling, economic coercion, cyber operations, and diplomatic pressure. Similarly, Brands (2016) contends that gray-zone competition has become a defining feature of international politics in the twenty-first century because it enables states to achieve geopolitical objectives while reducing the risks associated with traditional military escalation. In this scenario, strategic success increasingly depends on influencing adversaries' political landscape rather than defeating them on the battlefield.

By emphasizing nonmilitary tools of influence, the literature on hybrid threats advances knowledge of national security. But a large portion of this research is descriptive, classifying statecraft tools without explaining how they work together to create strategic influence. Energy security, disinformation, and economic coercion are examples of factors that are frequently addressed independently, failing to acknowledge their interconnections within a broader framework of geopolitical power. As a result, although current research on hybrid competition tools is instructive, it does not offer theoretical insights into the structures that combine these tools into a cohesive strategic influence mechanism.

The growing strategic significance of economic interdependence has been highlighted in a distinct body of literature that emerged concurrent with the rise of hybrid threat scholarship. Scholars increasingly argue that global economic integration has given states new ways to exercise power through markets, finance, technology, and infrastructure, rather than viewing globalization as a force that lessens geopolitical rivalry. Economic ties, which were formerly thot of mainly as tools for prosperity, are now major sites of geopolitical conflict. Baldwin (1985) was among the first to argue that economic instruments constitute an essential component of statecraft rather than merely commercial activity. Building upon this foundation, Blackwill and Harris (2016) define geoeconomics as the strategic use of economic tools—including trade, investment, sanctions, finance, and infrastructure—to advance geopolitical objectives. Their work challenges the traditional separation between economics and security by

demonstrating that economic policies increasingly function as instruments of national power.

Perhaps the most influential contribution to this debate is Farrell and Newman's (2019) theory of weaponized interdependence, which argues that globalization has produced asymmetric networks in which states occupying central positions can exploit interdependence for strategic advantage. Because financial systems, digital platforms, communication infrastructures, and global supply chains are organized through highly centralized networks, dominant states can leverage these positions to conduct surveillance, impose sanctions, restrict access to technology, and influence other states' behavior. Power, therefore, derives not merely from the possession of material resources but from occupying critical positions within interconnected global networks. By showing that control over connectivity can yield strategic influence comparable to territorial control, this viewpoint represents a substantial departure from traditional realist assumptions. However, interstate coercion via international economic and technological networks is the main focus of the literature on weaponized interdependence. Understanding how these external network structures interact with domestic political institutions, local governance, elite relationships, and information ecosystems to influence internal political behavior has received relatively less attention. While previous research clearly shows that networks can be used as tools of coercion, it falls short of explaining how multiple strategic networks can simultaneously influence domestic decision-making within sovereign states.

Contemporary geopolitical power is transforming with a focus on the strategic manipulation of interconnected systems rather than territorial occupation. While existing literature addresses military, economic, informational, technological, and political tools in isolation, this study builds on neoclassical realism to propose that these tools converge through strategic nodes in transnational networks. This concept, termed network occupation, explains how systemic competition shapes domestic political outcomes, synthesizing insights from realism, hybrid threats, and geoeconomics into a cohesive framework that illustrates influence without territorial conquest.

Network Society, Cognitive Security, and Strategic Influence

Analyzing shifts in geopolitical power requires an understanding of the growing significance of networks in international politics. Network theorists emphasize the significance of relationships, connectivity, and positionality, in contrast to realism, which sees power as originating from material capabilities. Power in a highly interconnected global system comes not only from having resources but also from holding positions that control the movement of capital, people, and information. This

point of view is essential to comprehending how some commonplace infrastructures or institutions can acquire substantial geopolitical significance.

According to Castells (2010), modern societies are increasingly structured around networks that are defined by flows of capital, information, technology, and communication. The ability to create, manage, and alter the connections that facilitate these flows is how power is used in the network society. This is a significant shift from ideas of power that are limited by geography. Network analysis looks at who controls the connections that allow resources to flow, not just who owns them. Therefore, a state, corporation, platform, infrastructure provider, or institutional actor in a strategically important position may exert influence beyond what its material capabilities alone would imply.

