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# Anchoring the U.S.-Philippine Alliance

*EDITED BY*  
**JEFFREY ORDANIEL**  
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PACIFIC FORUM

# Anchoring the U.S.-Philippine Alliance

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Jeffrey Ordaniel  
Carl Baker

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## Issues & Insights

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Authors of this volume participated in the second U.S.-Philippines *Next-Generation Leaders in Security* Initiative, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, through the U.S. Embassy Manila. With backgrounds in academia, public policy, civil society and industry, the cohort brings rich insights on the past, present, and future of the U.S.-Philippine relationship.

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# 1

## **Introduction: Anchoring the U.S.-Philippine Alliance**

*Jeffrey Ordaniel*

*Abstract*

The U.S.-Philippine Alliance has advanced significantly over the past two years. The period of transition, from Duterte to Marcos, and the renewed American commitment to the Indo-Pacific under Joe Biden were key determinants. Institutionalizing this progress in ways that allow the alliance to better withstand political changes, both in Washington and Manila, and to better deal with emerging regional security challenges is imperative.

## Introduction

*"It is very clear to me in my vision for the way that the country will move forward that I cannot see the Philippines in the future without having the United States as a partner."*

– President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., September 20, 2022

*"I want to be very clear. The United States defense commitment to the Philippines is ironclad."*

– President Joseph Biden, Jr., October 25, 2023

The U.S.- Philippine Alliance has advanced significantly over the past two years. The period of transition, from Duterte to Marcos, and the renewed U.S. commitment to the Indo-Pacific under Joe Biden were key determinants. Institutionalizing this progress in ways that allow the alliance to better withstand political changes, both in Washington and Manila, and to better deal with emerging regional security challenges is imperative.

## Security cooperation

Most notable in the rapidly improving bilateral relations is closer security cooperation. Soon after taking office in June 2022, President Marcos quickly reinvigorated the Philippines' long-standing alliance with the United States. The Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which saw very little progress during the Duterte administration, became relevant again with both sides deciding to fast-track infrastructure development at the five Philippine bases identified initially in March 2016 as open to American use.<sup>1</sup> In February 2023, both governments agreed to add four more EDCA sites to ensure greater interoperability and more rapid response to contingencies.<sup>2</sup> The additional EDCA sites – three facing Taiwan located in Cagayan and Isabela provinces, and one close to the South China Sea in southern Palawan – are seen by many Filipino and U.S. experts as valuable during peacetime and contingencies. At peacetime, the sites provide ideal environments for joint and combined training. Meanwhile, they are also consequential during

**The Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which saw very little progress during the Duterte administration, became relevant again with both sides deciding to fast-track infrastructure development at the five Philippine bases identified initially in March 2016 as open to American use. In February 2023, both governments agreed to add four more EDCA sites...**

contingencies as those bases are close to potential conflict areas, enabling a quicker and more effective response.

But the two allies are not waiting for the EDCA sites to be ready before commencing more advanced training. In 2023, they conducted their largest-ever Balikatan exercises, with over 17,000 U.S. and Philippine service members training together.<sup>3</sup> The number is notable,

given that past iterations only had around 8,000 participants. In addition to the usual focus on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), the 2023 iteration included a bilateral command post exercise to strengthen their "ability to plan, coordinate, and provide command and control of forces together... in a shared and contested battlespace."<sup>4</sup> There were also combined live-fire exercises, training on intelligence sharing and logistics, and simulations on amphibious landing operations and offshore territorial defense. In November 2023, the Philippine Navy and Air Force joined their U.S. counterparts for a series of joint air and naval patrols in parts of the South China Sea and the Luzon Straits, an alliance operation unimaginable just a few years back.

Moreover, to deepen the institutionalization of their alliance, Manila and Washington issued their very first Bilateral Defense Guidelines in May 2023, which served as a "guide for priority areas of defense cooperation to address both conventional and non-conventional security challenges of shared concern to the United States and the Philippines."<sup>5</sup> This was a key recommendation from the Track 2 U.S.-Japan-Philippines Trilateral Maritime Security Dialogue convened by the Pacific Forum in December 2022. The United States and Japan have their own Bilateral Defense Guidelines. In addition to enhancing bilateral planning, information-sharing, and deepening interoperability, which they have started to accelerate through more sophisticated training exercises, the Bilateral Defense Guidelines also expressed commitment to pour more resources to modernize the AFP's capabilities. They plan to do this by expeditiously adopting a 5-10-year Security Sector Assistance Roadmap, focusing on "priority defense platforms" and capacity-building "to enhance the Philippines' multi-domain deterrence." Acquisition priorities include a fleet of multi-role fighter aircraft for the Philippine Air Force and more capable vessels for the Philippine Navy through U.S. mechanisms such as the Foreign Military Financing, the Maritime Security Initiative, and the Excess Defense Articles Program.

Furthermore, the Guidelines envision the alliance would contribute more to global and regional peace and security through trilateral and multilateral cooperation with like-minded partners, especially with other U.S. allies. This started manifesting in August 2023 when the naval forces from the United States, Australia, Japan, and the

<sup>1</sup> Cheng, Willard. "PH, US to Fast-Track Projects under EDCA." ABS-CBN News. ABS-CBN News, January 20, 2023. <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/01/20/23/ph-us-to-fast-track-projects-under-edca>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. "New EDCA Sites Named in the Philippines," 2023. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3350297/new-edca-sites-named-in-the-philippines#:~:text=The%20ofour%20new%20sites%20are,who%20briefed%20the%20media%20today..>

<sup>3</sup> III Marine Expeditionary Force. "Shoulder-To-Shoulder, Philippines and United States Conclude Largest Balikatan Exercise," April 28, 2023. <https://www.iiimef.marines.mil/Content/News-Article->

<Display/Article/3384211/shoulder-to-shoulder-philippines-and-united-states-conclude-largest-balikatan-e/>.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Embassy Manila. "Philippine, U.S. Troops to Hold Largest Ever Balikatan Exercise from April 11 to 28." U.S. Embassy in the Philippines, April 4, 2023. <https://ph.usembassy.gov/philippine-u-s-troops-to-hold-largest-ever-balikatan-exercise-from-april-11-to-28/>.

<sup>5</sup> Petty, Martin. "Why Have the United States and Philippines Issued Defence Treaty Guidelines?" Reuters, May 4, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/why-have-united-states-philippines-issued-defence-treaty-guidelines-2023-05-04/>.



Philippines conducted a joint exercise near Manila Bay.<sup>6</sup> Manila has an existing Status of Visiting Forces Agreement with Canberra, and is currently negotiating a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) with Tokyo.

### **High-level visits and political engagements**

Since the start of the Marcos administration, the security relationship has been advanced by several high-level visits of senior officials to each other's capitals. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and Vice-President Kamala Harris visited Manila during the first year of the Marcos administration. To date, President Marcos has visited the United States thrice in September 2022, May 2023, and November 2023, with his Foreign Affairs and National Defense Secretaries making separate visits to meet with their U.S. counterparts. Marcos' U.S. visit and meeting with Biden in September 2022 was a first for a Filipino head of state, since Benigno Aquino III met with Barack Obama in Sunnylands, California, in February 2016.

In April 2023, after a seven-year hiatus, a two-plus-two meeting was held between the U.S. Secretaries of State and Defense and their Philippine counterparts.<sup>7</sup> No two-plus-two meeting was held during the six years of the Duterte administration.

### **Economic engagements**

While robust, the economic relations between the United States and the Philippines have significant room for growth. The Philippines' neighbor, Vietnam, has bigger trade and investment ties with the United States. Manila and Washington recognize the big disconnect. On the one hand, U.S. security and political relations with the Philippines are arguably the strongest in Southeast Asia, underpinned by a 72-year-old Mutual Defense Treaty. On the other hand, economic ties are less than ideal, with bilateral goods and services trade totaling only \$36.1 billion in 2022 (vice \$142.1 billion worth of U.S. trade with Vietnam, \$78.3 billion with Malaysia, and \$79.1 billion with Thailand).<sup>8</sup> To boost bilateral economic ties and the Philippines' quest for a higher economic growth trajectory, President Biden will dispatch a Presidential Trade and Investment Mission to the Philippines in March 2024 to encourage U.S. companies' investments.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is launching a program to assist in infrastructure development and support the construction of railways, ports, and transport systems throughout the Philippines. In 2023, the United States Trade and

Development Agency (USTDA) launched activities to leverage "over \$3 billion in public and private financing to strengthen the Philippines' critical mineral supply chains, advance smart grid technologies and clean energy solutions, promote secure 5G deployment, and strengthen airport security," among others.<sup>10</sup> The Marcos administration will have to reciprocate and implement reforms to improve the ease of doing business, introduce competitive tax incentives, and strengthen institutions for significant U.S. and other foreign investments to materialize.

Since the Philippines has some of the most expensive electricity costs in Southeast Asia, deterring foreign direct investments,<sup>11</sup> and given the looming energy issues associated with the Malampaya Gas Field in the South China Sea running dry by 2027<sup>12</sup>, the United States has responded favorably to renewed Philippine interest in nuclear power. In November 2023, Manila and Washington signed an "Agreement for Cooperation Concerning Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy," also known as a Section 123 Agreement.<sup>13</sup> The deal serves as a legal framework for U.S. energy companies to cooperate with the Philippines in the construction of nuclear power plants.

## **The Marcos Administration will have to reciprocate and implement reforms... for significant U.S. and other foreign investments to materialize.**

Long-term cooperation with the United States on critical technologies, renewable and nuclear energy, infrastructure development, and private sector investments are expected to boost the Philippines' economic competitiveness and result in bilateral economic ties that match the two countries' close security relations.

### **Playing catch up**

During the final year of the Duterte administration, the defense and foreign policy establishments in Manila had already lost interest in accommodating China's policy preferences. After all, President Duterte, in good faith, pursued a foreign policy that expected Beijing's goodwill. Duterte, for some time, disregarded the 2016 Arbitral Award that invalidated China's sweeping nine-dash line claim, appeared to have no interest in deepening security relations with China's rival, the United States, and downplayed some of China's coercive maneuvers in what Manila calls the West Philippine Sea, part of the South

<sup>6</sup> Dzirhan Mahadzir. "U.S., Australia, Japan Drill with the Philippines in South China Sea; China Flies Military Drone near Taiwan - USNI News." USNI News, August 27, 2023. <https://news.usni.org/2023/08/27/u-s-australia-japan-drill-with-the-philippines-in-south-china-sea-china-flies-military-drone-near-taiwan>.

<sup>7</sup> United States Department of State. "Joint Statement of the U.S.-Philippines 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue - United States Department of State," April 11, 2023. <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-of-the-u-s-philippines-22-ministerial-dialogue/>.

<sup>8</sup> United States Trade Representative. "Philippines," 2021.

<https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/southeast-asia-pacific/philippines>.

<sup>9</sup> Pco.gov.ph. "News Releases - First High-Level Trade Investment Mission to PH of Biden Admin Manifests Strong Ties with the US, Says PBBM," November 22, 2023. [https://pco.gov.ph/news\\_releases/first-high-level-trade-investment-mission-to-ph-of-biden-admin-manifests-strong-ties-with-the-us-says-pbbm/?\\_cf\\_chl\\_tk=XaAkXVmqSIYk218Ofdr3AG8xGL9K2AidAeLxu6xo\\_Vo-1701162771-0-gaNycGzNDvs](https://pco.gov.ph/news_releases/first-high-level-trade-investment-mission-to-ph-of-biden-admin-manifests-strong-ties-with-the-us-says-pbbm/?_cf_chl_tk=XaAkXVmqSIYk218Ofdr3AG8xGL9K2AidAeLxu6xo_Vo-1701162771-0-gaNycGzNDvs).

<sup>10</sup> The White House. "FACT SHEET: Investing in the Special Friendship and Alliance between the United States and the Philippines | the White House." The White House. The White House, May 2023.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/01/fact-sheet-investing-in-the-special-friendship-and-alliance-between-the-united-states-and-the-philippines/>.

<sup>11</sup> Ravago, Majah-Leah. "The Nature and Causes of High Philippine Electricity Price and Potential Remedies," 2022.

[https://www.ateneo.edu/sites/default/files/2023-01/AdMU%20WP%202023-01\\_1.pdf](https://www.ateneo.edu/sites/default/files/2023-01/AdMU%20WP%202023-01_1.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> BusinessWorld Online. "Malampaya Depletion Expected by 1st Quarter of 2027 - BusinessWorld Online," May 19, 2021.

<https://www.bworldonline.com/economy/2021/05/19/369673/malampaya-depletion-expected-by-1st-quarter-of-2027/>.

<sup>13</sup> Reuters. "US, Philippines Sign Landmark Nuclear Deal." Reuters, November 17, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-philippines-ink-landmark-deal-nuclear-cooperation-2023-11-17/>.

China Sea that lie inside the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The Duterte administration, however, found value in the Philippine Coast Guard's non-military nature and saw it as a valuable institution to keep maritime security engagements with the United States active and maintain presence in the South China Sea, both without provoking China. In other words, Duterte's approach encouraged China to show a willingness to compromise, operationalized Beijing's frequent references to 'meeting China halfway' and 'joint development in disputed waters,' and allowed Chinese officials to push for maritime policies that adhere to international law without 'losing face.' But Beijing did not return the favor.

U.S.-Philippines cooperation from mid-2016 until Marcos' election was capped by Duterte's parochial concerns and positions that accommodated many of China's policy preferences. When Marcos, Jr. was elected in 2022, the Philippines changed tack. Marcos does not share Duterte's foreign policy positions. While he kept engagement with China on the table, particularly on the economic front, the new administration wants to ensure a more responsive security strategy. The change of leadership in Manila provided Washington with an opportunity to move quickly to deepen security cooperation and modernize the relationship to keep up with the rapidly changing geopolitical and security landscape. Hence, the significant developments in U.S.-Philippines bilateral relations over the past two years.

### **A stronger alliance with the United States increases deterrence, builds Philippine capabilities, allows for closer coordination to better respond to gray zone coercion, including economic pressure, and provides investment and development opportunities.**

Meanwhile, the defense establishment in the Philippines is keenly aware of how conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East could stretch U.S. resources and attention. The Marcos administration wants to ensure the South China Sea remains a priority for Washington, and that the alliance gets back on track. Ultimately, the Philippines wants an effective response to China's increasingly assertive operations in the South China Sea and an alternative path to economic growth that is less reliant on Beijing. A stronger alliance with the United States increases deterrence, builds Philippine military capabilities, allows for closer coordination to better respond to gray zone coercion, including economic pressure, and provides investment and development opportunities.

#### **About this volume**

This edited volume is a collection of papers written by emerging American and Filipino leaders and experts, offering creative thinking on some of the most pressing issues in the bilateral relationship and advancing policy recommendations for the alliance to contribute more to regional peace and stability.

Mico Galang explores the linkage between the South China Sea disputes and the Taiwan issue to understand how the Philippines-U.S. alliance can be relevant in addressing the two potential flashpoints.

April Arnold premised her chapter on how the Philippines' concerted efforts to begin its clean energy transition are hampered by geography. She then analyzed the efforts of the Marcos administration to address the country's energy insecurity, focusing on partnerships with China and the United States, with the former offering more concrete investments but with potentially dire national security consequences. She argues that if the United States wants a deeper security relationship with the Philippines, then the U.S. government will need to increase trade support for the Philippines' energy sector, and will need to immediately establish concrete goals to keep pace with Chinese investment and the Philippines' growing energy crisis. Not meeting the challenge could mean the Philippines "may be forced to cede large portions of its energy sector to Chinese firms just to keep the country's lights on."

Japhet Quitzon's chapter examines how patronage-based, personality-driven politics, weak political institutions, and inadequate education systems are crucial to the effectiveness of disinformation in the Philippines. Quitzon looks at the various efforts to curb disinformation and proposes three policy recommendations: strengthen education systems, restore press freedom, and hold social media networks such as TikTok and Facebook accountable. He argues that countering disinformation is an avenue for U.S.-Philippine cooperation.

Brynn Park complements Quitzon's chapter by proposing that the United States and the Philippines establish a bilateral anti-disinformation program "to improve election integrity and apply best practices to other struggling democratic nations." Park argues that Washington and Manila are ideal partners for studying the viability of anti-disinformation policies owing to their shared history and common circumstances. Both countries are multicultural and have experienced, in recent years, varied malign influence campaigns from foreign and domestic actors. For Park, a joint effort to counter disinformation, an unconventional national security issue, showcases commitment to a strategic partnership.

Finally, Thomas Shattuck's chapter looks at the three major determinants of the Philippines' potential involvement in a Taiwan-related contingency: (1) bilateral relationships with Washington and Beijing; (2) geographic proximity to Taiwan; and (3) Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) living in Taiwan. Shattuck argues the three factors demonstrate the Philippines' vulnerability should there be a blockade or an outright invasion of Taiwan. His chapter concludes with recommendations for Washington to help the Philippines cope with any Taiwan contingency, including by helping modernize the Armed Forces of the Philippines into a more capable partner force.

The authors of this volume participated in the second U.S.-Philippine Alliance *Next-Generation Leaders Initiative*, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, through the U.S. Embassy Manila. With backgrounds in academia, public policy, civil society, and industry, the cohort brings rich insights into the past, present, and future of this increasingly consequential bilateral security relationship.

# 2

## **The Geopolitical Nexus of the South China Sea Dispute and Cross-Strait Relations: Strategic Implications for the Philippines-U.S. Alliance**

*Mico A. Galang*

### *Abstract*

The South China Sea (SCS) and Taiwan are potential flashpoints in the Indo-Pacific region. Although the disputes have been ongoing for decades, the strategic competition between the two powers – the United States and China – has added real risk to the overlapping territorial and maritime claims. While there is already a large body of literature on both issues, most analyses on the SCS and Taiwan consider them as two distinct issues. While such an approach is logical and understandable, it is likewise important to explore the linkage between the two issues because they impact each other due to geographical proximity. This paper seeks to answer how can the Philippines-U.S. alliance complement efforts to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific, specifically in the geopolitical nexus of the SCS dispute and cross-Strait relations? This paper also addresses the linkage between the SCS dispute and cross-Strait relations, how such a nexus figures in the overall security of the Indo-Pacific, and how the convergence and divergence of interests in these disputes create policy complexities for Manila and Washington. The aim is to provide policy inputs for courses of action vis-à-vis the challenges the alliance faces amidst great power competition.

## Introduction

On February 11, 2022, the Biden administration released the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS). Cognizant of the changing security environment, the U.S. IPS builds on the efforts of its predecessors and underscores how the region is “vital to [America’s] security and prosperity.”<sup>1</sup> The Obama administration pushed for a Pivot/Rebalance to Asia, while the Trump administration pursued a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) agenda. President Biden came into office in 2021 determined to focus on the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>2</sup> However, on February 24, 2022, barely two weeks after the U.S. IPS was released, Russia invaded Ukraine. Nonetheless, the United States continued to focus on the Indo-Pacific region. Indeed, the Biden Administration convened a U.S.-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in May 2022 and participated in the ASEAN-related meetings hosted by Cambodia. U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan, which caused an assertive military reaction from China. Vice President Kamala Harris traveled to the Philippines in November 2022 – including a historic visit to Palawan, near the disputed South China Sea (SCS).

The SCS and Taiwan are two potential flashpoints in the Indo-Pacific region. Although the disputes have been ongoing for decades, the strategic competition between the two major powers has added another dimension to the overlapping territorial and maritime claims. This paper seeks an answer how can the Philippines-U.S. alliance complement efforts to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific, specifically in the geopolitical nexus of the SCS dispute and Cross-Strait relations. This paper also addresses the linkage between the SCS dispute and Cross-Strait relations and how the convergence and divergence of interests in the two flashpoints shape the policy choices of Manila and Washington.

This paper argues that the SCS and Taiwan are closely intertwined because they are identified by China as part of its “core interests”, are part of the “Chinese Dream” and narrative to avenge the “Century of Humiliation”, are closely connected by geography, and Taiwan is a claimant in the SCS. The U.S. IPS seeks to ensure America’s continued primacy in the region and constrain China’s efforts to alter the balance of power in Beijing’s favor. Manila and Washington have shared strategic interests in this regard. However, there are nuances in the policies and considerations of the allies on the two key flashpoints.