International power cannot be reduced to direct coercion, as Susan Strange's (1996) analysis of structural power shows. The ability to influence the frameworks within which other people must work, such as financial, production, security, and knowledge structures, is known as structural power. Because states can maintain formal legal authority even as they become increasingly reliant on external structures that limit their options, this realization is especially crucial to understanding modern sovereignty. As a result, sovereignty may endure institutionally but become more conditional in reality.

The network perspective is extended into the field of governance by Slaughter (2004), who shows how networks linking government agencies, regulators, courts, and other institutional actors across national borders are becoming increasingly important in modern international relations. The conventional division between domestic and international politics is complicated by these networks. In addition to operating within national political systems, governmental institutions may engage in transnational networks that expose them to external norms, connections, resources, and demands.

Nye (2004) argues that soft power is the capacity of states to sway people through attraction rather than force or coercion. The modern information environment has greatly expanded the ways preferences can be shaped, even though soft power has historically placed a strong emphasis on culture, political values, and the legitimacy of foreign policy. Information can spread at previously unheard-of speeds and scales thanks to digital platforms, and algorithmic systems decide which stories are highlighted and which are ignored. According to Singer and Brooking (2018), social media has turned the information environment into a significant geopolitical arena. Digital platforms do more than just disseminate political messages; they also create the framework for political discourse. As a result, algorithmic amplification, emotional response, attention, and engagement become strategic resources. Influence in this context does not always necessitate convincing the whole populace to back a

specific foreign actor. Alternatively, it might entail escalating polarization, eroding confidence in institutions, deepening social divides, or raising doubts about the reliability of certain information.

The literature on foreign information manipulation and interference emphasizes how it uses information ecosystems to sway public opinion and democratic institutions. The European External Action Service (EEAS 2024) defines foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) as coordinated actions that threaten political processes and values, often exploiting social divisions and preexisting vulnerabilities. Information influences functions indirectly and cumulatively, in contrast to traditional coercion, to change the political landscape rather than enforce particular policies. This kind of cognitive influence is indicative of strategic competition in which external actors seek favorable positions within networks of interconnected information that include institutions, media, elites, and populations.

Literature Gap: Towards Network Realism

The study discusses contemporary geopolitical power as multidimensional and networked, contrasting Realism and Neoclassical Realism, and emphasizing hybrid threats and geoeconomic leverage. It identifies a gap in the literature regarding an integrated framework for understanding how these networks contribute to geopolitical influence. The paper introduces network realism, which extends neoclassical realism by treating network positions as variables that shape domestic power dynamics. It presents the idea of network occupation, where external influences leverage strategic nodes, potentially affecting economic and political autonomy. The concept of an Invisible Empire emerges, where states maintain sovereignty while being constrained by external networks. Using the Philippines as a case study, the paper illustrates how dependencies can shape its strategic influence and sovereignty by 2030.

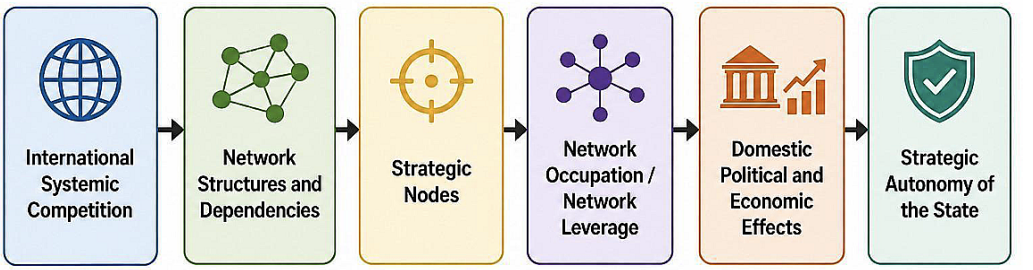
Theoretical Framework

From Neoclassical Realism to Network Realism

This study suggests network realism as an extension of neoclassical realism. Neoclassical realism emphasizes how domestic structures and elite perceptions filter international pressures before influencing foreign policy (Rose 1998; Ripsman et al. 2016). Nonetheless, the study makes the case for expanding this framework by highlighting how contemporary states are integrated into international networks of trade, finance, and energy that affect domestic decision-making. As a result, these networks provide an additional level of mediation between domestic political outcomes and external pressures. The basic principles of realism are upheld by

network realism: the international system is marked by competition and uncertainty; states continue to prioritize survival and strategic autonomy; power is distributed unevenly; and actors look for favorable positions in a setting where reliance can lead to vulnerability. Its main innovation is the contention that positional advantage within crucial networks, in addition to material capabilities, is increasingly the source of strategic power. Figure 1 shows the framework that represents this:

Figure 1. Theoretical framework of the paper



Strategic Nodes as Sources of Geopolitical Power

One of the central concepts of network realism is the "strategic node," described in this study as a node whose influence, control, disruption, or manipulation can have effects disproportionate to the node itself. There are both material and immaterial strategic nodes. Ports, energy infrastructure, telecommunications systems, logistics centers, financial institutions, and vital supply chains are examples of material nodes. Digital platforms, information ecosystems, elite networks, educational institutions, political connections, and public communication channels are examples of immaterial nodes.

Therefore, a node's size or economic worth is not the only factors that determine its significance. Its place in a network, and the number and importance of relationships that rely on it, give it strategic significance. As a result, if a relatively small organization acts as a gateway linking several networks, it can have significant geopolitical significance.

Network Occupation as the Mechanism of Influence

The process by which an external actor gains long-term control over strategically significant nodes or connections within networks that a state depends on is known as "network occupation." Network occupation does not require formal control over governmental institutions or physical possession of sovereign territory, unlike territorial occupation. Alternatively, influence appears through investment: infrastructure construction, reliance on technology, supply-chain connections, information networks, political connections, local government collaborations,

networks of elites, institutional interactions, and control over vital connectivity. Dependency is how the mechanism works.

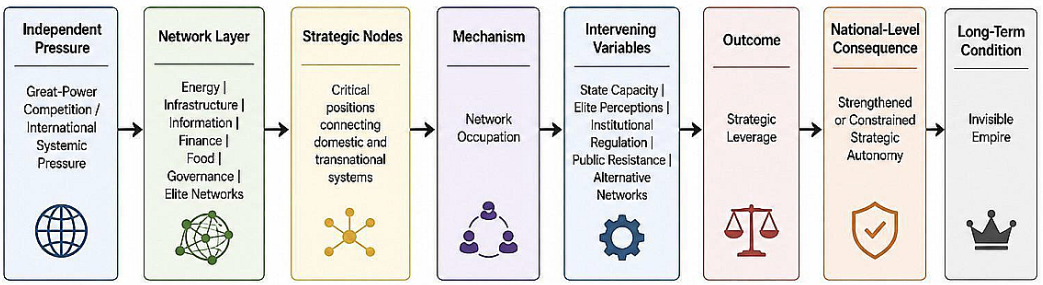
The Invisible Empire

The Invisible Empire represents the strategic outcome of network occupation. The target state's de facto strategic autonomy is limited by external control over its crucial internal networks, but it retains its de jure legal sovereignty, flag, constitution, and international representation. This is in contrast to the traditional definition of empire, which uses direct control and force, whereas the Invisible Empire retains a state's formal sovereignty and its government functions, but its vital networks that sustain a modern society are under external control, producing effects traditionally associated with formal occupation.

Network Occupation and Strategic Autonomy

In this framework, strategic autonomy is the final dependent variable. The ability of a state to make and carry out important political, economic, and security decisions without undue external pressure is known as strategic autonomy. Strategic autonomy is not always eliminated by network occupation. Rather, it may gradually reduce the number of practical options available to decision-makers.

Figure 2. The network realist model



Methodology

This study examines the impact of networked geopolitical influence on Philippine strategic autonomy in the absence of territorial conquest. It investigates interrelated networks that influence domestic political outcomes in the areas of energy, infrastructure, information, governance, and investment. Using qualitative techniques such as process tracing and documentary analysis, the study examines five strategic domains from a network-realist perspective. The results distinguish among strategic influence, foreign presence, and dependence, contending that true Network Occupation occurs when persistent foreign influence shapes policy decisions. In

the end, the study assesses how networked dependencies affect Philippine strategic autonomy while preserving territorial sovereignty.