The Philippines and the United States complement efforts to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific

**the SCS and Taiwan are closely intertwined because they are identified by China as part of its “core interests”, are part of the “Chinese Dream” and narrative to avenge the “Century of Humiliation”, are closely connected by geography**

by ensuring that their Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) and its implementing agreements – particularly the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) – remain intact, continuing joint and individual capacity-building efforts to strengthen integrated deterrence, and enhancing bilateral cooperation and dialogue mechanisms.

## South China Sea, Taiwan, and the Indo-Pacific

The SCS and Taiwan are two potential flashpoints connected in four ways. First, Chinese officials have labeled Taiwan and the SCS as part of Beijing’s ‘core interests.’ In official Chinese discourse, the term “core interest” has three key components: 1) the preservation of China’s basic state system and national security, which effectively means ensuring that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) remains in power; 2) the protection of territorial integrity and national sovereignty; and 3) the continued stable development of the Chinese economy and society.<sup>3</sup> Emphasizing the second component, Chinese officials have used core interests in geopolitically contentious areas such as Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan.<sup>4</sup> In the case of Taiwan, Beijing’s Communist rulers view the island as unfinished business from the Chinese Civil War. Indeed, the preamble of the PRC Constitution in part provides: “Taiwan is part of the sacred territory of the People’s Republic of China. It is the sacred duty of all the Chinese people, including our fellow Chinese in Taiwan, to achieve the great reunification of the motherland.” In 2005, China promulgated its “Anti-Secession Law,” which authorized Beijing to use force should Taiwan declare independence.<sup>5</sup>

The SCS is a relatively more recent addition to the category of Chinese “core interest.” In 2010, Chinese State Councilor Dai Bingguo was reported as saying that the SCS is a PRC core interest.<sup>6</sup> While there is some debate as to whether or not the CCP regime now officially considers the SCS (and arguably the East China Sea as well) as part of China’s core interests, there are strong indications that it has effectively done so.<sup>7</sup> China has consistently mentioned that it has “indisputable sovereignty over the islands [sic] in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters, and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Beijing created artificial islands in the SCS and transformed

<sup>1</sup> Office of the President of the United States, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 2022, Washington, D.C.: The White House, 4. Hereafter referred to as “2022 U.S. IPS.”

<sup>2</sup> Yen Nee Lee, “Biden beefs up administration with Asia experts as the U.S. prepares to take on China,” *CNBC*, February 4, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/05/biden-fills-team-with-asia-experts-as-us-prepares-to-take-on-china.html>

<sup>3</sup> Terrence K. Kelly, et. al., *The U.S. Army in Asia, 2030–2040* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2014), 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>5</sup> People’s Republic of China Anti-Secession Law, March 14, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Wong, “China Hedges Over Whether South China Sea Is a ‘Core Interest’ Worth War,” *The New York Times*, March 30, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/31/world/asia/31beijing.html>

<sup>7</sup> Shi Jiangtao, “Decoding the deliberate ambiguity of China’s expanding core interests,” *South China Morning Post*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3145326/decoding-deliberate-ambiguity-chinas-expanding-core-interests>

<sup>8</sup> Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Note Verbale CML/17/2009 dated May 7, 2009.

the same into military bases.<sup>9</sup> In pushing for maritime expansionism, Beijing uses the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), China Coast Guard (CCG), and its maritime militia to advance its claims and harass other claimants in the SCS,<sup>10</sup> including through gray zone coercion.<sup>11</sup>

Second, Taiwan and the SCS are part of the "Chinese Dream" of "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," a closely related narrative to the 'Century of Humiliation.' The latter refers to a period in Chinese history between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when foreign powers occupied huge portions of Chinese territory. During this period, China was forced to sign unequal treaties and lost control of Manchuria, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, among others. This 'century of humiliation' narrative still affects China's geopolitical thinking – or at least used as a strategic communications tool to justify its assertive foreign policy behavior. As one observer pointed out: "The narrative has created a 'never again' mentality in China, which dictates that the Century of Humiliation is not just a grim lesson of the past, but also a warning about a possible future. China must not only learn from history, but also actively work to prevent a second century of humiliation."<sup>12</sup>

In what is seen as partly a response to the Century of Humiliation, CCP General Secretary and PRC President Xi Jinping articulated his "Chinese Dream" of "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."<sup>13</sup> In his 2021 speech commemorating the CCP's 100<sup>th</sup> founding anniversary, Xi said the communists "united and led the Chinese people in fighting bloody battles with unyielding determination, achieving great success in the new-democratic revolution...[This] revolution put an end...to all the unequal treaties imposed on our country by foreign powers and all the privileges that imperialist powers enjoyed in China. It created the fundamental social conditions for realizing national rejuvenation."<sup>14</sup>

Third, Taiwan and the SCS are closely connected by geography. The two potential flashpoints are part of the First Island Chain, which includes the Aleutians, Kyushu, and Okinawa of Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Borneo, thus encapsulating both the East China Sea and the SCS. From the U.S. perspective, a strategic imperative is to ensure that countries in the First Island Chain have a close security relationship with Washington to ensure American primacy. During the Cold War, the United States established alliances in countries in and near the First

Island Chain – in particular Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), the Republic of China, the Philippines, Thailand, and Australia – to contain communist expansion by the Soviet Union and China. From China's perspective, it is surrounded by America's allies and partners, preventing Beijing from expanding its military and geopolitical influence in the Pacific. If China establishes primacy in the SCS and/or successfully reunifies with Taiwan, Beijing will

## **The United States maintains close security relationships with both the Philippines and Taiwan. However, while the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) with Manila remains in force, the formal alliance with Taiwan has been terminated.**

be able to shift the balance of power in its favor. In this regard, maintaining the region's sea lanes of communications (SLOCs) is critical.

The United States maintains close security relationships with both the Philippines and Taiwan. However, while the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) with Manila remains in force, the formal alliance with Taiwan has been terminated. Nonetheless, before the U.S.-ROC alliance formally ended in 1980, Washington enacted the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) – domestic legislation that continues to guide the informal U.S.-Taiwan relationship. Serving as the basis of U.S. arms supply to Taiwan, the law also provides that Washington considers "any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States."<sup>15</sup> This provision has led to what has been termed as America's policy of "strategic ambiguity," i.e., the TRA does not require Washington to defend Taiwan in the event of an armed attack but also does not preclude the U.S. military from intervening.<sup>16</sup>

Fourth, Taiwan is also a claimant in the SCS. Beijing's infamous 9-dash line claim was originally created by the Republic of China (ROC) under the Kuomintang (KMT)/Nationalists before they lost the civil war. In 1947, the ROC released a "Map of the Location of the South China Sea Islands," which included the then 11-dash lines. ROC claimed sovereignty over Pratas, Paracels, Macclesfield Bank, and Spratlys through this map.<sup>17</sup> Taiwan administers Pratas and Itu Aba – the largest natural land feature in the Spratlys.<sup>18</sup> In July 2016, the Arbitral Tribunal released its decision on the *Philippines v. China* South China Sea Arbitration case. The Arbitral Tribunal, in part, ruled that there is "no legal basis for China to claim historic rights to

<sup>9</sup> Updates on China's artificial islands can be found here: Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "China Island Tracker," no date, <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/>

<sup>10</sup> Prashanth Paremeswaran, "Andrew Erickson and Ryan Martinson on China and the Maritime Gray Zone," *The Diplomat*, May 14, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/andrew-erickson-and-ryan-martinson-on-china-and-the-maritime-gray-zone/>

<sup>11</sup> Michael Green, et. al, *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Mark Tischler, "China's 'Never Again' Mentality," *The Diplomat*, August 18, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/chinas-never-again-mentality/>

<sup>13</sup> Robert Lawrence Kuhn, "Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream," *The New York Times*, June 4, 2013,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/05/opinion/global/xi-jinpings-chinese-dream.html>

<sup>14</sup> Xi Jinping, "Full text of Xi Jinping's speech on the CCP's 100th anniversary," *Nikkei Asia*, July 1, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Full-text-of-Xi-Jinping-s-speech-on-the-CCP-s-100th-anniversary>

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Taiwan Relations Act, Public Law 96-8, 96<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1979, Section 2 (d).

<sup>16</sup> Susan V. Lawrence & Wayne M. Morison, *Taiwan: Issues for Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2017), 10.

<sup>17</sup> Antonio T. Carpio, *The South China Sea Dispute: Philippine Sovereign Rights and Jurisdiction in the West Philippine Sea* (Manila: Antonio T. Carpio, 2017), 10.

<sup>18</sup> Voice of America, "Taiwan (Republic of China)," no date, <https://projects.voanews.com/south-china-sea/taiwan/>

resources within the sea areas falling within the 'nine-dash line.'"<sup>19</sup>

In response, Taiwan, anchoring its claim on the nine-dash line, underscored that the decision is "completely unacceptable to the government of the [ROC]."<sup>20</sup> Seemingly echoing Beijing's position, Taipei also stressed that the "ROC is entitled to all rights over the South China Sea Islands and their relevant waters in accordance with international law, and the law of the sea is beyond dispute."<sup>21</sup>

Taiwan and the SCS are closely intertwined. What happens in one area could potentially affect the other. However, the SCS dispute could potentially complicate the Philippines' strategic calculus, given Taiwan's SCS claims. As such, it is imperative to examine the interests of Manila and Washington vis-à-vis the two potential flashpoints.

### Convergence and Divergence of Interests

Manila and Washington share the broad security interest of ensuring regional peace and stability. During the Cold War, U.S. alliances with countries in the region, including one with the Philippines, ensured a favorable balance of power that secured the interests of the United States and like-minded countries. The reemergence of China as a major geopolitical player threatens the U.S.-led order that has been in place since the end of the Second World War. Ironically, while China seeks to upend that order, it has benefited greatly from the same.

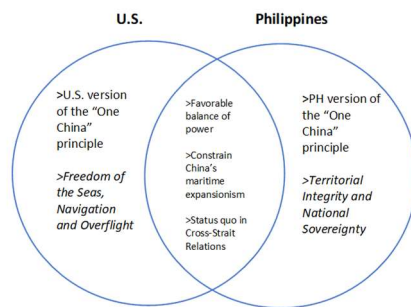


Figure 1. Convergence and Divergence of U.S. and Philippine Interests  
(Note: Those in italics are interests that they also share but are more important to the other)

China's increasing role in international affairs should not come as a surprise. Rising powers have often sought to match their economic wealth with geopolitical influence.

Emerging powers may be more assertive in pursuing certain interests that may differ from those of other countries. Strategic adjustments decided to a large degree by major powers need to reflect new geopolitical realities.

**While sharing the interest in the freedom of the seas, navigation, and overflight, the Philippines' main concern vis-à-vis China's maritime expansionism is its territorial integrity, national sovereignty, and maritime rights.**

Smaller powers generally support the international order, a status-quo arrangement from which they benefit. In this context, small powers must pursue two strategic objectives which may not be compatible with each other: adapting to the changing geo-strategic environment and protecting core interests.

The strategic environment engendered by great power competition amplifies a smaller power's sense of vulnerability. Other observers have argued that U.S. presence in the Philippines exposes the latter to great power competition since Beijing's actions are driven by perceived encirclement of China by the United States. But even if the Philippines wishes to be insulated from strategic rivalry, geography dictates that the archipelagic nation will inevitably be influenced by great power competition.

The Philippines and the United States share the strategic interest of constraining China's maritime expansionism. The maritime domain is one of the areas in which China is challenging U.S. primacy in the region. U.S. primary interest is ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight. Indeed, the 2020 U.S. naval strategy, *Advantages at Sea*, noted, "China has implemented a strategy and revisionist approach that aims at the heart of the United States' maritime power. It seeks to corrode international maritime governance, deny access to traditional logistical hubs, *inhibit freedom of the seas, control use of key chokepoints, deter our engagement in regional disputes, and displace the United States as the preferred partner in countries around the world*"<sup>22</sup> (emphasis added).

The United States seeks to promote the "Freedom of the Seas," defined as "all the rights, freedoms, and lawful uses of the sea and airspace, including for military ships and aircraft, recognized under international law."<sup>23</sup> One way Washington seeks to advance Freedom of the Seas is through its Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) program. First established in 1979, the FONOPs program seeks to operationally challenge excessive maritime claims by exercising U.S. maritime rights and freedoms.<sup>24</sup> Echoing his predecessors, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin announced in the 2022 Shangri-La Dialogue that America "will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows."<sup>25</sup>

While sharing the interest in the freedom of the seas, navigation, and overflight, the Philippines' main concern vis-à-vis China's maritime expansionism is its territorial integrity, national sovereignty, and maritime rights. The Philippines claims sovereignty over some of the features in the Spratlys – collectively calling them the Kalayaan Island Group (KIG) – and Scarborough Shoal. Moreover, the Philippines loses

<sup>19</sup> Permanent Court of Arbitration, "Press Release: The South China Sea Arbitration," July 12, 2016, <https://pcacases.com/web/sendAttach/1801>

<sup>20</sup> Taiwan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "ROC position on the South China Sea Arbitration," July 12, 2016, [https://en.mofa.gov.tw/News\\_Content.aspx?n=1EADDCFD4C6EC567&cs=5B5A9134709EB875](https://en.mofa.gov.tw/News_Content.aspx?n=1EADDCFD4C6EC567&cs=5B5A9134709EB875)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, and U.S. Coast Guard, *Advantage at Sea: Prevailing with Integrated All-Domain Naval Power*, Washington, D.C.: The Pentagon, 3. (Hereafter referred to as "Advantage at Sea.")

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Report to Congress: Annual Freedom of Navigation Report FY 2021*, 2021, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Lloyd D. Austin, "Remarks at the Shangri-La Dialogue," *U.S. Department of Defense*, June 11, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/3059852/remarks-at-the-shangri-la-dialogue-by-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-a/>

much if China successfully establishes dominance over the SCS through its nine-dash line claim. An estimated 80 percent of the Philippine EEZ in the South China Sea, equivalent to about 381,000 sq. kilometers, including the Reed Bank and portions of the Philippines' Malampaya gas field, will be impacted.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the Philippines could also lose all of its Extended Continental Shelf, estimated to be more than 150,000 sq. kilometers of maritime space.<sup>27</sup> Beijing's claims in the SCS "encroaches on over 531,000 sq. kilometers of Philippine [Exclusive Economic Zone] and [Extended Continental Shelf], including all the fishery, oil, gas, and mineral resources found within this vast area, which is larger than the total land area of the Philippines."<sup>28</sup> The United States shares these Philippine concerns, but freedom of the seas is the priority in Washington's strategic calculus.

On Taiwan, the Philippines, and the United States share strategic interest in maintaining the status quo. Politically, this means that Taiwan remains autonomous from China, and democratically governed. Manila and Washington prefer that Taiwan remain a strategic buffer against Beijing's intent to dominate the first island chain—thus enabling a balance of power favorable to the Philippines and like-minded countries. A reunified China could potentially achieve primacy in the first island chain and eventually tip the balance of power in favor of Beijing.

However, the Philippines and the United States have a nuanced approach to the "One-China" principle. When Manila and Beijing normalized diplomatic relations, the 1975 Joint Communiqué provided in part: "The Philippine Government recognizes the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government of China, "fully understands and respects" the position of the Chinese Government that there is but one China and that Taiwan is an integral part of Chinese territory...."<sup>29</sup> However, when the United States and China established formal relations, their 1979 Joint Communiqué stated: "The United States of America recognizes the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China.... The Government of the United States of America "acknowledges" the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China." For the Philippines, Taiwan is a territory of China. However, the U.S. position is ambiguous as it simply "acknowledges" the Chinese position on Taiwan. These nuances can complicate the actions of Manila and Washington in certain situations. For instance, on the One-China principle, the U.S. position arguably provides more flexibility than the Philippines.

The preceding discussion on the convergence and divergence of U.S. and Philippine interests have the following implications for their alliance. On the SCS, the Philippines needs to prepare for contingencies and to defend itself in the absence of military support from the United States. This is not to suggest that the MDT with Washington is irrelevant. On the contrary, the allies need to

## **However, the Philippines and the United States have a nuanced approach to the "One-China" principle.**

prepare for various scenarios. However, despite repeated expressions of commitment from the U.S. side, Washington may still decide not to come to the aid of the Philippines in the event of an armed attack. U.S. response to a gray zone aggression is even less clear. After all, the dynamics of abandonment and entrapment are always present in any alliance. Hence, capacity-building and responses to hybrid and gray zone coercion should also be considered in Philippines-U.S. alliance planning, not just joint operations during a conventional war.

On Taiwan, the Philippines will likely play a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, Manila needs to abide by its One-China policy. But on the other hand, the United States may seek assistance from the Philippines in the event of a contingency. After all, the Philippines is Taiwan's closest geographical neighbor. For instance, the United States may request access to Philippine military bases. There are indications that such access will be granted. Indeed, Philippine Ambassador to the United States, Jose Romualdez, announced that Manila is open to such access "if it is important for us, for [Philippine] security."<sup>30</sup> However, Taiwan contingencies will be further complicated if cross-Strait scenarios spill over to the SCS, where there are several claimants – the Philippines, China, and Taiwan included. Even if Manila wishes to be insulated from cross-Strait tensions and possible conflict, geographic proximity will inevitably affect the Philippines. If the Philippines granted such access to its bases, it should do so while publicly being committed to its One-China principle. Carefully worded statements, such as the one issued<sup>31</sup> in the aftermath of U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, would be crucial.

### **Policy Recommendations**

On June 30, 2022, Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. assumed office as the Philippines' 17<sup>th</sup> president. The new administration provides an opportunity to enhance the alliance after setbacks from the policy priorities of former President Rodrigo R. Duterte, often seen as overly friendly to Chinese interests.

In his inaugural address, President Marcos alluded to rising geopolitical tensions in the world when he said: "We face prospects of the spread of the war abroad, of which we are totally blameless. We seek friendship with all. But countries like ours will bear the brunt of it. And if the great powers draw the wrong lessons from the ongoing tragedy in Ukraine, the same dark prospect of conflict will

<sup>26</sup> Carpio, *The South China Sea Dispute*, 30.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>29</sup> Joint Communiqué of the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines, June 9, 1975, para 6.

<sup>30</sup> Ryo Nakamura & Yuichi Shiga, "Philippines may allow U.S. military access during Taiwan crisis," *Nikkei Asia*, September 5, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Interview/Philippines-may-allow->

U.S.-military-access-during-Taiwan-crisis ; and Susannah Patton, "What the Philippines has at stake in Taiwan," *Lowy Institute The Interpreter*, August 16, 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/what-philippines-has-stake-taiwan>

<sup>31</sup> Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs, "Statement on Developments in Cross-Strait Relations, August 4, 2022, <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/statements-and-advisoriesupdate/30944-statement-on-developments-in-cross-strait-relations>

spread to our part of the world.”<sup>32</sup> In his first State of the Nation Address (SONA), President Marcos underscored his administration’s foreign policy thrust: “I will not preside over any process that will abandon even one square inch of territory of the Republic of the Philippines to any foreign power. With respect to our place in the community of nations, the Philippines shall continue to be a friend to all, an enemy to none.”<sup>33</sup>

Under President Marcos, the Department of National Defense (DND) issued its 10-Point Agenda with the foremost priority of guaranteeing “the nation’s territorial integrity and sovereignty.”<sup>34</sup> Then-DND Officer-in-Charge Senior Undersecretary Jose C. Faustino, Jr. stressed that the Department “shall heighten [its] cooperation with state and non-state partners to improve domain awareness and maritime security, as well as pursue engagements in the international arena to advance [Philippine] interests on defense and security.”<sup>35</sup>

Considering the foreign policy and national security priorities of the Biden and Marcos administrations vis-à-vis the Indo Pacific, the following are some of the policy considerations moving forward.

First, there is a need to ensure that the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) – particularly the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) – remain intact. EDCA, in particular, needs to be watched carefully as it is an executive agreement that could be changed without legislative concurrence. Signed in 2014, EDCA supports the implementation of the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) and the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) by serving as a legal framework for increased rotational presence of U.S. forces in “agreed locations.”<sup>36</sup> Although the Philippine Supreme Court ruled in 2016 that the EDCA is compliant with the 1987 Constitution, the implementation of the security pact was stalled when Rodrigo Duterte took office. The agreement’s future was further placed in limbo when President Duterte announced the abrogation of the VFA in early 2020. Nonetheless, following Duterte’s decision to no longer terminate the VFA in 2021, the allies agreed to implement EDCA. Then-Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Chief of Staff Faustino said that “[t]he final decision on the withdrawal of the abrogation of the VFA now allows us to push forward the delayed activities like the exercise-related constructions.”<sup>37</sup>

In 2016, the allies identified the following five “agreed locations”: Antonio Bautista Air Base in Puerto

Princesa, Palawan; Lumbia Air Base in Cagayan de Oro, Mindanao; Basa Air Base in Floridablanca, Pampanga in Central Luzon; Fort Magsaysay in Nueva Ecija province, also in Central Luzon; and Mactan-Benito Ebuen Air Base in Cebu, Central Visayas.<sup>38</sup> In 2023, Manila and Washington agreed to add four more additional locations: Naval Base Camilo Osias in Santa Ana, Cagayan; Camp Melchor Dela Cruz in Gamu, Isabela; Balabac Island in Palawan; and Lal-lo Airport in Cagayan.<sup>39</sup> In these agreed locations, the allies agreed to conduct: “training; transit; support and related activities; refueling of aircraft; bunkering of vessels; temporary maintenance of vehicles, vessels, and aircraft; temporary accommodation of personnel; communications; prepositioning of equipment, supplies, and material; deploying forces and materiel; and such other activities as the [two countries] may agree.”<sup>40</sup>

EDCA will reach its ten-year mark in 2024, which is during President Marcos’ term. While the agreement provides that after ten years, “it shall continue in force automatically,”<sup>41</sup> some measure of uncertainty might be expected, considering that there are domestic political forces calling for EDCA’s abrogation.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, despite such provisions, then-Philippine National Security Adviser Clarita R. Carlos claimed that EDCA is up for termination or renewal in 2024.<sup>43</sup> This suggests that there are elements within Philippine politics working to end EDCA. This means that ensuring the alliance remains intact and responsive to the shared challenges is a continuous task. Hence, the two sides may issue a statement providing for the continued implementation of EDCA after the initial ten-year period lapses per the terms of the agreement. This statement will signify the allies’ commitment to each other, and reassure like-minded countries. Moreover, the statement will send a message to opponents of EDCA –

### **This means that ensuring the alliance remains intact and responsive to the shared challenges is a continuous task.**

both foreign and domestic – that the allies will continue working with each other to pursue their shared interests.

Second, the allies must continue capacity-building efforts. Both the MDT and VFA provide for the capability of both sides to address security challenges. EDCA, in particular, provides: “Supporting the Parties’ shared goal

<sup>32</sup> Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr., “Inaugural Address,” *Philippine Official Gazette*, June 30, 2022, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2022/06/30/inaugural-address-of-president-ferdinand-romualdez-marcos-jr-june-30-2022/>

<sup>33</sup> Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr., “First State of the Nation Address,” *Philippine Official Gazette*, July 25, 2022, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2021/07/26/ferdinand-r-marcos-jr-first-state-of-the-nation-address-july-25-2022/>

<sup>34</sup> Philippine Department of National Defense, “DND’s 10-point agenda to contribute to nation-building,” July 18, 2022, <https://www.dnd.gov.ph/Postings/Post/DND%E2%80%99s%2010-point%20agenda%20to%20contribute%20to%20nation-building/>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “Philippines, U.S. Announce Locations of Four New EDCA Sites,” April 3, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3349257/philippines-us-announce-locations-of-four-new-edca-sites/>

<sup>37</sup> Priam Nepomuceno, “EDCA activities to push through as VFA remains in effect: AFP,” *Philippine News Agency*, October 15, 2021, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1156735>

<sup>38</sup> Quismundo, Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> John Eric Mendoza, “Military names 5 more Edca sites,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, November 14, 2022,

<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1693105/military-names-5-more-edca-sites>

<sup>40</sup> Agreement between the Government of the Philippines and the Government of the United States of American on Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, April 28, 2014, Article III, para 1. Hereafter referred to as “EDCA.”

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., Article XII, para 4

<sup>42</sup> Neil Arwin Mercado, “‘Urgent’ review of EDCA sought it Senate,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, January 27, 2020,

<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1220263/urgent-review-of-edca-sought-in-senate>

<sup>43</sup> Joviland Rita, “Study group formed to review 1951 MDT with US – NSA Carlos,” *GMA News Online*, November 22, 2022, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/852214/study-group-formed-to-review-1951-mdt-with-us-nsa-carlos/story/>



of improving interoperability of the Parties' forces, and for the [AFP], addressing short-term capabilities gaps, promoting long-term modernization, and helping maintain and develop additional maritime security, maritime domain awareness...."<sup>44</sup> Building the allies' capability has another imperative. For a time, the United States was rather reluctant to publicly declare if the MDT covered the SCS. It was not until 2019 when then-U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo publicly declared that the "South China Sea is part of the Pacific" and that "any armed attack on Philippine forces, aircraft, or public vessels in the South China Sea will trigger mutual defense obligations under Article 4 of our Mutual Defense Treaty."<sup>45</sup> This commitment was later included in U.S. domestic legislation.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, as reaffirmed by the Biden administration, Washington also changed its SCS policy which, among others, publicly called out China over its excessive and illegal 9-dash line maritime claims.<sup>47</sup>

One of the likely reasons why Washington was reluctant to provide such public reassurance was the lack

of significant U.S. military presence in the Philippines to help Manila respond to

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contingencies. U.S. forces have significant presence in Japan and South Korea, which allows Washington to be more clear-cut in making public statements of support concerning their respective security concerns.

In October 2022, the U.S. Embassy in Manila announced that US\$100 million would be granted to the Philippines as part of Washington's foreign military financing program.<sup>48</sup> To promote interoperability, the allies also agreed to conduct 496 defense and security engagements in 2023,<sup>49</sup> an increase compared to the 461 activities in 2022.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, there is a strategic imperative to boost the capabilities of both sides – the Philippines in particular – to respond to a range of security challenges. Beijing may test the commitment of Washington to the Philippines, and if the U.S. fails to adequately respond, the same could provide a dent in the credibility of U.S.-led alliances. Implementing EDCA is crucial in this regard.

Third, enhancements to bilateral cooperation and dialogue mechanisms are needed. The Philippines-U.S. alliance has several dialogue platforms, such as the Bilateral Strategic Dialogue (BSD), the Two-Plus-Two

Ministerial Dialogue, and the Mutual Defense Board-Security Engagement Board (MDB-SEB), among others. Summit-level meetings are likewise important in strengthening the alliance. Indeed, the meeting of Presidents Marcos and Biden at the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2022 was the first in-person meeting between the leaders of both countries in half a decade. There are numerous bilateral exercises such as Balikatan, Salaknib, and Marine Aviation Support Activity (MASA), among others that support alliance cooperation. The allies could also enhance contingency planning for both SCS and Taiwan.

Beyond bilateral cooperation, there are initiatives to strengthen cooperation between and among other U.S. allies and partners. For instance, in September 2022, the Philippines, the United States, and Japan inaugurated the Trilateral Defense Policy Dialogue (TDPD). The three countries "exchanged views on common defense and security challenges to include maritime security challenges with an emphasis on the importance of upholding freedom

of navigation and overflight, and the rules-based order to ensure peace and stability in the region."<sup>51</sup> Convened at the Director-level, the TDPD

also identified the following issues as possible areas of cooperation: maritime security and maritime domain awareness, cyber security, information sharing, and humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HADR).<sup>52</sup>

<sup>44</sup> EDCA, Article I, para 1 (a).

<sup>45</sup> Michael R. Pompeo, "Remarks With Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin, Jr. at a Press Availability," U.S. Department of State (Archived), March 1, 2019, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/remarks-with-philippine-foreign-secretary-teodoro-locsin-jr/index.html>

<sup>46</sup> U.S. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, Sec. 1258 (a) (2).

<sup>47</sup> Michael R. Pompeo, "U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea," U.S. Department of State (Archived), July 13, 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/index.html>

<sup>48</sup> Karen Lema, "U.S. grants Philippines \$100 million in foreign military financing," Reuters, October 14, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-grants-philippines-100-million-foreign-military-financing-2022-10-14/>

<sup>49</sup> Priam Nepomuceno, "PH, US to have 496 defense, security engagements in 2023," *Philippine News Agency*, October 10, 2022, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1185726>

<sup>50</sup> Vitor Reyes, "496 PH-US military activities set next year," *Malaya*, October 11, 2022, [https://malaya.com.ph/news\\_news/496-ph-us-military-activities-set-next-year/](https://malaya.com.ph/news_news/496-ph-us-military-activities-set-next-year/)

<sup>51</sup> Philippine Department of Defense, "Philippines-Japan-US Trilateral Defense Policy Dialogue (TDPD)," September 16, 2022, [https://www.dnd.gov.ph/Postings/Post/Philippines-Japan-US%20Trilateral%20Defense%20Policy%20Dialogue%20\(TDPD\)](https://www.dnd.gov.ph/Postings/Post/Philippines-Japan-US%20Trilateral%20Defense%20Policy%20Dialogue%20(TDPD))

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

# 3

## **U.S.-Philippines energy cooperation**

*April Arnold*

*Abstract*

The Philippines has made concerted efforts to begin its clean energy transition, but its geography has made it difficult for the country to access and deploy some of the valuable resources needed to make the transition. The Philippines is facing an energy security crisis coupled with increasing energy demand in general and already-surfacing supply shortages. Not even mid-way through 2023, the country has experienced brownouts on Luzon, its largest and most populous island, and multiple alerts across all three stages of its electricity systems: generation, transmission, and distribution. To address the crisis, the Marcos administration has been seeking to secure various international business and trade arrangements, namely with China and the United States. While the recent U.S.-Philippines 2+2 Ministerial discussed energy security, China announced in January 2023 a commitment to provide US\$ 13.7 billion through nine Chinese companies to help the Philippines build its energy infrastructure. If the United States wants to enjoy a deeper security relationship with the Philippines, then the U.S. government will need to increase trade support for the Philippines' energy sector. While meetings between U.S. and Philippine leadership in May 2023 show promise, the initiatives announced will need to immediately establish concrete goals to keep pace with Chinese investment and the Philippines' growing energy crisis. Otherwise, the Philippines may be forced to cede large portions of its energy sector to Chinese firms just to keep the country's lights on.

## Overview

### Domestic energy supply and demand

The Philippines has seven years left to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 75% of the “projected business-as-usual cumulative economy-wide emission of 3,340.3 MtCO<sub>2</sub>e for the same period [2020-2030],” according to its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) submitted under the Paris Agreement; but the country has already begun to see the impacts of climate change.<sup>1</sup> In its NDC, submitted in 2021, the Philippines detailed its national circumstances around development and the impact of climate change. Growing population through 2040, approximately 20 tropical cyclones a year, daily seismic shocks, aging infrastructure, and a 16.7% poverty rate are some of the major contributors to the country’s increasing energy and electricity challenges.<sup>2</sup> To fully address the issues detailed in the NDC, the Philippines will need to address climate change mitigation and rapidly transition to clean energy sources to continue its development path. The Philippines has already begun establishing many institutions and frameworks for a successful energy transition, namely through the 2009 Climate Change Act, the 2008 Renewable Energy Act, the National Climate Change Action Plan, and the Philippine Energy Plan, among others. Yet, despite landmark legislation, the country is even more dependent on coal now than when the government initially announced some of its clean energy ambitions in 2008.<sup>3</sup>

With the pending depletion of the Malampaya Natural Gas Field by 2027, increased reliance on coal over the past few years, and early signs of energy supply shortages in 2023, the Philippines’ energy dynamics have worsened. In October 2022, the Philippine Secretary of Energy stated that 2023 would be a difficult year for electricity production, as some of the country’s hydro plants will be down, leading to “yellow alerts” in the second half of 2023 that signal insufficient energy supply.<sup>4</sup> As of May 2023, the country has already experienced multiple alerts and brownouts from issues with the transmission system and insufficient supply, impacting approximately 300,000 people in Luzon.<sup>5,6</sup>

### Key legislation

While there are several pieces of foundational legislation that established the institutional infrastructure and codified the Philippines’ strategy to combat climate change and transition to clean energy, this paper focuses on the intersection of energy security and national security. This helps clarify opportunities for the United States to assist in bolstering Philippine energy security while

simultaneously addressing national security concerns. First is the *National Security Policy 2017-2022* (NSP). Its 12-point national security agenda cites energy security as #8. The point states the following:

“Secure and protect energy supply throughout the country and pursue the sustainment of existing sources and the development of alternative sources of energy to support the demands of economic enterprises and households, and contribute to the global efforts to combat climate change.”<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, the NSP considers renewable energy as one of its strategic industries for which the Philippine government will make additional efforts to foster public-private partnerships.<sup>8</sup> Other industries selected that are adjacent to energy security include the mining, strategic materials and resources, and transportation.

The *Philippines’ Energy Plan: 2020-2040*, put forth by the Philippine Department of Energy, acknowledges the aims of the NSP and synchronizes with those aims. The report contains a comprehensive chart (shown below) on how energy security intersects with domestic, regional, and international affairs and disputes. At the top of the list is the South China Sea dispute and its impact on the Philippines’ ability to explore energy reserves.<sup>9</sup>

Energy Security Criteria	EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT: International / Regional Situation	INTERNAL: National Situation
<b>Access and availability of supply</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Securing the supply chain</li> <li>Emergency supply</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>West Philippine Sea Dispute impeding oil and gas exploration.</li> <li>Oil Supply disruption from OPEC countries due to international conflicts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Malampaya Gas depletion by 2024.</li> <li>Smuggling of petroleum products.</li> <li>Threats of cyber-attack in the power transmission grid system and smart distribution system.</li> </ul>
<b>Reliable &amp; uninterrupted supply</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Import/Export of Fuels</li> <li>Grid/Off-Grid Power Generation, Transmission, and Distribution</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ASEAN holds the smallest oil reserves in the world.<sup>10</sup></li> <li>Effect of environmental policies on coal producing/ exporting countries.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Philippines as net importer of oil products and coal.</li> <li>Maintenance of power generation facilities.</li> <li>Security threats on the physical infrastructures of the energy system (power generation, transmission and distribution facilities, oil depot and terminals, etc.).</li> </ul>
<b>Affordability/ competitive supply</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Energy Market Price</li> <li>Managing oversupply</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prices of crude oil and petroleum products driven by the world market.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Electricity/Oil Price is market driven</li> </ul>

Energy Security Challenges table in the Philippines’ Energy Plan: 2020-2040

One of the biggest hurdles to foreign investment in renewable energy in the Philippines was the limitation within the 2008 Renewable Energy Act (under its implementing rules and regulations) that required having at least 60% of capital under Filipino ownership.<sup>10</sup> In November 2022, President Duterte signed Republic Act No. 11647, amending the 2008 Renewable Energy Act and its implementing rules and regulations. This removed the foreign equity limitation based on a clearer interpretation of the definition of the phrases “natural resources” and “all forces of potential energy.” With this change, foreign

<sup>1</sup> The Republic of the Philippines, “Republic of the Philippines: Nationally Determined Contribution,” April 15, 2021, <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/NDC/2022-06/Philippines%20-%20NDC.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> International Energy Agency, “Philippines - Countries & Regions,” IEA, <https://www.iea.org/countries/philippines>.

<sup>4</sup> Enrico Dela Cruz, Neil Jerome Morales, and Karen Lema, “Philippines Energy Chief: 2023 Power Supply Conditions Look ‘Difficult,’” *Reuters*, October 10, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/philippines-energy-chief-2023-power-supply-conditions-look-difficult-2022-10-10/>.

<sup>5</sup> Power Philippines, “DOE: ‘Inadequacies’ in Transmission Lines Caused Red, Yellow Alerts,” May 9, 2023, <https://powerphilippines.com/doe-inadequacies-in-transmission-lines-caused-red-yellow-alerts/>.

<sup>6</sup> Jon Viktor D. Cabuenas, “NGCP Lifts Red Alert Status of Luzon Grid, Yellow Alert Remains,” *GMA News Online*, May 8, 2023, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/869348/ngcp-lifts-red-alert-status-of-luzon-grid-yellow-alert-remains/story/>.

<sup>7</sup> “National Security Policy for the Change and Well-Being of the Filipino People: 2017-2022,” p. 25. April 4, 2017, <https://nsc.gov.ph/attachments/article/NSP/NSP-2017-2022.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.27.

<sup>9</sup> Philippines Department of Energy, “Philippines Energy Plan 2020-2040,” accessed December 2, 2022, <https://www.doe.gov.ph/pep?withshield=1>.

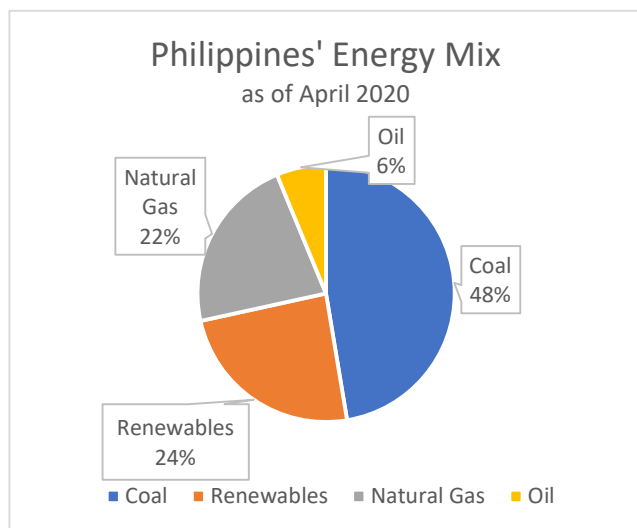
<sup>10</sup> Philippines Department of Energy, “Rules and Regulations Implementing Republic Act No. 9513,” May 25, 2009, <https://www.doe.gov.ph/renewable-energy/implementing-rules-and-regulations>.

investors can now access the Philippine energy market without foreign equity limitation.<sup>11</sup>

### Energy and climate ambitions

The Philippines has several ambitious aims for its clean energy transition. Chief among them has been the government's desire to be energy self-sufficient, something it measures annually in its *Key Energy Statistics*. This goal tends to cause issues for the country's other aims, primarily to be 35% renewable energy-reliant by 2040, particularly to see decreases in the country's reliance on coal.<sup>12</sup> Because of Malampaya Gas Field depletion and planned and unplanned outages at multiple power plants, the Philippines has briefly resorted to coal over the past few years to maintain energy security, undermining these goals.<sup>13</sup> Yet, the government has still sought to usher their transition away from coal with a moratorium on new coal-fired power plants put in place by the Duterte Administration in 2020.<sup>14</sup> As of August 2022, the Marcos Administration has opted to also uphold the moratorium, with the government's Secretary of Energy citing stability for investors.<sup>15</sup>

### Energy profile



Like the rest of the world, the Philippines' energy consumption contracted in 2020. Before COVID-19, the Philippines' total energy consumption was approximately 1.9 quadrillion British thermal units (Btu) in 2019.<sup>16</sup> According to the U.S. Department of Commerce's

International Trade Administration, as of April 2020, the Philippines' energy mix was comprised of 23 GW of energy capacity, with energy sources being the following: 47% coal, 24% renewable energy, 22% natural gas 22%, and 6.2% oil.<sup>17</sup> According to more recent data on coal, these numbers seem to have shifted more toward coal and further away from renewable energy. The country is a net importer of energy, which will likely increase as no indigenous primary energy sources are developed to replace the depletion of the Malampaya Natural Gas Field, and the country has processed its first import of liquified natural gas.<sup>18,19</sup> This is not for lack of resources in the Philippines, but those resources the country does have are often located in regions susceptible to high risks and disputed by China in the South China Sea.