Analysis

From Territorial Power to Networked Strategic Leverage

The central argument of this study is that contemporary geopolitical competition increasingly operates through networks of dependence rather than territorial conquest alone. For the Philippines, national security and strategic autonomy are embedded within transnational systems of energy, infrastructure, information, investment, and political relationships. These networks connect domestic institutions to external actors and create opportunities for influence without requiring formal territorial control. Network realism, therefore, shifts the analytical question from who controls Philippine territory to who occupies strategically important positions within the networks upon which the Philippine state depends.

This argument builds upon Farrell and Newman's (2019) concept of weaponized interdependence, which demonstrates how states occupying central positions within global networks can convert connectivity into strategic leverage. Positioned within the neoclassical realist tradition, Network realism maintains that systemic pressures do not automatically produce political outcomes. Rather, external pressures are filtered through domestic institutions, elite perceptions, state capacity, and available alternatives (Ripsman et al. 2016; Rose 1998). Network Occupation consequently occurs when external actors gain advantageous positions within critical networks, and those positions generate asymmetric dependence that can affect domestic choices.

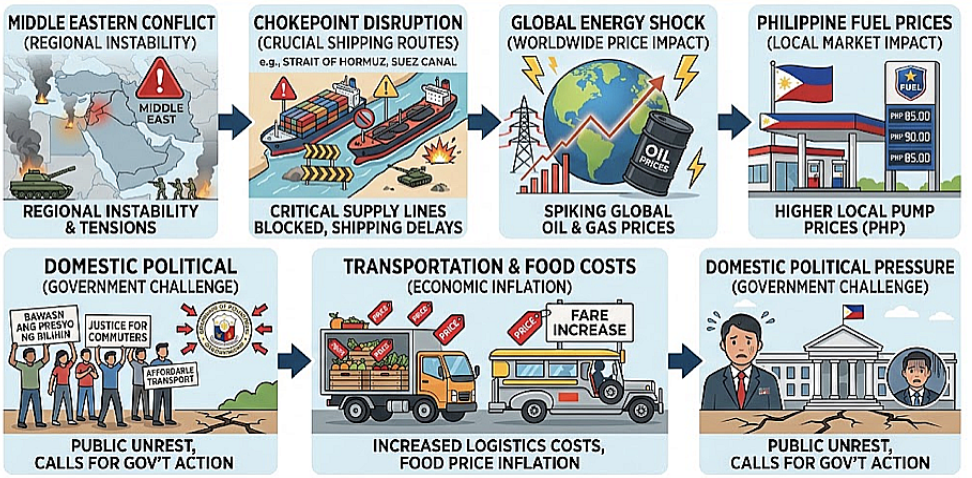
The Philippine experience illustrates this process across several strategic domains.

Energy as Network Vulnerability

Energy demonstrates how geopolitical events occurring outside the Philippine territory can generate direct domestic consequences. The 2026 Middle East crisis and disruption surrounding the Strait of Hormuz exposed the Philippines' vulnerability to global energy networks. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. declared a national energy emergency after the conflict disrupted global petroleum markets and threatened energy supply stability (Presidential Communications Office [PCO] 2026a).

The significance of Hormuz extends beyond geography. The Philippines occupies a downstream position within an international energy network in which Middle Eastern production, maritime chokepoints, Asian refineries, shipping routes, and domestic consumers are interconnected. Consequently, the mechanism is:

Figure 3. Global energy crisis to Philippine Domestic pressure: a causal chain



This demonstrates that strategic vulnerability can emerge without direct military targeting. The Philippines does not need to be physically attacked for developments elsewhere to constrain its policy choices. Energy diversification, therefore, becomes an instrument of strategic autonomy because alternative suppliers and domestic energy sources reduce dependence on external network nodes (Department of Energy [DOE] 2025).