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### Coal

In 2021, coal was the largest in the Philippines' energy generation mix at 58%.<sup>20</sup> As part of its climate goals, in fulfillment of its Nationally Determined Contributions for the Paris Climate Agreement, the Philippines has sought to decrease reliance on coal, instead shifting to renewables. This has not been successful. Reliance on coal has not diminished, and the role of renewables has decreased from approximately 40% in 2008 to 24% in 2023.<sup>21</sup> In October 2020, the government placed a moratorium on coal-fired power plants to help curb the use of coal and increase sustainability and the potential use of renewable energy.<sup>22</sup> The Marcos Administration has decided to keep the moratorium in place to avoid signaling risk and uncertainty to investors.

### Oil and gas

The Marcos Administration has prioritized the Philippines' energy security over its climate goals and political considerations stemming from Russia's invasion

<sup>11</sup> Philippines Department of Energy, "Department Circular No. DC2022-11-0034," November 15, 2022, <https://www.doe.gov.ph/sites/default/files/pdf/issuances/dc2022-11-0034.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Philippines Department of Energy, "Philippine Energy Plan 2020-2040," *Press Release*, n.d., <https://www.doe.gov.ph/pep?withshield=1>.

<sup>13</sup> Enrico Dela Cruz, Neil Jerome Morales, and Karen Lema, "Philippines Energy Chief: 2023 Power Supply Conditions Look 'Difficult,'" *Reuters*, October 10, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/philippines-energy-chief-2023-power-supply-conditions-look-difficult-2022-10-10/>.

<sup>14</sup> Myrna Velasco, "Coal Moratorium to Stay under Marcos Admin - DOE," *Manila Bulletin*, August 9, 2022, <https://mb.com.ph/2022/08/09/coal-moratorium-to-stay-under-marcos-admin-doe/>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Philippines," November 12, 2020, <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/PHL>.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. International Trade Administration, "Philippines Energy Market," April 22, 2020, <https://www.trade.gov/market-intelligence/philippines-energy-market>.

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Philippines: Analysis - Energy Sector Highlights," November 12, 2020, <https://www.eia.gov/international/overview/country/PHL>.

<sup>19</sup> Enrico Dela Cruz, "Philippines Set to Receive First-Ever LNG Cargo for Power Generation," *Reuters*, April 3, 2023, sec. Energy, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/philippines-set-receive-first-ever-lng-cargo-power-generation-2023-04-03/>.

<sup>20</sup> Philippines Department of Energy, "Coal," accessed December 3, 2022, <https://www.doe.gov.ph/coal-overview>.

<sup>21</sup> Philippines Department of Energy, "Key Energy Statistics 2009," <https://www.doe.gov.ph/key-energy-statistics-2009>, accessed December 3, 2022, <https://www.doe.gov.ph/key-energy-statistics-2009>.

<sup>22</sup> Philippines Department of Energy, "Advisory on the Moratorium of Endorsements for Greenfield Coal-Fired Power Projects In Line with Improving the Sustainability of the Philippines' Electric Power Industry," December 22, 2020, <https://www.doe.gov.ph/announcements/advisory-moratorium-endorsements-greenfield-coal-fired-power-projects-line-improving>.

of Ukraine.<sup>23</sup> The increasing demand is also partly due to the depletion of the Malampaya Natural Gas Field, which currently accounts for approximately 30% of its fuel supply.<sup>24</sup> The Malampaya Natural Gas Field is projected to deplete by 2027.<sup>25</sup> For oil, the Philippines has two petroleum fields with potential for hydrocarbons in the South China Sea. While they fall within the country's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), they are also inside China's nine-dash line.<sup>26</sup>

### Liquefied natural gas

While further exploration for reserves in the South China Sea is still disputed between the Chinese and Philippine governments, Manila has stated that it would transition to importing liquefied natural gas (LNG) to cover for the Malampaya Gas Field once it is depleted. In April 2023, the energy and commodities company, Vitol Group, announced that the Philippines had purchased its first supply of LNG for the Ilijan Power Plant, the country's largest natural gas plant with 1200 MW of nameplate capacity located in Luzon.<sup>27</sup> Ilijan Power Plant historically accounts for approximately 10% of Luzon's capacity.<sup>28</sup> The plant shut down in June 2022 after the Gas Supply and Purchase Agreement between Malampaya and the government-owned National Power Corporation, which owned Ilijan Power Plant, expired.<sup>29</sup> Around the same time, the plant was also transferred to a private firm, SMC Global Power Holdings Corporation (SMGP), a subsidiary of San Miguel Corporation (SMC), following the expiration of the build-operate-transfer contract.<sup>30</sup> During the shutdown, SMGP brought in Singapore's Atlantic, Gulf & Pacific to install an LNG import terminal, while SMGP sought "to improve the plant's fuel efficiency and generation ramp rate" in preparation for the LNG shipment.<sup>31,32</sup> While SMC made the LNG purchase after spot price declines in the region from record highs due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there has been growing concern that reliance on LNG imports, which would subject Filipino firms to higher prices and more market volatility (especially without long-term LNG contracts in place), thus increasing prices for



LNG terminal at Ilijan Power Plant in Batangas.

(Photo Credit: SMC Website)

consumers.<sup>33,34</sup> According to Reuters, this is "the first of seven LNG projects approved by the U.S. government."<sup>35</sup>

### Renewables

Renewable energy supply in 2019 for the Philippines was primarily comprised of geothermal (48%) and bioenergy (48%), with hydropower comprising approximately 3%. The government's *National Renewable Energy Program: 2020-2040* (NREP), published in 2022, states that the Philippines plans to triple installed renewable capacity by 2030 based on 2010 levels (from 5,438 MW to 15,304 MW).<sup>36</sup> Half of this renewable energy capacity goal had been achieved by the end of 2019.<sup>37</sup> Based on the installation targets from the assessment, solar energy started with 1 MW of capacity but grew to 921 MW by 31 December 2019, well beyond the 2030 target for solar energy.<sup>38</sup> There was significant growth in wind capacity, starting from 33 MW in 2010 and growing to 427 MW by 31 December 2019, but with a target capacity of 2,378 MW by 2030.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, the country would need 52 GW (52,000 MW) by 2040 to meet its goal of 40% reliance on

<sup>23</sup> Andreo Calozzo, "Philippines to Maximize Oil and Gas Resources, Marcos Says," *Bloomberg.Com*, October 11, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-11/philippines-to-maximize-oil-and-gas-resources-marcos-says>.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, "Philippines Oil and Gas," Energy Resource Guide, accessed December 3, 2022, <https://www.trade.gov/energy-resource-guide-philippines-oil-and-gas>.

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Philippines," November 12, 2020, <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/PHL>.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Enrico Dela Cruz, "Philippines Set to Receive First-Ever LNG Cargo for Power Generation," *Reuters*, April 3, 2023, sec. Energy, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/philippines-set-receive-first-ever-lng-cargo-power-generation-2023-04-03/>.

<sup>28</sup> San Miguel Corporation, "SMC Sees Reopening of Ilijan Power Facility in May, Takes Delivery of First-Ever LNG Cargo," April 27, 2023, <https://www.sanmiguel.com.ph/news/smc-sees-reopening-of-ilijan-power-facility-in-may-takes-delivery-of-first-ever-lng-cargo>.

<sup>29</sup> Lenie Lectura, "Ilijan Power Plant to Stop Supply from Malampaya | Lenie Lectura," *BusinessMirror* (blog), June 6, 2022, <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2022/06/06/ilijan-power-plant-to-stop-supply-from-malampaya/>.

<sup>30</sup> "SMC Global Power Officially Takes over Ilijan Plant," *Power Philippines* (blog), June 8, 2022, <https://powerphilippines.com/smc-global-power-officially-takes-over-ilijan-plant/>.

<sup>31</sup> Sayumi Take, "Philippines and Vietnam to Import LNG but Long-Term Doubts Loom," *Financial Times*, March 14, 2023, sec. Nikkei Asia, <https://www.ft.com/content/8fda3e3b-9b1e-4953-a61b-568b23b85072>.

<sup>32</sup> Enrico Dela Cruz, "Philippines Set to Receive First-Ever LNG Cargo for Power Generation," *Reuters*, April 3, 2023, sec. Energy, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/philippines-set-receive-first-ever-lng-cargo-power-generation-2023-04-03/>.

<sup>33</sup> International Energy Agency, "Natural Gas Markets Expected to Remain Tight into 2023 as Russia Further Reduces Supplies to Europe - News," October 3, 2022, <https://www.iea.org/news/natural-gas-markets-expected-to-remain-tight-into-2023-as-russia-further-reduces-supplies-to-europe>.

<sup>34</sup> Enrico Dela Cruz, "Philippines to Open Door to LNG Imports next Year with 3 Terminals," *Reuters*, September 27, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/philippines-sees-3-lng-import-terminals-starting-operations-early-2023-2022-09-27/>.

<sup>35</sup> Enrico Dela Cruz, "Philippines Set to Receive First-Ever LNG Cargo for Power Generation," *Reuters*, April 3, 2023, sec. Energy, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/philippines-set-receive-first-ever-lng-cargo-power-generation-2023-04-03/>.

<sup>36</sup> Renewable Energy Management Bureau and National Renewable Energy Program, "National Renewable Energy Program: 2020-2040" p.1. (Tapuig City, Philippines: Department of Energy, 2022), [https://www.doe.gov.ph/sites/default/files/pdf/renewable\\_energy/nrep\\_2020-2040\\_0.pdf](https://www.doe.gov.ph/sites/default/files/pdf/renewable_energy/nrep_2020-2040_0.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p.1.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.1.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p.1.

renewable energy.<sup>40</sup> Based on the collective targets set by the NREP assessment, the Philippines is behind on its renewable energy targets. According to the World Bank, the Philippines has potential for an additional 28 GW (28,000 MW) of offshore wind energy to fulfill the necessary targets by 2030, a resource that has yet to be tapped.<sup>41</sup> The government projects up to 178 GW of potential offshore wind capacity that the Philippines could tap, preserving land for other possible uses.<sup>42</sup> On March 30, 2023, SMC announced establishing a battery energy storage system (BESS) network across 32 sites in the country, amounting to 1000MWh of capacity.<sup>43</sup>

### Nuclear

Before 2022, there had been no active efforts to develop nuclear power capacity since 1986, when then-President Corazon Aquino opted to halt the final stages of loading fuel and beginning operations at the Bataan Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) due to the Chernobyl nuclear accident.<sup>44</sup> Since 2016, the Philippine government has been reconsidering nuclear power as a replacement for coal, particularly because of its baseload capacity. During the Duterte administration, the Philippine government began discussions with Russia's Rosatom. It is unclear where the current Marcos Administration stands on continuing to work with Rosatom in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with the most recent update being a January 2022 reaffirmation by then-Secretary of Energy Alfonso Cusi, of collaboration to explore small modular reactors (SMR).<sup>45</sup> In February 2022, President Duterte signed Executive Order 164, deeming nuclear energy "a viable baseload power source" and kickstarting efforts to once again pursue nuclear power capacity.<sup>46</sup>

In November 2022, the United States government began discussing providing technology support to the Philippines for SMRs, as part of a larger technology-sharing and clean energy agreement that would see the United States assist the Philippines in expanding the latter's nickel and cobalt mining industries.<sup>47</sup> During President Marcos'

visit to the United States in May 2023, NuScale executives discussed the potential deployment of the company's SMRs to the Philippines. NuScale's SMRs are the first to receive design approval from the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission.<sup>48</sup> NuScale plans to partner with Filipino-owned Prime Infrastructure Capital on the project, estimated to be a US\$ 6.5-7.5 billion investment, and that would provide approximately 462MW of capacity by the early 2030s.<sup>49</sup> Currently, NuScale is conducting a study on potential sites for a plant.<sup>50</sup>

### Geopolitics

#### China

The Philippines originally partnered with China on offshore oil and gas exploration in the South China Sea, but the deal collapsed in June 2022 on what the Philippines' government cited as disregard for its territorial integrity and sovereign rights.<sup>51</sup> In November 2022, newly-elected President Marcos had expressed interest in pursuing oil and gas exploration in the South China Sea without China; but in March 2023, Foreign Affairs Secretary Enrique Manalo announced that the two countries would begin talks "at a technical level" by May 2023.<sup>52</sup> On January 5, 2023, the Philippine government also announced that a Chinese firm would be committing US\$ 13.7 billion towards energy investments in the Philippines.<sup>53</sup> The investments, coming from nine Chinese firms, will focus on renewable energy, energy storage, and off-grid power.<sup>54</sup> Despite these investments, some Filipino policymakers are concerned about China's involvement in their national energy grid, given the tensions over the South China Sea.<sup>55</sup> Particularly, in May 2023, Senator Raffy Tulfo expressed concern about the security risks of allowing the State Grid Corp. of China (as part of a consortium) a 40% stake in National Grid Corporation of the Philippines, the operator of the country's grid.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Job Manahan, "PH Gets \$13.7-B 'investment Pledges' from China on Energy," ABS-CBN News, January 5, 2023, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/business/01/05/23/ph-gets-137-b-investment-pledges-from-china-on-energy>.

<sup>41</sup> World Bank Group, "Offshore Wind Roadmap for the Philippines" (Washington, DC: The World Bank, April 2022), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099225004192234223/pdf/P1750040b777da0c30935a0e2aa346f4e26.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

<sup>43</sup> "PBMM Unveils SMC's Nationwide BESS Network Seen to Power RP's Clean Energy Transition," San Miguel Corporation, March 30, 2023, <https://www.sanmiguel.com.ph/news/pbmm-unveils-smcs-nationwide-bess-network-seen-to-power-rps-clean-energy-transition>.

<sup>44</sup> World Nuclear Association, "Nuclear Power in the Philippines," March 2022, <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-o-s/philippines.aspx>.

<sup>45</sup> Philippines News Agency, "PH, Russia Reaffirm Efforts on Potential Use of Small Reactors," January 21, 2022, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1166066>.

<sup>46</sup> President Rodrigo Duterte, "Executive Order No. 164, Adopting a National Position for a Nuclear Energy Program, And for Other Purposes," p.2. February 28, 2022, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2022/02feb/20220228-EO-164-RRD.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> Jenny Leonard and Andreo Calonzo, "US, Philippines to Negotiate Nuclear Power Tech-Sharing Pact," *Bloomberg.Com*, November 20, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-11-20/us-philippines-to-negotiate-nuclear-power-tech-sharing-pact>.

<sup>48</sup> World Nuclear News, "NuScale in Talks with the Philippines on SMR Deployment," May 2, 2023, <https://www.world-nuclear-news.org/Articles/NuScale-in-talks-with-the-Philippines-on-SMR-deplo>.

<sup>49</sup> Raymund Antonio, "Leading Nuclear Power Energy Firm to Invest in PH; Plans to Conduct Study to Locate Site in the Country," Presidential Communications Office, May 1, 2023, [https://pco.gov.ph/news\\_releases/leading-nuclear-power-energy-firm-to-invest-in-ph-plans-to-conduct-study-to-locate-site-in-the-country/](https://pco.gov.ph/news_releases/leading-nuclear-power-energy-firm-to-invest-in-ph-plans-to-conduct-study-to-locate-site-in-the-country/).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Reuters Staff, "UPDATE 1-Philippines Abandons Joint Energy Exploration Talks with China," *Reuters*, June 23, 2022, sec. Oil report, <https://www.reuters.com/article/philippines-china-southchinesea-energy-idINL1N2YA0N7>.

<sup>52</sup> Enrico Dela Cruz, "Manila, Beijing to Resume Oil and Gas Talks in May," *Reuters*, March 30, 2023, sec. Asia Pacific, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/manila-beijing-resume-oil-gas-talks-may-philippine-minister-2023-03-30/>.

<sup>53</sup> Job Manahan, "PH Gets \$13.7-B 'investment Pledges' from China on Energy," ABS-CBN News, January 5, 2023, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/business/01/05/23/ph-gets-137-b-investment-pledges-from-china-on-energy>.

<sup>54</sup> Kris Crismundo, "DOE Names 9 Chinese Firms with \$13.7-B Investment Pledges," Philippine News Agency, January 9, 2023, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1192296>.

<sup>55</sup> Manolo Serapio Jr, "Philippines May Retake Control of Grid Operator, Marcos Says," *Bloomberg.Com*, May 16, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-05-16/philippine-govt-may-retake-control-of-grid-operator-marcos-says>.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

## Despite these investments, some Filipino policymakers are concerned about China's involvement in their national energy grid, given the tensions over the South China Sea.

### *The United States*

While much of the U.S. relationship with the Philippines has been around defense issues, President Marcos has recently begun engaging with the U.S. government and private sector firms on the Philippines' energy security situation. Since the beginning of his administration in June 2022, Filipino officials have met with the President, Vice President, Secretary of State, and Secretary of Defense, with each meeting touching on potential energy cooperation. In March 2022, the U.S. and Philippine governments signed the *Memorandum of Understanding Concerning Strategic Civil Nuclear Cooperation*, "which improves our cooperation on energy security and strengthens our diplomatic and economic relationship."<sup>57</sup> Then, in November 2022, Vice President Kamala Harris visited the Philippines to begin discussions on the use of American technologies, namely SMRs, in the Philippines' civilian nuclear energy pursuits.<sup>58</sup>

In April 2023, the United States and the Philippines met for a 2+2 Dialogue. The resulting joint statement included an announcement of an Energy Policy Dialogue, a partnership on offshore wind development, and the U.S.-Philippines Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement to facilitate civil nuclear cooperation.<sup>59</sup> Following President Marcos' visit to Washington DC in May 2023, President Biden announced that he would be "dispatch[ing] a Presidential Trade and Investment Mission to the Philippines on his [President Biden's] behalf – the first mission of its kind – to enhance U.S. companies' investment in the Philippines' innovation economy, its clean energy transition and critical minerals sector.... The Presidential Trade and Investment Mission will feature the highest caliber of U.S. business leaders."<sup>60</sup> Additionally, the White House announced that "over the course of 2023, USTDA [U.S. Trade & Development Agency] will launch new sustainable infrastructure activities to leverage over \$3

billion in public and private financing to strengthen the Philippines' critical mineral supply chains, advance smart grid technologies and clean energy solutions..." among other infrastructure investments.<sup>61</sup> Finally, amidst the same set of announcements, President Biden announced that USAID would provide US\$135 million to the Philippines for various development projects, including support for a second round of clean energy auctions in the Philippines.<sup>62</sup> The initiative is subject to Congressional approval, and, unlike other initiatives announced in the press release, there were no details provided on any financial allocation to the clean energy auction initiative.

On August 17, 2023, the U.S. State Department sent senior officials to meet with the Philippine Department of Energy in the inaugural US-Philippines Energy Policy Dialogue.<sup>63</sup> The dialogue included conversation on the Philippines' various energy projects, issues, and points of collaboration between the two countries.<sup>64</sup> The U.S. also reaffirmed commitment on collaboration and support for the Philippines on small modular reactors. The U.S. State Department press release for the dialogue noted that future engagement will also include U.S. Deputy Secretary of Energy, Mr. David Turk; but the document did not state how often these dialogues would occur or when the next one would be.<sup>65</sup>

### Analysis

Considering the 40% stake that Chinese firm, State Grid Corp. of China, might have in the Philippines' national grid, and the US\$13.7 billion increase in investments from Chinese firms following the removal of the foreign equity limitation, Filipino policymakers ought to be concerned about what Chinese investment means to their national security over the long term. Particularly, if Chinese firms have majority access to each stage of the Philippines' electricity system as well as clean energy technology supply chains, the Philippines may find itself coerced into Chinese security demands to avoid energy security issues that could come with a departure (or cease in operations) of Chinese firms from the country. Furthermore, the Philippine government should consider any implications of giving Chinese firms access to that much energy and electricity data, possibly down to the consumer level. This is especially true for Chinese state-owned firms like the State Grid Corp. of China.

The United States needs to be actively involved in the Philippines' clean energy transition, or energy security risks could force Manila into desperate measures. The

<sup>57</sup> U.S. Department of State, "The United States of America and the Republic of the Philippines Sign a Memorandum of Understanding Concerning Strategic Civil Nuclear Cooperation," United States Department of State, March 10, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-of-america-and-the-republic-of-the-philippines-sign-a-memorandum-of-understanding-concerning-strategic-civil-nuclear-cooperation/>.

<sup>58</sup> The White House, "Readout of Vice President Harris's Meeting with President Marcos of the Philippines," The White House, November 21, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/11/21/readout-of-vice-president-harris-meeting-with-president-marcos-of-the-philippines/>.

<sup>59</sup> The U.S. Department of State, "Joint Statement of the U.S.-Philippines 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue," April 11, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-of-the-u-s-philippines-22-ministerial-dialogue/>.

<sup>60</sup> The White House, "FACT SHEET: Investing in the Special Friendship and Alliance Between the United States and the Philippines," The White House, May 1, 2023, [https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/01/fact-sheet-investing-in-the-special-friendship-and-alliance-between-the-united-states-and-the-philippines/)

[room/statements-releases/2023/05/01/fact-sheet-investing-in-the-special-friendship-and-alliance-between-the-united-states-and-the-philippines/](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/01/fact-sheet-investing-in-the-special-friendship-and-alliance-between-the-united-states-and-the-philippines/).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> "PRESS RELEASE: United States Announces \$135 Million to Advance a Prosperous, Inclusive, and Resilient Philippines," U.S. Agency for International Development, May 1, 2023, <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/may-01-2023-united-states-announces-135-million-advance-prosperous-inclusive-and-resilient-philippines>.

<sup>63</sup> U.S. Department of State, "PRESS RELEASE: U.S.-Philippines Energy Policy Dialogue," August 19, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-philippines-energy-policy-dialogue/>.

<sup>64</sup> Pia Lee-Brago, "Philippines, US Cite Importance of Nuclear Energy," Philstar.com, August 21, 2023, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2023/08/21/2290126/philippines-us-cite-importance-nuclear-energy>.

<sup>65</sup> U.S. Department of State, "PRESS RELEASE: U.S.-Philippines Energy Policy Dialogue," August 19, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-philippines-energy-policy-dialogue/>.

already-surfacing energy security issues may leave the Philippine government susceptible to Chinese financial overtures that sacrifice the long-term development and security of the Philippines for keeping the lights on now. These overtures include deploying fully-Chinese owned energy systems and loans with higher interests that must be paid off sooner than other loans, leaving the Philippines in an even more precarious situation to continue developing as a country while burdened with additional debt.<sup>66</sup>

As is shown by some of the U.S. government's recent conversations and trade deals with the Philippines, there is ample opportunity for the United States to partner with the Philippines in addressing its impending energy crisis. Unfortunately, current U.S. efforts are not enough to help lift the Philippines out of the immediate and short-term crises that threaten to eliminate energy reserves and even leave the country unable to provide energy to its people and industries over the next few years. For example, while the Philippines agreed to use American technology for its nuclear power plants, NuScale is still trying to identify locations and has a projected operations start date set in the early 2030s. Additionally, nuclear power plant construction notoriously experiences significant cost overruns and schedule delays, and it is unclear what challenges constructing SMRs may bring, especially for the first to be constructed. In an MIT Technology Review article, the Director of the Center for Advanced Nuclear Energy Systems at MIT, Jacopo Buongiorno, stated the following about SMRs, "these initial units will always be a little bit behind schedule and a little bit above budget."<sup>67</sup>

As for renewable energy, U.S. energy firms and investors can benefit from the Philippines' removal of the foreign equity limitation, new renewable portfolio standard, and strong government commitment to increase reliance on renewable energy.<sup>68</sup> In short, the Philippine government has demonstrated substantial commitment across two presidential administrations to transition to renewable energy, which should offset some risk; but concrete projects similar in scale to China's announcement have yet to be announced by the United States.

While U.S. financial and technical support for increased Philippine reliance on LNG may provide an immediate bridge that helps the country avoid an energy crisis, it is not without its flaws. First, it is not a carbon-neutral energy source, so the Philippines is only shifting from one fossil fuel (coal or oil) to another. That noted, the Philippines has not made a net zero or carbon neutral commitment, and LNG fits within the government's

ambitions. LNG produces significantly less carbon and could be a good bridge energy source if the Philippines is comfortable with potential market volatility and high prices. What LNG does provide is a good immediate-term answer, perhaps sooner than even renewable energy and battery storage, although that was not clear in the research. The U.S. government may be able to provide support in LNG terminal construction or consulting on LNG long-term contract negotiations. This could help avert an energy security crisis in the Philippines that could have long-term impacts on national security if only China provided concrete energy solutions.

Energy exploration in the South China Sea is a much more difficult issue for the United States. With the Chinese government's aggression towards Malaysian and Vietnamese energy exploration vessels, the United States may need to further support Philippine energy exploration, but that seems unlikely.<sup>69</sup> Admittedly, the question then becomes- when does the United States step into the situation, and how? If the United States did not step in when China began harassing the Philippines' energy exploration initiatives, the Philippines would run even more risk of losing investors as the political risk becomes too high, thus putting the country back into a potentially energy-insecure position. It may be a valuable exercise for the Philippine government to assess the impact of Chinese maritime aggression on LNG shipments.

## **With the Chinese government's aggression towards Malaysian and Vietnamese energy exploration vessels, the United States may need to further support Philippine energy exploration, but that seems unlikely.**

### **Recommendations**

There are plenty of options for the Philippines to transition to clean energy, renewables in particular, and there are a few angles the United States and its firms could take in supporting the Philippines in its energy transition. In August 2023, the Institute of Energy Economics and Financial Analysis published a report on the Philippines' renewable energy sector, stating that the market was attracting more investors and positioning the country for growth in renewable energy.<sup>70</sup> One of the report's key findings stated, "A standout feature of the acceleration of renewable energy adoption in the Philippines is the emergence of listed companies that are at the center of this growth."<sup>71</sup> Coupled with innovative financial instruments and business models, the Philippines' market is starting to rapidly attract investors. This is likely the easiest way for

<sup>66</sup> Kai Wang, "China: Is It Burdening Poor Countries with Unsustainable Debt?," *BBC News*, January 6, 2022, sec. Reality Check, <https://www.bbc.com/news/59585507>.

<sup>67</sup> Casey Crownhart, "We Were Promised Smaller Nuclear Reactors. Where Are They?," *MIT Technology Review*, February 8, 2023, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2023/02/08/1067992/smaller-nuclear-reactors/>.

<sup>68</sup> Philippines Department of Energy, "Department Circular No. DC2022-09-0030," accessed February 5, 2023, <https://www.doe.gov.ph/laws-and-issuances/department-circular-no-dc2022-09-0030>.

<sup>69</sup> Center for Strategic & International Studies, "Perilous Prospects: Tensions Flare at Malaysian, Vietnamese Oil and Gas Fields," *Asia*

*Maritime Transparency Initiative*, <https://amti.csis.org/perilous-prospects-tensions-flare-at-malaysian-vietnamese-oil-and-gas-fields/>.

<sup>70</sup> Ramnath Iyer, "Renewable Energy Sector in the Philippines Is Poised to Grow Faster as Investor Interest Rises," *Institute of Energy Economics and Financial Analysis*, August 22, 2023, <https://ieefa.org/articles/renewable-energy-sector-philippines-poised-grow-faster-investor-interest-rises>.

<sup>71</sup> Ramnath Iyer, "Business Model Innovations Drive the Philippines' Energy Transition" (*Institute of Energy Economics & Financial Analysis*, August 22, 2023), Executive Summary, <https://ieefa.org/resources/business-model-innovations-drive-philippines-energy-transition>.



U.S. investors to enter and contribute to the Philippines' clean energy market.

At the federal level, the United States should work with the Philippines to determine what stages of the energy system are most vulnerable to security issues. As of August 2023, U.S. State Department senior officials have begun to meet with Philippine Department of Energy senior officials, through the U.S.-Philippine Energy Policy Dialogue, to discuss partnership between the two countries on a variety of energy issues.<sup>72</sup> While officials reviewed the current status of energy projects already under development in the Philippines, no additional commitments were made by either party. Moving forward, the U.S. State Department could include additional U.S. interagency counterparts in the dialogue and policy planning to discuss how to further encourage and incentivize U.S. private sector investment in the Philippines to balance out Chinese firms currently holding significant stakes in the country's electricity generation. As briefly noted in President Biden's announcement, the United States could also work with the Philippine government or private sector firms to modernize their grid and transmission infrastructure.

More directly, the U.S. Department of Commerce's International Trade Administration provides favorable market analysis for the Philippines' battery energy storage systems and electric vehicle markets.<sup>73,74</sup> The EV analysis states, "The Philippines electric vehicle market is a promising sector for U.S. companies as energy policy is changing to encourage investment in and adoption of cleaner technologies."<sup>75</sup> Much of domestic strife in the Philippines is around income inequality and the migration from rural communities to the cities, exacerbating transportation. The United States could help by supporting the Philippine EV market and infrastructure development. Washington could pull from the lessons it is learning in building its own EV infrastructure and transfer some of the knowledge and technology. This could include developing a public transportation fleet of electric buses and charging stations.

The US could also offer indirect solutions, such as technical expertise and upskill programs to train the workforce required for these new technologies. Workforce development could include identifying and training nuclear engineers and other STEM professionals to work on clean energy technology. The two countries could partner in establishing training programs that require a low barrier of entry to help close the wage gap found in the Philippines, which could help with poverty issues.<sup>76</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The Philippines is in a delicate situation with its energy security and clean energy future. Facing both energy crises in 2023 and potential long-term problems with Chinese investment into their energy markets, the Philippines needs to navigate each energy-related decision with an abundance of caution and with the most resources they can get. The United States has an interest in providing

its expertise, private sector investment, and government support, especially as the U.S. government announces four new military sites in the Philippines. The Philippines is a strategic location for the United States, so seemingly domestic issues like energy security could have a reverberating impact on U.S. security if ignored. The Biden-Harris Administration has recognized this and has initiated the first few steps, but there is still plenty to be done to ensure these initiatives have a meaningful impact now and over the next few decades.

**Moving forward, the U.S. State Department could include additional U.S. interagency counterparts in the dialogue and policy planning to discuss how to further encourage and incentivize U.S. private sector investment in the Philippines to balance out Chinese firms currently holding significant stakes in the country's electricity generation.**

<sup>72</sup> Pia Lee-Brago, "Philippines, US Cite Importance of Nuclear Energy," Philstar.com, accessed August 24, 2023, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2023/08/21/2290126/philippines-us-cite-importance-nuclear-energy>.

<sup>73</sup> U.S. International Trade Administration, "Philippines Energy Storage Market," Department of Commerce, April 28, 2020, <https://www.trade.gov/market-intelligence/philippines-energy-storage-market>.

<sup>74</sup> U.S. International Trade Administration, "Philippines Electric Vehicles Market," April 22, 2020, <https://www.trade.gov/market-intelligence/philippines-electric-vehicles-market>.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Shinichi Taniguchi, "Securing Access to Electricity with Variable Renewable Energy in the Philippines: Learning from the Nordic Model," n.d., p.2.

# 4

## **Post-EDSA Philippine Democracy and Disinformation: A Canary in a Coal Mine**

*Japhet Quitzon*

### *Abstract*

Several unique societal or institutional factors leave the Philippines vulnerable to social media-based disinformation. As patient zero for social media disinformation-based populist politics, the Philippines and its democratic allies must act to successfully contain disinformation. This paper examines how patronage-based, personality-driven politics, weak political institutions, and inadequate education systems are crucial to disinformation's effectiveness in the Philippines. Moreover, it analyzes attempts to curb disinformation and proposes three policy recommendations: strengthen education systems, restore press freedom, and hold social media networks such as TikTok and Facebook accountable. This paper also analyzes current efforts to curb social media disinformation. These include the junked social media abuse bill of February 2022, lawsuits planned by the Robredo campaign's lawyers, and non-profit disinformation monitoring campaigns. Analysis of these factors and disinformation-curbing measures assesses the Philippines' path toward a healthier, fact-based democracy.

## Introduction

Building upon Philippine cultural mores, gossip and hearsay have been essential in daily life even before social media gained ubiquity in the Philippines. Social media has become a common 'public square' for spreading ideas worldwide. The Philippines is no exception. Internet usage in the country continues to grow by the year, and with it comes an expansion in social media usage. By 2026, 77% percent of the Philippine population will be on social media.<sup>1</sup> Social media companies such as TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter play host to disinformation and misinformation that threaten Philippine democracy.

Misinformation generally refers to "incorrect or misleading information," regardless of intention; meanwhile, disinformation refers to "false information deliberately

and often covertly spread to influence

public opinion of obscure truth."<sup>2</sup> While both harm online discourse, disinformation plays a more insidious role as it often preys upon the marginalized<sup>3</sup> or minority groups and people in more compromised financial or personal situations. They tend to believe extraordinary claims presented in social media disinformation. Often, disinformation narratives in the Philippines designate a scapegoat for the country's ills, such as communists.<sup>4</sup> Disinformation has the power to revise history and create cults of personality, as exemplified by the rise of Rodrigo Duterte and the subsequent return of Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr., and his family to Malacañang.

Marcos Jr.'s overwhelming victory in the 2022 presidential election was due to decades of perpetuated disinformation about the Marcos family since the 1960s. Ferdinand Marcos Sr.'s Martial Law was touted as a 'golden age' for the country with high quality of life, excellent infrastructure, and a thriving economy - all because of Marcos Sr.'s supposed intellect and skills. Marcos supporters often lauded the 'order and discipline' allegedly characterizing Philippine society under Marcos Sr.'s rule. Notably, disinformation and historical revisionism were intertwined: pro-Marcos content brushes over the corruption and abuses of the Martial Law Era, including the billions of dollars stolen by the Marcos family and its cronies. The success of Bongbong Marcos' campaign was the culmination of this disinformation, restoring the family to power over 30 years after being ousted in 1986.

Vulnerability to disinformation is not unique to the Philippines. All democracies, including the United States, have inherent institutional or societal characteristics

that leave them vulnerable to disinformation. Due to the intensity of social media disinformation campaigns in the country, the Philippines was named "patient zero" in the global "pandemic" of fake news.<sup>5</sup> As such, it is an excellent case study for analyzing what methods can effectively curb disinformation. What unique societal or institutional factors have left the Philippines vulnerable to social media-based disinformation? As patient zero for social media disinformation-based populist politics, how can the Philippines set an example for curbing disinformation?

This paper examines how patronage-based, personality-driven politics, combined with weak political institutions and inadequate education systems, are crucial to the effectiveness of disinformation. In addition, this paper analyzes efforts to curb social media disinformation.

These include the junked social media abuse bill of February 2022, lawsuits planned by the Robredo campaign's lawyers, and non-profit disinformation monitoring campaigns.

Interviews with stakeholders shed light on the Philippines' potential path toward a healthier, fact-based information space in the Philippines. First, 'bad habits,' defined as Filipino cultural and historical institutions that perpetuate disinformation, must be mitigated. Educational systems must emphasize critical thinking; moreover, they must include an accurate narrative of Philippine history. Foreign social media companies such as TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook must be held accountable for their heavy influence on the Philippine information space. Finally, Philippine journalism must be strengthened - six years under the Duterte administration severely hobbled the power of the free press and civil society in the Philippines.

## Philippine historical context

Philippine disinformation is rooted in a deep culture of corruption and clientelism. Before analyzing the potential remedies for disinformation, we must first understand the cultural and historical factors that strengthened the effects of disinformation. Filipino corruption and oligarchy are rooted in the Spanish *encomienda* system, which originally distributed land to 'deserving Spaniards,' who would manage the land and its natural wealth to pay tribute to the Spanish crown.<sup>6</sup> The *encomienda* system served as the origin of an inherent feature in Philippine society: domination by landed elites. The *encomienda* system gradually evolved into the *hacienda* system, a feudal system wherein even more power was

<sup>1</sup> Statista Research Department, "Philippines Social Media Reach 2017-2026," Statista, October 5, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/490378/mobile-messaging-user-reach-philippines/>.

<sup>2</sup> Senn, Kay. 2022. "Research Guides: Misinformation, Disinformation, and Bias: Misinformation." Guides.emich.edu. August 26, 2022. <https://guides.emich.edu/misinformation>.

<sup>3</sup> Woolley, Inga Trauthig, Samuel. 2022. "Digital Disinformation Increasingly Targets the Most Vulnerable." Centre for International Governance Innovation. March 23, 2022. <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/digital-disinformation-increasingly-targets-the-most-vulnerable/>.

<sup>4</sup> De Leon, Amelie. 2021. "The Philippines' Red-Tagging Campaign - How Communist Accusations Have Silenced Dissent." COLUMBIA POLITICAL

REVIEW. December 4, 2021. <http://www.cpreview.org/blog/2021/12/the-philippines-red-tagging-campaign-how-communist-accusations-have-silenced-dissent>.

<sup>5</sup> Mendoza, Ronald, Imelda Deinla, and Jurel Yap. 2021. "Philippines: Diagnosing the Infodemic." [www.lowyinstitute.org](http://www.lowyinstitute.org). December 1, 2021. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/philippines-diagnosing-infodemic>.

<sup>6</sup> Litonjua, M. D. 2001. "The State in Development Theory: The Philippines under Marcos." *Philippine Studies* 49 (3): 368-98. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42634449>.

amassed in the hands of the few. The Spanish Crown had the land of small landowners reposessed through the Royal Decree of February 13, 1894, allowing "landholders one year within which to secure legal title to their land."

The concentration of power and economic wealth in the hands of the few gave rise to the Philippines' first native oligarchs. The Spanish used feudal lords and collaborators as administrators within the colonies. These oligarchs, who reported directly to Spanish rulers, were proxy rulers who collected taxes and maintained the rule of law. Often, they sought to curry favor with the Spanish ruling class to preserve their influence and power over the land. By "using, manipulating, and exploiting government," oligarchs cemented their position at the top of Philippine society for centuries. Clientelism, endemic to the Philippines from the beginning of its existence as a colonial entity and into the present day, hindered the rise of an independent, effective meritocracy. Endemic corruption ensured that personal connections, rather than skill, are more effective for personal advancement. Corruption and clientelism in developing nations such as the Philippines "seriously affect the power and hinder state effectiveness to deliver services, the rule of law, and security."<sup>7</sup> The nature of Filipino society and governance encouraged the "patron-client model of politics," referring to "paternalistic, personalistic, and mutually beneficial ties between rich patrons and poorer clients."<sup>8</sup> This created a chain of power reaching as low as the smallest villages and as high as officials in Manila. This patron-client model further enabled a powerful oligarchy, weakening the powers of the state. Toward the end of the 1960s, the people of the new Philippine Republic recognized the problems inherent in the political system and sought action, leading to a flurry of "rallies, demonstrations, and strikes... almost daily" in Manila.<sup>19</sup> This allowed Ferdinand

## Post-EDSA, Philippine democratic gains proved to be fleeting, and political institutions were unsound. Clientelism continued to play a strong role in Philippine society

Marcos, then an aspiring politician, an opportunity to channel the discontent of the Filipino people into electoral support. He won his first term in 1965. With few avenues for accountability within government institutions, centuries of endemic corruption came to a head.

### Sixth Republic, same woes

What does Philippine history mean for the present-day proliferation of disinformation? In 1986, the

EDSA People Power Revolution ousted Marcos Sr. after 21 years in power. After Marcos' ousting, Corazon Aquino, installed as president, sought to reinvigorate the Philippines' languishing democratic institutions. In March 1986, Aquino decreed a provisional "Freedom Constitution" to guide the country from Marcosian authoritarianism. She appointed 46 men and women to draft a new constitution to reflect the Philippines' return to democracy.<sup>9</sup> Many of the provisions in the new Constitution were specifically designed to prevent Marcosian excesses. Martial law, renewed by the Marcos Sr. administration twice to extend its near-absolute authority, became constrained to 60 days per declaration. With a new section on "accountability of public officers," the 1987 Philippine Constitution gained a new focus on stamping out graft and corruption. To many outside observers, Philippine democracy was turning a corner.