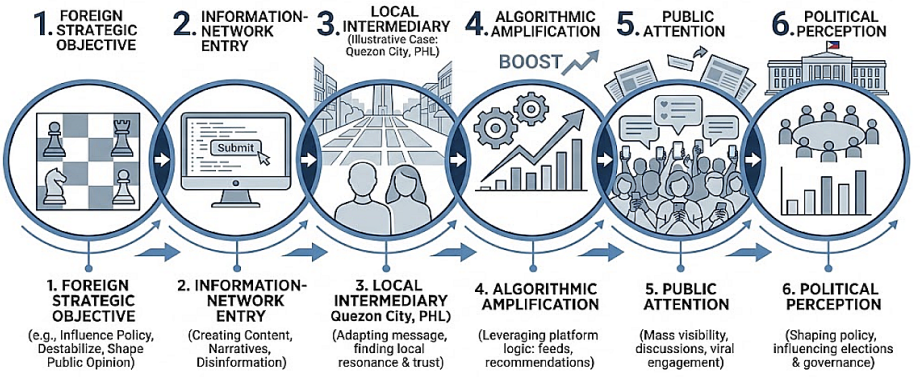
Information and Cognitive Network Occupation

Information represents a less visible but increasingly important strategic network. Traditional security analysis emphasizes physical territory and military capabilities, whereas contemporary competition also involves narratives, attention, and political perceptions. Social-media networks allow actors to reach domestic audiences through local intermediaries without physically entering the country (Singer and Brooking 2018).

This vulnerability became particularly visible during the 2025 Philippine elections. Philippine security officials raised concerns regarding alleged Chinese state-sponsored information operations and the use of local proxies to amplify narratives favorable to Beijing (Gita-Carlos 2025). Reuters subsequently reported on an alleged Chinese-linked online influence campaign involving fake accounts and locally produced content intended, among other objectives, to weaken support for the Philippine–US alliance; Chinese authorities rejected allegations of interference (McPherson and Lema 2025).

Network realism's significance lies in the mechanism:

Figure 4. Pathway of strategic influence: From foreign objective to political perception



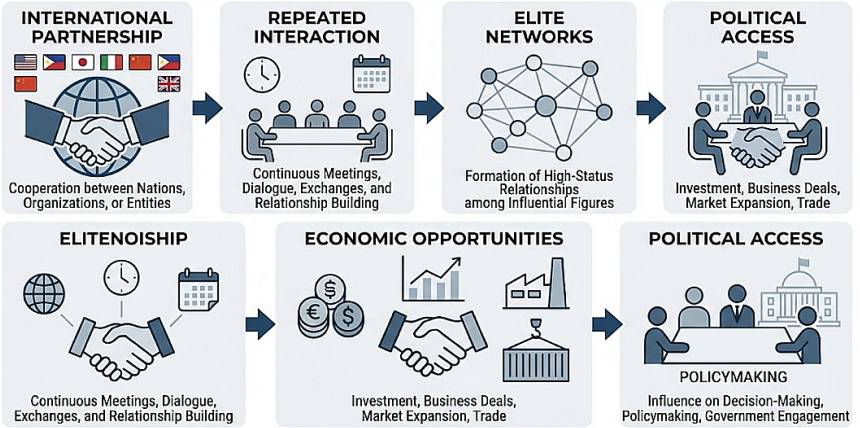
The strategic node is therefore attention itself. An external actor need not control the Philippine media system or persuade the entire population. It may instead amplify existing divisions, undermine trust, or alter the visibility of particular narratives. This creates what can be termed cognitive network occupation: influence generated through strategic positioning within the information environment.

Local Governance and Elite Networks

Network occupation may also occur below the national level. Globalization has enabled Philippine cities and provinces to develop international relationships through sister-city agreements, investment promotion, educational exchanges, tourism, and business networks. Such relationships are not inherently threatening; indeed, they can produce substantial developmental benefits. However, Network realism asks whether repeated external relationships can create durable connections between foreign actors and local political and economic elites.

The mechanism is:

Figure 5. From conflict to political pressure



Recent controversies involving Philippine offshore gaming operators (POGOs) demonstrate how economic networks can intersect with local governance and national security. Investigations into the Bamban POGO complex involving former mayor Alice Guo revealed connections among local political authority, foreign-linked businesses, property, migration, and alleged criminal activity. The case eventually resulted in Guo's conviction for human trafficking (Lema 2025).