Post-EDSA, Philippine democratic gains proved to be fleeting, and political institutions were unsound. Clientelism continued to play a strong role in Philippine society: in 2021, Transparency International ranked the Philippines 117<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries in its corruption perceptions index. Around 86% of surveyed Filipinos believed government corruption is a big problem, with 19% of public service users paying a bribe in the last 12 months.<sup>10</sup> Corruption and clientelism hampered Philippine democratic institutions. Repeated disappointments marked the beginning of the 21st century. In 2001, EDSA II ousted populist President Joseph Estrada for graft and corruption. His successor, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, became the second Philippine president to face trial for corruption, graft, and electoral fraud. Notably, Arroyo was considered an excellent 'troubleshooter' politician of good character.<sup>11</sup> Soon, Arroyo was beleaguered by yet another popular movement to oust her in the face of corruption scandals.<sup>12</sup> The cycle did not end with Arroyo. Even Corazon Aquino's son, Benigno "Noy" Aquino III, was plagued with scandal regarding misuse of public funds.<sup>13</sup> Noy Aquino's administration, which emphasized anti-corruption and good governance, presided over the highest average growth rate in the Philippines since the 1950s.<sup>14</sup> Some Filipinos, however, did not feel the effects of this growth; despite growing economic prosperity on paper, many Filipinos perceived little change.<sup>15</sup> Consequently,

<sup>7</sup> Singh, Danny. 2018. "Challenging Corruption and Clientelism in Post-Conflict and Developing States - ProQuest." [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com). December 5, 2018. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/085e86c7beb5792fb85e9967425feb45/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=36512>.

<sup>8</sup> Curaming, Rommel, and Lisandro Claudio. "A Historicised (Re)Assessment of EDSA "People Power" (1986)." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2010, 10.2139/ssrn.1716572.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Fineman, "New Philippine Constitution Submitted to Aquino; Nationwide Vote Set for Jan. 23," *Los Angeles Times*, October 16, 1986, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-10-16-mn-5630-story.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Transparency International. 2020. "Philippines." [Transparency.org](https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/philippines). 2020. <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/philippines>.

<sup>11</sup> SCMP Reporter. 2002. "Troubleshooter Makes Her Mark." *South China Morning Post*. January 6, 2002. <https://www.scmp.com/article/367837/troubleshooter-makes-her-mark>.

<sup>12</sup> Mogato, Manny. 2008. "Thousands Protest against Philippines' Arroyo." *Reuters*, February 15, 2008, sec. Financial Services and Real Estate. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-protests/thousands-protest-against-philippines-arroyo-idUSMAN28625720080215>.

<sup>13</sup> Manuel Mogato, "Analysis - Aquino's Mr. Clean Image Skewed by Philippine Pork Barrel Politics," *Reuters*, October 31, 2013, sec. World News, <https://www.reuters.com/article/philippines-corruption-idINDEE99U0DQ20131031>

<sup>14</sup> Punongbayan, J.C. 2021. "[ANALYSIS] PNoy's Legacy: We Were No Longer the 'Sick Man of Asia.'" *RAPPLER*. June 30, 2021. <https://www.rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/analysis-pnoy-legacy-we-were-no-longer-sick-man-of-asia/>.

<sup>15</sup> Ubac, Michael Lim. 2014. "Aquino on Rise in Joblessness: What Went Wrong?" *INQUIRER.net*. February 12, 2014. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/577058/aquino-on-rise-in-joblessness-what-went-wrong>.

Aquino's Liberal Party became associated with hypocrisy and elitism.

Many Filipinos became frustrated at the failure of successive presidents to create lasting change, leading to a pervasive sense of cynicism. Consequently, the Philippine public believed its politicians to be ineffective and corrupt, regardless of the party. Like many beleaguered democracies, Filipinos sought an 'outsider' who could bring about 'real' change, hoping for a champion with a no-nonsense attitude that could restore order, prosperity, and stability. Rodrigo Duterte, the brash, tough-talking strongman mayor of Davao City, won the 2016 Philippine presidential elections handily in a stunning repudiation of Noyonoy's Liberal Party. To many of his supporters, Duterte, famous for restoring order to Davao City through intimidation and his infamous death squads, could do for the country what he did for Davao City. His strongman effectiveness, voters argued, would yield more tangible results than previous "corrupt" politicians. Tapping into this national dissatisfaction with traditional politicians, Duterte's campaign unleashed an unprecedented online campaign that relied on fake news, virality, and outrage. By his admission, Duterte paid 10 million pesos (\$198,000) to create an online army of trolls to spread his message.<sup>16</sup> This opened the door for the Marcos family to complete their return to national relevance by building upon Duterte's example and connecting their decades-long disinformation campaign to modern social media. Six years after Duterte, the Philippines defied its history and elected Marcos, Jr. as his successor.

The election of Duterte and Marcos, Jr. coincided with a steep decline in popular trust of mainstream media outlets. Filipinos are more likely to trust *tsismis*, or gossip, and *kwentong kutsero*, or hearsay, rather than mainstream media. In 2022, some 90,000 people in markets throughout Southeast Asia were surveyed for their trust in mainstream news media. The Philippines had the second lowest level of public trust, at 37% of the population. Filipinos sought alternative sources of information. *Tsismis* and *kwentong kutsero*, while powerful within physical communities, were amplified by the power of social media. Through Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, *kwentong kutsero*, *tsismis*, and unverifiable 'facts' dominated political discussion. As such, social media-based disinformation and misinformation can better shape political narratives than traditional media.

### How the Philippines should curb disinformation

The path to curbing disinformation in the Philippines is complicated. First, "bad habits," which this essay defines as Filipino cultural institutions that perpetuate disinformation, must be neutralized. Next, educational systems must be strengthened to foster a new generation of informed citizens and policymakers. Furthermore, social media companies such as TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook must be held accountable for their heavy influence on the Philippine information space. Finally, traditional news outlets must restore their credibility among the Filipino people after decades of

mischaracterization and distrust. Lastly, this essay evaluates opportunities for a U.S.-Philippine partnership in fighting disinformation.

### Step one: mitigate bad habits

Philippine cultural norms are the foundation on which its sociopolitical foundations lie. From its colonial inception, patronage systems dominated government and business. Philippine institutions are hampered by societal norms that enable corruption and inefficiency. No matter the intention of the ruling government, Philippine policymakers cannot change national norms through decree. Outlawing or banning disinformation outright would present dangerous implications for freedom of speech. Government definitions of disinformation could balloon into unnecessary censorship. Even if the government was able to pass such a ban, the weakness of due process and the rule of law in the Philippines would prevent enforcement. A civilian discourse based on *tsismis* and *kwentong kutsero* offers a weak foundation for political institutions.

Moreover, anemic education systems cannot adequately prepare Philippine citizens for political discourse.<sup>17</sup> As such, the best move for the government is to provide sufficient support for public education. Education is crucial to the shaping of shared norms. Interviewed stakeholders agreed that Philippine society is deeply conducive to the power of disinformation in the country. *Tsismis*, or gossip, paired with *kwentong kutsero*, or hearsay, are longstanding norms in Philippine social interaction that often supplant truth and objectivity. Educational systems must equip future members of society with critical thinking skills. Moreover, education based on facts must emphasize the importance of fact-checking. Strengthened education systems yield citizens more capable of reasonable discourse, placing the *tsismis* and *kwentong kutsero* culture of the Philippines in check.

## the best move for the government is to provide sufficient support for public education. Education is crucial to the shaping of shared norms

The Philippines has some of the highest rates of 'learning poverty' in the East Asia and Pacific region. According to a report on education by the World Bank, 90.9% of Filipino children experience learning poverty, defined as "the share of children who cannot read a simple text with comprehension by age 10." Meanwhile, 90.5% of Filipino children suffer from learning deprivation, defined as "the share of children who at the end of primary school read below the minimum proficiency."<sup>18</sup> The report indicates that 5% of Filipino children do not attend school. Quality of education is also crucial for learning outcomes. The Philippines spends \$569 per child of primary education age, 83.5% below the average for the East Asia and Pacific region, and 29.5% below the average for lower-middle

<sup>16</sup> Ng, Yi Shu. 2017. "Philippine President Admits He Used an Army of Social Media Trolls While Campaigning." Mashable. July 25, 2017. <https://mashable.com/article/duterte-oxford-paid-trolls>.

<sup>17</sup> Louie Checa Montemar, "The Problem with PH History Education," RAPPLER, September 26, 2015, <https://www.rappler.com/moveph/107094-problem-ph-history-education/>.

<sup>18</sup> World Bank. 2022. "The State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update." <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/e52f55322528903b27f1b7e61238e416-0200022022/original/Learning-poverty-report-2022-06-21-final-V7-0-conferenceEdition.pdf>.

income countries. The low investment in Philippine education led to outdated teaching methods, resulting in “limited attention to the development of children’s social and emotional needs.”<sup>19</sup> Current didactic methods do not promote critical thinking, as the education system focuses on rote memorization rather than understanding key concepts.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps more concerning is the direction of the education system under Vice President and Secretary of Education Sara Duterte. With an extra PHP 100 billion, she vowed that she would be able to fix the country’s education system. Duterte offered few concrete policy proposals to address the Philippine education crisis in her testimony to the Philippine House of Representatives. Instead of pushing for higher quality education and reforming Philippine public schools, she suggested mandatory Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) for students.<sup>21</sup> An increase in funding alone is insufficient to address deficiencies in the Philippine education system. Moreover, misappropriation of funds remains a pervasive concern in the Philippine government.

Fact-checking is crucial in the age of disinformation. History has been reduced to mere *tsismis* in the Philippines. Actress Ella Cruz, who portrayed Irene Marcos in Darryl Yap’s *Maid in Malacañang*, prompted a national debate by saying, “history is like *tsismis*.” Talk show host Eugenio “Boy” Abunda, went so far as to claim that *tsismis* is “part of the Philippines’ historical discourse.” Historical revisionism is rampant in the Philippines. *Maid in Malacañang* is part of a decades-long narrative that the Marcoses were victims. In 2020, Marcos Jr. called for revising history textbooks, claiming that children are being taught lies about his family and that his father’s regime was not responsible for human rights violations or ill-gotten wealth.<sup>22</sup> These claims and similar sentiments echoed by other members of the Marcos family raised concerns that Marcos Jr. would use his authority as president to whitewash his family history by banning books critical of him and his family.<sup>23</sup> Even existing textbooks show this tendency. For instance, in 2016, a textbook called “Lakbay ng Lahing Pilipino 5” praised the Marcos Sr. administration for its accomplishments, claiming that Marcos Sr.’s programs were “done to uplift the lives of Filipinos,” all while “turning a blind eye to the trampling of human rights and civil liberties and systemic corruption.”<sup>24</sup> A review conducted by Far Eastern University found that martial law

was largely glossed over. Only 6 to 11% of the total pages of selected textbooks from Grade 5 and Grade 6 social studies courses focused on Martial Law. Textbooks were riddled with outdated or debunked theories, biases, factual errors, and generalizations under the guise of objectivity.<sup>25</sup> These controversies bred a lack of distrust in the textbook system and a rejection of objective history.<sup>26</sup>

To constrain *tsismis* and *kwentong kutsero*, the Philippines must work in earnest to develop its education system. While increasing spending would be beneficial to improving the state of public education in the country, the Department of Education must remain transparent with its funds to ensure that the entirety of the budget is directed toward improving educational outcomes rather than supporting kickbacks. Textbooks must be held to a rigorous standard to ensure that objective facts form the foundation of the curriculum. Textbook revisionism and misinformation can influence how future participants in a fragile democracy perceive their past, shaping the country’s future.

### **Step two: curb the power of social media networks**

Social networks such as Facebook and TikTok allow a virtual platform for the *tsismis* and *kwentong kutsero* formerly constrained to neighborhoods, communities, and households. Constraining the power of social media in the Philippines will be crucial to the fight against disinformation. Facebook’s former policy director Katie Harbath described the Philippines as “patient zero” for social media disinformation. Social media networks such as Facebook took advantage of the information environment in the Philippines to expand their presence outside of their home markets. Internet speeds in the Philippines are often slow and unreliable. This slowness comes at a premium, as internet connectivity in the Philippines is among the most expensive in the world.<sup>27</sup> In this, social media networks found an excellent opportunity to enter a new market. Social media networks partnered with Philippine telecommunications networks, offering free access to their services.

Notably, Facebook introduced Facebook Basics to the Philippines in 2013. Partnering with Globe Telecom, Facebook offered access to its services with zero data charges to Globe’s 36 million subscribers.<sup>28</sup> This model has since been replicated by Smart Communication’s “Free TikTok for All” initiative in 2022, which gave “subscribers

<sup>19</sup> Torralba, Alanah. 2016. “Education.” Wwww.unicef.org. 2016. <https://www.unicef.org/philippines/education>.

<sup>20</sup> Leander, I, and P Marquez. n.d. “Critical Thinking in Philippine Education: What We Have and What We Need.” <http://www.jceps.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/15-2-10.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Magsambol, Bonz. 2022. “Sara Duterte Tells Marcos, Congress: Give Me P100B, I’ll Fix Education in 6 Years.” Rappler. September 14, 2022. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/sara-duterte-asks-marcos-jr-congress-give-billions-fix-education-problems/>.

<sup>22</sup> Jalea, Glee. 2020. “Marcos Pushes for Revision of History Textbooks: ‘You’re Teaching the Children Lies.’” CNN Philippines. January 10, 2020. [https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/1/10/Marcos-wants-to-revise-history-textbooks.html?fbclid=IwAR1wx4GD3RwQfsTUKUejml2a-1U96LrVvkl5\\_3of9e3BIRFt0sM8guaOXtQ](https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/1/10/Marcos-wants-to-revise-history-textbooks.html?fbclid=IwAR1wx4GD3RwQfsTUKUejml2a-1U96LrVvkl5_3of9e3BIRFt0sM8guaOXtQ).

<sup>23</sup> Esguerra, Anthony. 2022. “Preserve the Truth: Historical Books, Documents in Danger as Marcos Family Returns to Power.” VOA. June 11, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/preserve-the-truth-historical-books-documents-in-danger-as-marcos-family-returns-to-power-/6613037.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Gonzales, Yuji Vincent. 2016. “DepEd Urged to Recall Textbooks with ‘Misinformation’ on Martial Law.” INQUIRER.net. March 2, 2016. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/770166/depd-urged-to-recall-textbooks-with-misinformation-on-martial-law>.

<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/770166/depd-urged-to-recall-textbooks-with-misinformation-on-martial-law>.

<sup>25</sup> Far Eastern University. 2022. “#TwistedTruths: The Dilemma of Philippine History Textbooks • Far Eastern University.” Far Eastern University. January 27, 2022. <https://www.feu.edu.ph/index.php/2022/01/twistedtruths-the-dilemma-of-philippine-history-textbooks/>.

<sup>26</sup> Pierson, David. 2022. “Dictator’s Son Uses TikTok to Lead in Philippine Election and Rewrite His Family’s Past.” Los Angeles Times. May 5, 2022. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-05-05/dictators-son-uses-tiktok-to-lead-philippines-election-and-rewrite-his-family-past>.

<sup>27</sup> Natividad, Nikki. 2021. “Why Internet Speeds in the Philippines Are so Slow.” Wwww.vice.com. February 22, 2021. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/n7vy3m/why-internet-speeds-philippines-slow-laws>.

<sup>28</sup> INQUIRER.net. 2013. “Globe Telecom to Offer Free Facebook Access for Its 36 Million Subscribers.” Inquirer.net. 2013. <https://technology.inquirer.net/30705/globe-telecom-to-offer-free-facebook-access-for-its-36-million-subscribers>.

absolutely free TikTok access when they register[ed for] select prepaid promos.”<sup>29</sup> Social media networks such as Facebook and TikTok offer a convenient, accessible means of consuming internet content. Since consuming internet content outside of the platforms is a slow, expensive task, carrier-subsidized social media presents itself as convenient and accessible. Consequently, Facebook and, increasingly, TikTok are becoming the *de facto* internet for many Filipinos. As such, social media has become a *de-facto* public square for the Philippines’ digital community.

Some 90% of Filipinos with internet access have a social media presence. Statista found that “on average, Filipinos spent over four hours using social media platforms, which was the highest across the Asia Pacific region.”<sup>30</sup> As of January 2022, there were 92.05 million social media users in the Philippines.<sup>31</sup> Facebook made up 91.11% of the Philippines’ social media market as of July 2022. Facebook has been deeply entrenched in Philippine society largely thanks to its initiatives to expand into developing countries. In 2017, a survey found that Filipinos with internet access trust social media more than mainstream news organizations. Of these respondents, 87% claimed to trust the information they found on social media.<sup>32</sup> Unreliable internet coverage at a high cost effectively paywalls the web outside of Facebook and

## Unreliable internet coverage at a high cost effectively paywalls the web outside of Facebook and TikTok, making it difficult for Filipinos to fact-check their feed or personal messages on Messenger, WhatsApp, or Viber

TikTok, making it difficult for Filipinos to fact-check their feed or personal messages on Messenger, WhatsApp, or Viber.<sup>33</sup>

What has been done to address the spread of disinformation on social media networks? Meta, Facebook’s parent company, has acted over the past few years to address disinformation in the Philippines. In May 2016, they opened an office in Manila. In the Philippine information space, Facebook was home to countless pages

run by ‘trolls,’ internet users who call attention to themselves, spread disinformation, and deceive others. Facebook remains a key gathering space for these trolls to work in concert as a ‘troll army’ to advance the message of a government or politician. Their ubiquity has boosted their popularity with celebrities as well, seeking the help of trolls to boost their followers artificially. Often, these trolls are not real people: some troll accounts are run by automated bots. Facebook initially struggled to respond to trolls and disinformation, practicing a *laissez-faire* policy toward content spread in Philippine cyberspace. Scalding criticism, however, promoted Meta to take down hundreds of offending pages and shut down troll accounts. Initially, Facebook either “ignored or was slow to act on evidence that fake accounts on its platforms [were] undermining elections and political affairs around the world.”<sup>34</sup> In response to scathing criticism of its approach to misinformation, Meta has since taken down hundreds of offending pages.<sup>35</sup>

Those seeking regulation of the disinformation environment question the role of government in promulgating anti-disinformation policy and enforcing rule of law. For example, in the aftermath of the 2022 national elections, former Vice President Leni Robredo’s team considered taking legal action against peddlers of fake news and disinformation on social media.<sup>36</sup> Before the election, Robredo’s spokesperson filed a cyber libel case against a Manila-based tabloid that claimed Robredo’s campaign adviser was Jose Maria Sison, founder of the Communist Party of the Philippines.<sup>37</sup> Though the results of this legal action are yet to be seen, it is uncertain if these actions would generate significant change. The weak rule of law in the Philippines was cited as a potential reason these legal proceedings will not make significant headway.<sup>38</sup>

In early 2022, Philippine lawmakers passed a bill to tackle social media abuse. The bill required “social media users to register their legal identities and phone numbers” to curb the spread of disinformation. Then-President Rodrigo Duterte vetoed it in April 2022.<sup>39</sup> In June 2022, Senator Francis “Kiko” Pangilinan drafted a report in Senate Resolution 953 on social media disinformation, which argued that “malice should be presumed on the part of the [social media platform] if the libelous comment is made by a fake or fictitious person and such platform fails to take down the libelous content within a reasonable

<sup>29</sup> “Smart Unveils Free ‘TikTok for All’ with Prepaid Promos.” 2022. RAPPLER. April 18, 2022. <https://www.rappler.com/brandrap/smart-free-tiktok-prepaid-promos/>.

<sup>30</sup> Statista. 2021. “Topic: Social Media Usage in the Philippines.” Statista. September 16, 2021. [https://www.statista.com/topics/6759/social-media-usage-in-the-philippines/#topicHeader\\_\\_wrapper](https://www.statista.com/topics/6759/social-media-usage-in-the-philippines/#topicHeader__wrapper).

<sup>31</sup> Kemp, Simon. 2022. “Digital 2022: The Philippines.” DataReportal – Global Digital Insights. February 15, 2022. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-philippines>.

<sup>32</sup> Tapsell, Ross. 2020. “Social Media and Elections in Southeast Asia: The Emergence of Subversive, Underground Campaigning.” *Asian Studies Review* 45 (1): 117–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2020.1841093>.

<sup>33</sup> Quitzon, Japhet. 2021. “Social Media Misinformation and the 2022 Philippine Elections.” Center for Strategic & International Studies. November 22, 2021. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/social-media-misinformation-and-2022-philippine-elections>.

<sup>34</sup> Silverman, Craig, Ryan Mac, and Pranav Dixit. 2020. “‘I Have Blood on My Hands’: A Whistleblower Says Facebook Ignored Global Political Manipulation.” BuzzFeed News. September 14, 2020. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/facebook-ignore-political-manipulation-whistleblower-memo>.

<sup>35</sup> Mahtani, Shibani, and Regine Cabato. 2019. “Why Crafty Internet Trolls in the Philippines May Be Coming to a Website near You.” *Washington Post*, July 26, 2019.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/why-crafty-internet-trolls-in-the-philippines-may-be-coming-to-a-website-near-you/2019/07/25/c5d42ee2-5c53-11e9-98d4-844088d135f2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/why-crafty-internet-trolls-in-the-philippines-may-be-coming-to-a-website-near-you/2019/07/25/c5d42ee2-5c53-11e9-98d4-844088d135f2_story.html).

<sup>36</sup> News, GISELLE OMBAY, GMA. 2022. “Robredo Camp Mulls Legal Action vs Fake News Peddlers on Social Media.” GMA News Online. June 19, 2022.

<https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/835385/robredo-camp-mulls-legal-action-vs-fake-news-peddlers-on-social-media/story/>

<sup>37</sup> Geducos, Argyll. 2022. “Robredo Spokesperson Files Cyber Libel Case vs Tabloid.” Manila Bulletin. May 6, 2022. <https://mb.com.ph/2022/05/06/robredo-spokesperson-files-cyber-libel-case-vs-tabloid/>.

<sup>38</sup> Stakeholder 1. 2022. Interview Questions: Disinformation in the Philippines Interview by Japhet Quitzon.

<sup>39</sup> Reuters. 2022. “Philippine President Vetoes Bill Seeking to Tackle Social Media Abuse.” *Reuters*, April 15, 2022, sec. Asia Pacific. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippine-president-vetoes-bill-seeking-tackle-social-media-abuse-2022-04-15/>.

amount of time.”<sup>40</sup> The report listed several recommendations meant to curb the influence of disinformation, including the “refil[ing] of the SIM card registration bill,” holding social media platforms accountable for their use of algorithms, and creating a partnership between government, civil society, and academia for creating awareness of disinformation. Of these proposals, the SIM Card Registration Act, designed to “aid law enforcers to track perpetrators of crimes committed through phones,” was passed and signed into law on October 10, 2022.<sup>41</sup> In October 2022, Senator Risa Hontiveros suggested that the Philippines adopt the European Union’s “practice of requiring social media companies to submit reports on how disinformation spreads on their platforms.”<sup>42</sup>

Unilateral government proposals, unfortunately, do not always have sufficient enforcement power, especially on multinational social media networks like TikTok and Facebook. As such, the Philippines would benefit from strength in numbers. To curb the effects of harmful disinformation on political discourse, the Philippines must partner with other nations to push social media networks toward accountability. Developing and developed democracies alike suffer from rampant disinformation. The Philippines should follow the example of the European Union’s Digital Services Act and work in concert with developed countries to create a framework for healthy internet discourse. By creating a shared platform for democracies, countries like the Philippines, sharing the stage with countries like the United States, can leverage influence on social media networks to better regulate their services.

### ***Step three: empower and protect journalists through civil society***

Freedom of speech and expression is guaranteed in the 1987 Philippine Constitution. As previously discussed, however, rule of law is weak in the Philippines. Corruption and clientelism hinder due process and rule of law, offering the rich and powerful impunity. As such, journalists in the Philippines struggle to report the truth independently. Death threats, blatant physical harassment, and online coordinated troll attacks make objective, critical news analysis difficult. Over the past few decades, journalists have been disappeared and murdered for speaking out against government policy or corruption – 197

journalists have been killed in the Philippines since 1986.<sup>43</sup> As of 2022, the country ranks 147<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries for press freedom and is one of the “world’s deadliest countries for journalists.” Even in the most blatant attacks against journalists, suspects remain at large. In the case of the 2009 Maguindanao Massacre, 58 people, 32 of them journalists, were killed on their way to cover the filing of candidacy of an opposition candidate. As of 2022, 28 people were convicted of these murders. However, “dozens of suspects have yet to be arrested.”<sup>44</sup>

The Duterte administration presided over a continued decline in press freedom in the Philippines.<sup>45</sup> Duterte openly expressed disdain for the press, even arguing that “just because you are a journalist does not exempt you from assassination” and that killing “corrupt” journalists is justified.<sup>46</sup> His indifference to the safety of journalists and his calls for violence came with bloody consequences. Under his tenure, at least 22 journalists were killed.<sup>47</sup> Duterte worked to silence opposition through intimidation and attacks on media outlets. He systematically cracked down on news outlets and journalists that were critical of his policies. ABS-CBN, a prominent Philippine broadcaster, caught Duterte’s ire. He accused the news organization of bias against him in the 2016 election and “warned that he would not allow the renewal of its franchise.”<sup>48</sup> ABS-CBN was forced to shut down its free TV and radio channels after its franchise expired in May 2020. Rappler and its founder and CEO, Maria Ressa, were also targeted by the Duterte administration for criticizing his war on drugs. Ressa was accused of fraud, tax evasion, and links to the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). After years of threats and accusations from the government, Ressa was convicted of cyber libel by a court in Manila.<sup>49</sup>

Social media is often used to spread disinformation and disparage journalists. Journalists are often branded as rebels or communist sympathizers, known as ‘red-tagging,’ a decades-old practice originating from government counter-insurgency efforts against Philippine communist groups, including the New People’s Army (NPA). Countless activists, journalists, and politicians were accused of supporting the NPA. Duterte’s National Task Force on Ending Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) has been criticized as state-sponsored red-tagging.<sup>50</sup> In addition, Duterte’s 2021 Anti-Terrorism Law “allows for terrorism suspects to be

<sup>40</sup> “Press Release - Pangilinan: Senate Body OKs Report Recommending That Socmed Platforms Be Held Accountable for Disinformation.” 2022. Legacy.senate.gov.ph. June 22, 2022.

[https://legacy.senate.gov.ph/press\\_release/2022/0602\\_pangilinan1.asp](https://legacy.senate.gov.ph/press_release/2022/0602_pangilinan1.asp).

<sup>41</sup> CNN Philippines Staff. 2022. “Marcos to Sign SIM Registration Act on Oct. 10.” CNN Philippines. October 9, 2022.

<https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2022/10/9/Marcos-to-sign-SIM-Registration-Act-on-Oct.-10.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Cabanban, Seth. 2022. “Risa on Fake News: Gov’t Must Hold Social Media Networks Accountable.” Manila Bulletin. October 13, 2022.

<https://mb.com.ph/2022/10/13/risa-on-fake-news-govt-must-hold-social-media-networks-accountable/>.

<sup>43</sup> Bolledo, Jairo. 2022. “IN NUMBERS: Filipino Journalists Killed since 1986.” Rappler. July 23, 2022. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/numbers-filipino-journalists-killed-since-1986/>.

<sup>44</sup> Peña, Kurt Dela. 2022. “Maguindanao Massacre: The Wound of PH Impunity That Will Never Heal.” INQUIRER.net. November 22, 2022. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1696507/maguindanao-massacre-the-wound-of-ph-impunity-that-will-never-heal>.

<sup>45</sup> Reporters Without Borders. 2022. “Philippines | RSF.” Rsf.org. 2022. <https://rsf.org/en/country/philippines>.

<sup>46</sup> Sawatzky, Robert. 2016. “Duterte Says Killing of Corrupt Philippines Journalists Justified.” CNN. June 1, 2016.

<https://www.cnn.com/2016/05/31/asia/philippines-duterte-journalists>.

<sup>47</sup> Cole, Brendan. 2021. “22 Journalists Killed in Philippines since Rodrigo Duterte Became President.” Newsweek. December 9, 2021.

<https://www.newsweek.com/rodrigo-duterte-philippines-journalist-killed-jesus-malabanan-1657778>.

<sup>48</sup> Gutierrez, Jason. 2020. “Philippine Congress Officially Shuts down Leading Broadcaster.” *The New York Times*, July 10, 2020, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/10/world/asia/philippines-congress-media-duterte-abs-cbn.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Gutierrez, Jason, and Alexandra Stevenson. 2020. “Maria Ressa, Crusading Journalist, Is Convicted in Philippines Libel Case.” *The New York Times*, June 14, 2020, sec. Business. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/14/business/maria-ressa-verdict-philippines-rappler.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Human Rights Watch. 2022. “Philippines: End Deadly ‘Red-Tagging’ of Activists.” Human Rights Watch. January 17, 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/17/philippines-end-deadly-red-tagging-activists>.



detained without a warrant... and removes a requirement that the police present suspects before a judge to assess whether they have been subjected to physical or mental torture," expanding upon government powers to arrest anyone by accusing them of terrorist activities.<sup>51</sup> This includes members of the press, social media activists, and other anti-government critics. To further complicate matters, Filipinos are already distrustful of the press. A Reuters Institute survey found that 37% of Filipinos believed they could "trust the news most of the time," while only 26% believed the media was free from "undue political influence."<sup>52</sup>

As such, there are several barriers to the success of independent journalism in the Philippines: public distrust of the press, government suppression of criticism, red-tagging, and the weak rule of law. The Philippine Plan of Actions on the Safety of Journalists was launched in late 2019 after years of consultation with stakeholders to address the dangers to independent journalism in the Philippines.<sup>53</sup> Developed under the Safeguarding Press Freedom in the Philippines Project and supported by the European Union and Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the report outlined five crucial areas: integrity and professionalism, conducive working conditions, safety and protection mechanisms, the criminal justice system, and public information, journalism education, and research.<sup>54</sup> Without government intervention, there can be no improvement to the state of independent journalism in the Philippines. Marcos Jr. promised to be a better advocate for the rights of journalists. He is more conscious of his image on the world stage and has positioned himself away from Duterte-style demagoguery. After the shooting of Percy Lapid, a well-known radio broadcaster, Marcos Jr. committed to protecting and upholding journalist rights.<sup>55</sup> His statements, however, are contrasted with his disregard for the press. Throughout his campaign, Marcos pushed away independent journalists, snubbed all the debates, and only attended media events his supporters ran.<sup>56</sup> Like Duterte, he employs armies of social media trolls and supporters to amplify pro-government narratives and pro-Marcos disinformation.

Weak rule of law combined with unwilling government institutions does little to address the challenges faced by independent journalism. As such, civil society and volunteer agencies are crucial to advancing independent journalism and factual reporting in the

Philippines. Organizations such as Rappler, VeraFiles, and FactRakers work on fact-checking news sources and offer fact-checking resources for invested citizens. One stakeholder suggested "fighting fire with fire" and using the same platforms used by disinformation campaigns to promote fact-checking and substantiated facts.<sup>57</sup> For example, former Vice President Leni Robredo's BuildPilipinas initiative aims to create a resource center "for truth-telling and nation-building." Building off the precedent set by her campaign and her signature Angat Buhay program, BuildPilipinas focused on creating a spirit of volunteerism to combat disinformation.<sup>58</sup>

### Conclusion: U.S.-Philippine collaboration?

Both the United States and the Philippines are at risk of social media disinformation eroding faith in institutions and threatening the health of their respective democracies. On January 6, 2021, insurrectionists stormed the U.S. Capitol to overturn the results of the 2020 election. Many of these insurrectionists were radicalized by online, pro-Trump disinformation.<sup>59</sup> The United States has increasingly become a deeply polarized society, affecting social cohesion and threatening the health of its democratic institutions. The United States and the Philippines are not alone in their fight against disinformation. Developing and developed countries alike suffer from rampant disinformation. As such, the power of disinformation must be constrained.

How can the United States and the Philippines collaborate to combat disinformation? The United States is already making an impact by partnering with the Philippines in bolstering its education system and improving youth literacy. As of 2023, the United States fields several education projects in the Philippines through USAID, including programs for advancing basic education, improving education governance effectiveness, creating inclusive education for children with blind and deaf children, as well as improving reading outcomes.<sup>60</sup> The United States and the Philippines enjoy robust civil society partnerships allowing information sharing. By sharing knowledge, resources, and best practices, the United States and the Philippines can strengthen their societies and contribute to the global fight against disinformation. Ultimately, the success of this collaboration will depend on the commitment and leadership of policymakers, civil society, and citizens in both countries.

<sup>51</sup> Gutierrez, Jason. 2020a. "Duterte Signs Antiterrorism Bill in Philippines despite Widespread Criticism." *The New York Times*, July 3, 2020, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/03/world/asia/duterte-antiterrorism-law-philippines.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Newman, Nic, Richard Fletcher, Craig Robertson, Kirsten Eddy, and Rasmus Nielsen. 2022. "Digital News Report 2022." 2022. [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital\\_News-Report\\_2022.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News-Report_2022.pdf).

<sup>53</sup> UNESCO. 2019. "The Philippines Launches National Plan on Action on Safety of Journalists | UNESCO." [www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org). November 29, 2019. [https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/philippines-launches-national-plan-action-safety-journalists?TSPD\\_101\\_R0=080713870fab200051b2695a1d2fd10073628779936f001ee19bdc61f04b36c8cb96df9a5defa79108f9d19623143000046467332b367932544be69b6fce6089731c4099145cac428206f3498ae3da74fac70a4b32846916def8e743ea85fa02](https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/philippines-launches-national-plan-action-safety-journalists?TSPD_101_R0=080713870fab200051b2695a1d2fd10073628779936f001ee19bdc61f04b36c8cb96df9a5defa79108f9d19623143000046467332b367932544be69b6fce6089731c4099145cac428206f3498ae3da74fac70a4b32846916def8e743ea85fa02).

<sup>54</sup> Asian Institute of Journalism and Communication and International Media Support. 2019. "Philippine Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists." <https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/PPASJ-final-pdf.pdf>.

<sup>55</sup> Valente, Catherine S. 2022. "Marcos Vows Protection of Media under His Govt." *The Manila Times*. October 5, 2022.

<https://www.manilatimes.net/2022/10/05/news/marcos-vows-protection-of-media-under-his-govt/1861059>.

<sup>56</sup> Arao, Danilo. 2022. "Press Freedom under Bongbong Is Fake News." East Asia Forum. October 10, 2022.

<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/10/10/press-freedom-under-bongbong-is-fake-news/>.

<sup>57</sup> Stakeholder 1. 2022. Interview Questions: Disinformation in the Philippines Interview by Japhet Quitzon.

<sup>58</sup> Build Pilipinas. n.d. "BUILD Pilipinas." [www.buildpilipinas.com](http://www.buildpilipinas.com). Accessed December 3, 2022. <https://www.buildpilipinas.com/#about>.

<sup>59</sup> Silverman, Craig, Craig Timberg, Jeff Kao, and Jeremy Merrill. 2022. "Facebook Hosted Surge of Misinformation and Insurrection Threats in Months Leading up to Jan. 6 Attack, Records Show." ProPublica. January 4, 2022. <https://www.propublica.org/article/facebook-hosted-surge-of-misinformation-and-insurrection-threats-in-months-leading-up-to-jan-6-attack-records-show>.

<sup>60</sup> USAID. 2019. "Education | Philippines | U.S. Agency for International Development." [www.usaid.gov](http://www.usaid.gov). August 2, 2019. <https://www.usaid.gov/philippines/education>.

The Philippines cannot act alone in demanding accountability from social networks. As a global challenge, combatting disinformation requires multiple countries to take responsibility for providing solutions for the international information ecosystem. The United States, a global leader in technology and digital services, significantly influences the international information ecosystem. As such, any actions it takes are enormously consequential to international governance. The United States must lead in developing a framework for holding social media companies accountable for profiting from disinformation. There are obvious precedents that the United States could follow, namely the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Digital Services Act (DSA).

The GDPR was established by the European Union in 2016 to safeguard the privacy of EU citizens. It regulates how organizations operating in the EU handle, process, store, and share users' data.<sup>61</sup> The more personal data a social network collects, the better it can curate content for the user. This led to many users trapping themselves within an ideological bubble of disinformation.<sup>62</sup> The GDPR gives users the ability to have better control over their data, preventing social media networks from using their profiles to amplify disinformation. The Digital Services Act, which works to regulate digital service provider obligations in connecting consumers to goods, services, and content, also contains provisions against disinformation.<sup>63</sup> It requires digital service providers to combat disinformation by establishing rules on removing misleading content, increasing political advertising transparency, and promulgating tools meant to detect and neutralize the spread of disinformation.<sup>64</sup> EU member states are legally bound to the GDPR and the DSA; meanwhile, non-EU countries are left to create their own mechanisms.

The United States and its allies such as the Philippines could integrate an opt-in alternative to the DSA and GDPR into a non-traditional trade agreement, like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). In doing so, the Philippines and the United States could become stakeholders in a network of like-minded partners focused on curbing the power of social media companies. This could help to promote global cooperation and address the growing problem of disinformation and harmful content online. Together, countries could demand accountability from social media companies and persuade them to better regulate their services. This vision, however, may not prove realistic, as the United States is typically hesitant to regulate technology companies. In demanding accountability from social media, however, the United States and the Philippines can help develop healthier, more robust, and less polarized democratic societies. As social media's influence over community discourse continues to grow, having vigilant, well-educated citizens through strong education systems, strong commitments to freedom of speech and expression, and constrained social media

companies are crucial foundations in the fight against disinformation.

## **The United States, a global leader in technology and digital services, significantly influences the international information ecosystem**

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<sup>61</sup> Wolford, Ben. 2018. "What Is GDPR, the EU's New Data Protection Law?" GDPR.eu. European Union. 2018. <https://gdpr.eu/what-is-gdpr/>.

<sup>62</sup> Morrison, Sara. 2021. "Think You Have Nothing to Hide? Why You Should Care about Data Privacy Anyway." Vox. January 28, 2021. <https://www.vox.com/recode/22250897/facebook-data-privacy-collection-algorithms-extremism>.

<sup>63</sup> "Press Corner." 2022. European Commission - European Commission. November 14, 2022.

[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA\\_20\\_2348](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_20_2348).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

# 5

## **Disinformation in Democratic Elections: U.S. and Philippine Alliance Opportunity**

*Brynn M. Park (Koeppen)*

### *Abstract*

The United States and the Philippines must forge the first bilateral anti-disinformation program to improve election integrity and apply best practices to other struggling democratic nations. The United States and the Philippines are ideal partners for studying the viability of anti-disinformation policies because of their mutual principles of multiculturalism and the varied malign influence campaigns they face from foreign and domestic actors. Addressing disinformation would showcase commitment to a strategic partnership that includes unconventional national security issues.

Three proposed options provide creative frameworks for leveraging such an alliance based on a mutual national security threat and equal participation levels by the two nations. First, the U.S. Department of State should forge its inaugural anti-disinformation partnership with a foreign country – the Philippines. The program would evolve into a repeatable model within the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Second, the U.S. and Philippine governments and non-government organizations (NGOs) should initiate a matching program with equivalent counterparts for media, social media, and public affairs organizations in their respective country. Third, it is prudent to establish a foundational and universal framework to monitor disinformation threat levels, whether positive or negative, within a democratic election cycle to better focus country resources. The United States and the Philippines both need improvement to mitigate election disinformation, making them ideal models to establish a universal standard in the degree that falsehoods permeate democratic election outcomes.