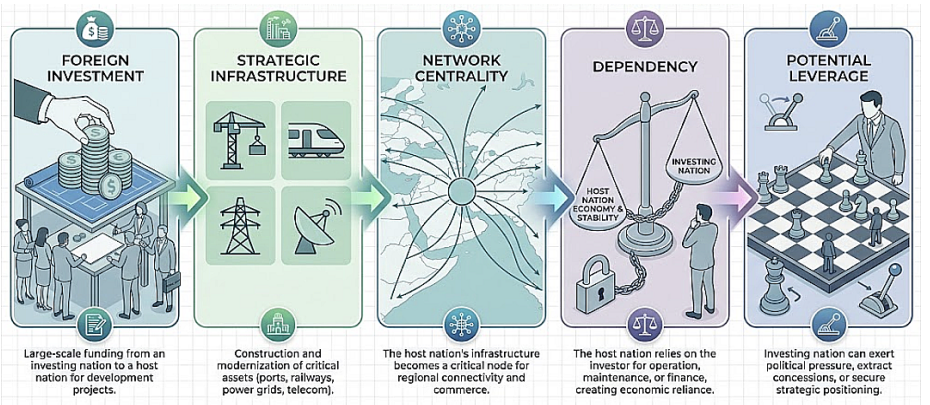
The significance is not that foreign-linked businesses automatically constitute foreign influence. Rather, the case demonstrates that seemingly commercial networks can become connected to political and governance structures. The municipality can therefore function as a strategic node through which external economic and social networks enter the domestic state.

Infrastructure and Economic Dependence

Infrastructure constitutes another strategic network because ports, telecommunications, logistics, energy systems, and technology platforms connect the Philippine economy to external capital and supply chains. Foreign investment is not inherently a security threat. The strategic concern arises when external actors occupy positions within critical infrastructure networks and create dependencies that are difficult to replace.

Farrell and Newman (2019) argue that network centrality can produce asymmetric power, while Strange (1996) emphasizes that structural power derives from the ability to shape the systems within which other actors operate. Applied to the Philippines, this suggests:

Figure 6. Geopolitical leverage through infrastructure partnerships



The appropriate policy response is therefore not isolation but diversification. Multiple suppliers, investors, technological partners, and infrastructure providers

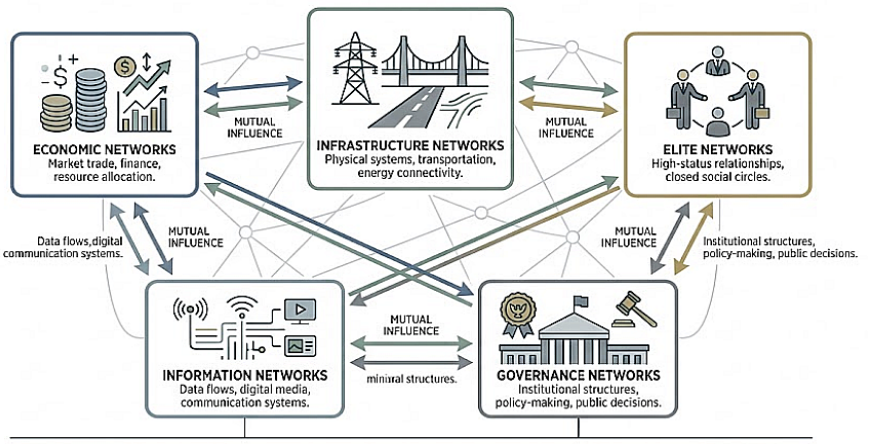
increase Philippine alternatives and reduce the likelihood that connectivity can be used as coercive leverage.

From Network Presence to the Invisible Empire

The evidence suggests that network occupation becomes strategically significant when individual networks converge. Energy dependence, infrastructure relationships, information influence, local governance, and elite networks may appear separate, but they can become mutually reinforcing.

The resulting structure is:

Figure 7. Interdependence between governance-related networks



When an external actor occupies multiple strategic nodes, influence may become cumulative. Economic relationships can facilitate political access; political relationships can facilitate infrastructure opportunities; infrastructure can create technological dependence; and information networks can influence public perceptions of foreign-policy choices.

This convergence provides the foundation for the concept of the Invisible Empire. The term does not suggest that a foreign power already controls the Philippine state. Rather, it describes a potential condition in which formal territorial sovereignty remains intact while strategic autonomy becomes increasingly constrained by external network dependencies. The central distinction is therefore between territorial sovereignty and strategic autonomy. A state may retain complete legal authority over its territory while possessing fewer meaningful alternatives in energy, technology, infrastructure, information, or foreign policy. The greatest strategic vulnerability may consequently not be the loss of territory, but the loss of alternatives.

For the Philippines, defending sovereignty in the networked age, therefore, requires more than protecting borders. It requires maintaining diversified networks, resilient institutions, capable governance, informed citizens, and sufficient strategic alternatives to prevent any external actor from controlling enough critical nodes to render Philippine sovereignty formally intact yet strategically conditional.

Discussion

The results show that traditional measures of military capability, territorial control, or material power are insufficient to fully understand the Philippines' strategic vulnerability. Rather, the analysis shows that the networks linking the Philippine state to external economic, technological, informational, and political systems are increasingly the means by which modern geopolitical competition operates. This bolsters the main idea of Network realism, which holds that states' strategic positions within networks of interdependence, in addition to their possessions, increasingly determine power (Farrell and Newman 2019).

Further evidence that network vulnerability does not always equate to foreign control comes from the Philippine cases. Systemic pressures are mediated by domestic institutions, elite perceptions, state capacity, and political decision-making, all of which are consistent with neoclassical realism (Ripsman et al. 2016; Rose 1998). Therefore, depending on the state's ability to control, diversify, and create alternative relationships, the same external network may result in different outcomes. Therefore, rather than being an inevitable byproduct of globalization, network occupation should be viewed as a conditional process. The convergence of different networks—where energy dependence, infrastructure connectivity, economic investment, information operations, local governance, and elite relationships gain strategic importance at their intersections—is a crucial discovery. An external actor may be more powerful than one with isolated connections if they engage with several interconnected nodes. As a result, in addition to individual dependencies, evaluating strategic vulnerability necessitates examining node centrality and cross-network connectivity.

The implications of Philippine sovereignty in a networked environment are discussed in this section, emphasizing the need to adapt traditional ideas of sovereignty to preserve strategic choices. It makes the case that even with legal sovereignty, a state may still be constrained by a dearth of viable partnership options and necessary resources. Introduced is the idea of the "Invisible Empire," which highlights a strategic vulnerability in which foreign actors take control of crucial networks and influence domestic decision-making without direct foreign control.

Thus, the study's theoretical contribution is to establish a link between network-based conceptions of power and neoclassical realism. It may be more important for the

future of Philippine sovereignty to ensure that no external actor can occupy enough strategic nodes to render sovereignty formally intact yet strategically conditional than to completely cut off foreign connectivity.

Conclusion

This study contends that understanding the future of Philippine sovereignty requires looking beyond traditional measures of state power and territorial defense. It illustrates how energy dependence, infrastructure, information networks, economic ties, local government, and elite connections can produce strategic vulnerabilities without territorial conquest through the lens of Network Realism situated within Neoclassical Realism. When external actors occupy crucial nodes in interconnected networks and can influence the costs and options available to Philippine decision-makers, foreign influence becomes especially significant.

The concept of the Invisible Empire embodies this new form of power. It does not imply that a foreign power currently controls the Philippine state. Rather, it suggests a potential situation in which external dependencies gradually restrict strategic autonomy while maintaining formal sovereignty. Therefore, the main threat is not territory acquisition but rather the progressive reduction of national options. To safeguard the Philippines' sovereignty by 2030, network resilience must be strengthened through diverse energy sources, secure infrastructure, robust information environments, responsible governance, and a range of diplomatic and economic alliances. In the end, maintaining the ability to make decisions is just as important to sovereignty in the networked age as controlling territory. When external connectivity expands rather than constrains a state's options, it preserves its strategic sovereignty.

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ISSN 2719-0722

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Lower Ground Floor, Ang Bahay ng Alumni, Magsaysay Avenue
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Telephone (02) 8981-8500 loc. 4266 to 4268 (02) 8426-0955
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