## Introduction

Disinformation campaigns impacted presidential election outcomes and countless Congressional and local votes in the Philippines and the United States in the past seven years. It is helpful to compare the United States and the Philippines because the two nations share socio-cultural foundations, are comprised of similar public institutions, and disinformation is flooding all aspects of their societies. This paper will address the success of state and non-state disinformation actors influencing U.S. and Philippine elections and the effectiveness of anti-disinformation policies. First, a note on terminology: "Disinformation" intentionally supports false information, whereas "misinformation" spreads incorrect information inadvertently. Both *mis* and disinformation amplify distorted facts, but the latter is the act of deliberately spreading inaccuracies. Three proposed programs would most effectively combat the deliberate spreading of false information in democratic elections through the U.S.-Philippine alliance.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and presidential election mis and disinformation prompted *The Economist's* Democratic Index to rank both the United States and the Philippines as "flawed democracies."<sup>1</sup> U.S. and Philippine presidential election campaigns affected by disinformation include President Donald J. Trump, President Rodrigo Duterte, President Joseph R. Biden, and President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Romualdez Marcos Jr. from 2016 to 2022.<sup>2</sup> Political disinformation continues to impact general and local election campaigns in both high and low-income democratic countries. The U.S. and Philippine governments should refocus bilateral initiatives toward public institutions and the fourth estate – the media – to mitigate the malign influence of election disinformation in both nations.

The Philippines is the oldest U.S. treaty ally in Asia through the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) and is the largest recipient of U.S. foreign military aid in the U.S. Indo-Pacific region. Since 2015, the Philippines has received over \$463 million in U.S. security assistance.<sup>3,4</sup> Their strategic partnership is primarily comprised of conventional defense programs, such as communist counterinsurgency intervention in the northern Philippines

in the 1940s to 1950s (a model initially replicated by the United States during its intervention in Vietnam) and present-day counterterrorism measures in the southern Philippines.<sup>5, 6</sup> The U.S. and Philippine government mandates, such as their constitutions and bill of rights, are virtually identical as a legacy of U.S. imperialism.

Focusing on mitigating political disinformation campaigns in the Philippines and the United States is well within the two nations' institution and capacity-building relationship. Addressing disinformation would showcase commitment to a strategic partnership that includes unconventional national security issues. Both governments would actively address the "mutual" part of the MDT's Article III, specifically on attacks against "political independence."<sup>7</sup> Both governments would mitigate a national security problem and provide input to solving the problem. The outcomes could be a model for nations within Asia and beyond.

## Why evaluate U.S. and Philippine political disinformation campaigns?

Foreign malign influences exploit and pin multiple identities against each other to affect U.S. and Philippines elections and foreign policy.<sup>8</sup> State-actor disinformation campaigns, especially by Russia and increasingly by the People's Republic of China (PRC), are effective because they focus on the existing political differences in democratic countries. U.S. and Philippine citizens share common values and diversity, creating similar fault lines ripe for disinformation exploitation. More specifically, social media companies micro-identify individuals and exploit an individual's preferences to showcase more polarizing content.<sup>9</sup> Social media technology companies freely curate content that incentivizes citizens (also voters) to stay on a platform longer, view more advertisements, and thus increase the opportunity to perpetuate misinformation from other users.<sup>10</sup>

## Why the U.S.-Philippines Alliance? Why not another ally?

A U.S.-Philippine anti-disinformation program is ideal for discovering universal outcomes. Both countries elected presidential candidates with campaigns that

## U.S. and Philippine citizens share common values and diversity, creating similar fault lines ripe for disinformation exploitation.

<sup>1</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit. "Democracy Index 2021 Download Success - Economist Intelligence Unit," November 21, 2022. p. 12-13. <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2021-download-success/>.

<sup>2</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit, 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> United States Department of State. "U.S. Security Cooperation with the Philippines - United States Department of State," October 7, 2022. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-the-philippines/#:~:text=Since%20FY%202015%2C%20the%20Department,the%20Global%20Peace%20Operations%20Initiative.>

<sup>4</sup> Prashanth, Parameswaran. "US Terror Aid to Philippines Signals Enduring Defense Ties Under Duterte." *The Diplomat*. June 8, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/us-terror-aid-to-philippines-signals-enduring-defense-ties-under-duterte/>.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Ordaniel, Editor. "Issues & Insights Vol. 22, SR1 – Resilient Alliance: Moving the U.S.-Philippines Security Relations Forward - Pacific Forum." *Pacific Forum*, April 1, 2022. p.13 <https://pacforum.org/publication/issues-insights-vol-22-sr1-resilient-alliance-moving-the-u-s-philippines-security-relations-forward.>

<sup>6</sup> Max Boot. *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam*. (New York: Liveright, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> "Avalon Project - Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines; August 30, 1951," n.d. [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/phil001.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/phil001.asp). Access date: February 20, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Samantha Bradshaw, Renee DiResta, Caitlin Vogus, Suzanne Spaulding, and Caitlin Chin. "Stopping the Spread of Online Mis- and Disinformation." September 7, 2022. Virtual panel, 59:33. <https://www.csis.org/events/stopping-spread-online-mis-and-disinformation.>

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Corpus Ong, Ross Tapsell, and Nicole Curato. "Tracking Digital Disinformation in the 2019 Philippine Midterm Election." *New Mandala*. August 2019. <https://www.newmandala.org/disinformation/>.

<sup>10</sup> Kate Jones. "Online Disinformation and Political Discourse: Applying a Human Rights Framework." *The Royal Institute of International Affairs*. November 6, 2019. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/11/online-disinformation-and-political-discourse-applying-human-rights-framework.>

notoriously benefited from domestic disinformation actors. Both countries also experienced foreign influence in election campaigns by two authoritarian governments – the PRC and Russia.

Other Asian nations do not experience the degree of disinformation influence in elections, specifically presidential elections, as the United States and the Philippines do. U.S. and Filipino citizens are uniquely susceptible to similar technology applications and usage levels of social media for news. Filipinos not only have the highest social media usage in the world but the first and second most popular applications in the Philippines – YouTube and Facebook – are U.S.-founded companies.<sup>11</sup>

The Taiwan government developed effective tools, policies, and mechanisms to mitigate systematic disinformation campaigns. Despite a campaign riddled with disinformation from the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen won elections in 2016 and 2020. Taiwan’s methods are threat-specific to the PRC’s malign influence, rendering its anti-disinformation policies not easily repeatable.<sup>12</sup> South Korean election cycles historically experience misinformation and a significant degree of domestic investigative reporting that uncovers political corruption, frequently derailing candidates or ousting representatives. The South Korean government effectively addresses disinformation through transparent government and private sector and fact-checking programs. Overall, South Korea’s chief disinformation culprit is domestic, with little foreign influence seeking to direct election outcomes.<sup>13,14</sup> Japan routinely experiences PRC-backed disinformation influence campaigns, with most stories aiming to undermine U.S.-Japan alliance commitments. PRC campaigns in Japan do not back specific candidates or seek to cast doubt on election integrity in Japan.<sup>15</sup>

The United States and the Philippines are uniquely behind in effectively mitigating disinformation election interference domestically and with foreign actors. Both countries have addressed the topic with successes and failures in the past six years. The two nations would benefit from an alliance on this topic because they experience domestic and foreign actors impacting presidential

elections and possess similar institutional mechanisms to address disinformation.

### Political Contrast

The structure of foreign and non-state actor disinformation campaigns varies between the United States and the Philippines. Dynastic politics dominate all Philippine elections. Relatives, including a spouse, child, or cousin – anyone with a family connection – typically succeed in political positions. Dynastic politics focuses political debates on an individual, weakening political party platforms. In part, national political parties are weak in the Philippines due to name-brand political candidates supported by polarizing and emotionally driven disinformation campaigns.

Effective disinformation that wins U.S. elections seeks to erode trust in government institutions. Both foreign and domestic disinformation amplifiers accuse the U.S. government of not holding fair and open elections to deter citizens from voting and to degrade a core pillar of a functioning democratic society. An estimated 50-60% of the U.S. population vote in presidential elections, compared to 81% of the Philippine population.<sup>16,17</sup> The U.S. media and government continue reassuring voters that President Biden’s win in 2020 was fair within the voting system and the electoral college. However, 70% of Republican Party voters, two years after the election, believe that the 2020 U.S. presidential election was skewed by a fraudulent voting system.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast, in the last six years, Philippines presidential election cycles have not included voters questioning the integrity of election ballot outcomes. That is ironic, as the Philippines historically had issues with voter fraud, specifically during the 2007 mayoral elections and, infamously, President Ferdinand E. Marcos’ 1986 snap election.<sup>19, 20</sup> Domestic and foreign disinformation campaigns have not targeted the validity of the democratic voting system in the Philippines, in contrast to present issues in the United States.

Still, the United States and the Philippines share more similarities than differences regarding the vulnerability of their democratic institutions. In two case studies selected from each country based on election outcomes targeted by state and non-state actors, political

## Both countries have addressed the topic with successes and failures in the past six years.

<sup>11</sup> Simon @ DMI and by Digital Marketing Institute. “Social Media: What Countries Use It Most & What Are They Using?” Digital Marketing Institute, September 1, 2022. <https://digitalmarketinginstitute.com/blog/social-media-what-countries-use-it-most-and-what-are-they-using>.

<sup>12</sup> Casey Corcoran, Crowley, Julie Bo, and Raina Davis. “Dealing with Disinformation: Lessons from Taiwan and Korea.” Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Summer 2019. <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/dealing-disinformation-lessons-taiwan-and-korea>.

<sup>13</sup> Corcoran, Dealing with Disinformation: Lessons from Taiwan and Korea.  
<sup>14</sup> Heidi Tworek and Yoojung Lee. “Lessons from South Korea’s approach to tackling disinformation.” Brookings’ Tech Stream. July 12, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/lessons-from-south-koreas-approach-to-tackling-disinformation/>.

<sup>15</sup> Kyoko Kuwahara. “Fighting disinformation: Japan’s unique situation and the future of Canada Japan cooperation.” Macdonald-Laurier Institute. November 2021. <https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/japan-work-canada-allies-fighting-disinformation/>.

<sup>16</sup> “Number of Registered Voters, Voters Who Actually Voted and Voters’ Turnout.” Republic of the Philippines Commission on Elections. October

17, 2016; Accessed October 31, 2022.

<https://comelec.gov.ph/index.html?r=2016NLE/Statistics/VotersTurnout2016NLE>.

<sup>17</sup> Nishizawa, Lyon. “How Does U.S. Voter Turnout Compare to the Rest of the World’s?” *Council on Foreign Relations*. (August 24 2022). <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-does-us-voter-turnout-compare-rest-worlds>

<sup>18</sup> Jon Greenberg. “Most Republicans Still Falsely Believe Trump’s Stolen Election Claims. Here Are Some Reasons Why.” Poynter, June 15, 2022. <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2022/70-percent-republicans-falsely-believe-stolen-election-trump/>.

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin Crost, Joseph H. Felter, Hani Mansour, and Daniel I. Rees, “Election Fraud and Post-Election Conflict: Evidence from the Philippines.” Institute for the Study of Labor. June 2013. <https://docs.iza.org/dp7469.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Seth Mydans. “Marcos Flees and is Taken To Guam; U.S. Recognizes Aquino as President.” *The New York Times*. February 26, 1986. <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/02/26/world/marcos-flees-and-is-taken-to-guam-us-recognizes-aquino-as-president.html>.

candidates were unwilling and faced no legal obligation to alter falsehoods spread during their campaigns.

### Foreign state actors back winners: Russia and PRC

Russia exploits U.S. grievances through unregulated social media companies. Executing a toolkit seen in Eastern Europe, Russia influenced U.S. voters in the 2016 presidential election by feeding into voter anxieties about multiculturalism and affinity toward anti-establishment platforms.<sup>21</sup> Emotionally charged false content increased viewership, causing algorithms to naturally amplify disinformation.<sup>22</sup> Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google showcased crisis-themed content derived from Russian accounts with the highest number of interactions by end users.<sup>23</sup> Despite no evidence of Russian interference in the last two mid-term congressional elections, in 2018 and 2022, and some degree of Russian interference in the 2020 presidential election, the amplification of planted Russian disinformation ideas by domestic actors and election candidates remains in today's U.S. politics.<sup>24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30</sup> The adversary continues to achieve its objective of corroding trust in U.S. institutions without direct attribution.

Russian disinformation campaigns against foreign audiences are more robust and effective than the PRC's. Most of China's deliberate mass media and propaganda campaigns are aimed at Taiwan and domestic audiences.<sup>31</sup> However, China expanded its domestic and Taiwan toolkits in the last six years to influence Southeast Asian politics. An example of this shift is the narrative, which has been prominent in Southeast Asian media, is that authoritarian governments, like the PRC, mitigated the

COVID-19 pandemic better than democratic societies.<sup>32,33,34,35</sup>

China has demonstrated its willingness to funnel resources toward disinformation campaigns, particularly in the Philippines, in two ways. First, the PRC has sought out individuals already in office to influence foreign policies that show deference to China. During his six-year term, China amplified President Duterte's policies that supported its objectives and anti-American rhetoric. The PRC migrated into election disinformation when it created Facebook accounts supportive of Sara Duterte, the former president's daughter, during her vice presidential run in 2022.<sup>36</sup>

Second, China has conducted a five-year pro-PRC social content ecosystem targeting Filipino, Taiwanese, Indonesian, and American consumers. "Operation Naval Gazing," coined by social media research company Graphika, was small in scale, with content that did not exceed 100,000 followers across 155 Facebook pages.<sup>37,38</sup> However, the campaign did consist of four languages, including Tagalog. Content themes began with the PRC's Taiwan policy, expanded into maritime territorial claims, and ended with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Naval achievements.<sup>39,40</sup> The Philippines is a test bed for broader PRC influence in Asia as PRC malign campaigns will likely increase in scope in the next decade.<sup>41</sup>

Even though Filipino citizens are exposed to large amounts of pro-China media content, they have remained skeptical.<sup>42</sup> Freedom House ranks the Philippines with a high "local resilience and response" to PRC propaganda, overcoming an equally high rating of PRC "media influence efforts" within the country.<sup>43</sup> The Philippines'

<sup>21</sup> Nina Jankowicz. "Avoiding the Band-aid Effect in Institutional Responses to Disinformation and Hybrid Threats." German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2019. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21230>.

<sup>22</sup> Joyce Hakmeh, Emily Taylor, Allison Peters, and Sophia Ignatidou. "The COVID-19 pandemic and trends in technology." The Royal Institute of International Affairs. February 16, 2021. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/02/covid-19-pandemic-and-trends-technology/04-infodemic-and-covid-19-disinformation>.

<sup>23</sup> Young Mie Kim. "New Evidence Shows How Russia's Election Interference Has Gotten More Brazen." Brennan Center for Justice. March 5, 2020. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/new-evidence-shows-how-russias-election-interference-has-gotten-more>.

<sup>24</sup> "Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections." National Intelligence Council. March 10, 2021. p. 1. <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> Lata Nott. "What midterm news stories can tell us about how misinformation has changed in the past two years." Medium. November 17, 2018. <https://medium.com/@lata.nott/what-midterm-news-stories-can-tell-us-about-how-misinformation-has-changed-in-the-past-two-years-752cee9fa348>.

<sup>26</sup> Kayleen Devlin and Jack Goodman. "Boebart to Lake: how election deniers have fared in US midterms." BBC News. November 11, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-63568003>.

<sup>27</sup> Nott, What midterm news stories can tell us about how misinformation has changed in the past two years.

<sup>28</sup> Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections, p.1.

<sup>29</sup> Lisa Singh. "Misinformation lost in the 2022 midterms: What was different?" Georgetown University McCourt School of Public Policy. December 5, 2022. <https://mccourt.georgetown.edu/news/misinformation-2022-midterms/>.

<sup>30</sup> James M. Lindsay. "The 2020 Election by the Numbers." Council on Foreign Relations. December 15, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/2020-election-numbers>.

<sup>31</sup> Kevin Rudd. "The World According to Xi Jinping: What China's Ideologue in Chief Really Believes." Foreign Affairs, February 24, 2023.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/world-according-xi-jinping-china-ideologue-kevin-rudd>.

<sup>32</sup> Audrye Wong. "COVID-19 and China's information diplomacy in Southeast Asia." Brookings. September 3, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/09/03/covid-19-and-chinas-information-diplomacy-in-southeast-asia/>.

<sup>33</sup> David Bandurski. "China and Russia are joining forces to spread disinformation." March 11, 2022. Brookings' TechStream. <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/china-and-russia-are-joining-forces-to-spread-disinformation/>.

<sup>34</sup> Hakmeh, Taylor, Peters, and Ignatidou, The COVID-19 pandemic and trends in technology.

<sup>35</sup> Guy Mentel, Juan Pablo Cardenal, Mariana Palau, Orysia Lutsevych, and Christopher Sabatini. "The fake news pandemic in Latin America," Chatham House, November 17, 2021, Highlights clip, 3:16, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/members-event/fake-news-pandemic-latin-america>.

<sup>36</sup> Sebastian Strangio. "Facebook Shuts Down Fake China-Based Accounts Backing Duterte." The Diplomat. September 23, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/facebook-shuts-down-fake-china-based-accounts-backing-duterte/>.

<sup>37</sup> Gregory Winger. "China's Disinformation Campaign in the Philippines." The Diplomat. October 6, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/chinas-disinformation-campaign-in-the-philippines/>.

<sup>38</sup> Ben Nimmo, Shawn Eib, C., and Léa Ronzaud. "Operation Naval Gazing." Graphika Report. September 22, 2020. p. 2. <https://graphika.com/reports/operation-naval-gazing>.

<sup>39</sup> Nimmo, Eib and Ronzaud, Operation Naval Gazing, p. 16-23.

<sup>40</sup> Dexter Roberts. "China's Disinformation Strategy: Its Dimensions and Future." Atlantic Council, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep30746>.

<sup>41</sup> Nimmo, Eib and Ronzaud, Operation Naval Gazing, p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> BC Han and Camille Elemia. "Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022: Philippines." Freedom House. Date Accessed November 5, 2022. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/philippines/beijings-global-media-influence/2022>.

<sup>43</sup> Han and Elemia, Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022.

ability to detect PRC-affiliated disinformation is due to strong independent media foundations, a fragmented media outlet sector, and growing consciousness within civil society of the PRC's malign influence.<sup>44</sup>

### **Politicians are not resisting campaign disinformation**

The Philippines' inexpensive digital labor market serves as a third-party marketing provider for dynastic political candidates.<sup>45</sup> Media workers with professional backgrounds in advertising freely contribute to election media cycles for extra money.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, technology companies offer free access to certain social mobile phone applications. Facebook is the most popular, along with Facebook-owned WhatsApp messenger, as part of a household's telecommunications bundle.<sup>47</sup> , <sup>48</sup> Disinformation spreads even more rapidly inside echo chambers in emerging markets because everyone within a self-selected group is on the same free mobile phone applications.

President Marcos Jr. faced accusations of benefiting from independent disinformation actors who live-streamed falsehoods during his 2022 election campaign. The unregulated Philippine social media ecosystem makes prosecuting candidates benefiting from false content impossible. Overwhelmingly positive disinformation contributed to Marcos' online voter support and ultimate presidential win. In contrast, presidential candidate Leni Robredo, vice president during the Duterte administration, received damaging disinformation about her gender, family, and governance.<sup>49,50</sup> Robredo spoke at a CNN Philippines debate about the discrepancy saying, "fake news and disinformation has resulted in the potential return of a politics of corruption and plunder."<sup>51</sup> Individuals in government and online suggested that Robredo sought to infringe upon the right to freedom of

expression.<sup>52</sup> Robredo lost the election by more than 15 million to Marcos Jr.'s 31 million votes.<sup>53</sup>

Disinformation also continues to impact U.S. voting in national, state, and local elections, extending down to local school boards.<sup>54</sup> , <sup>55</sup> Since the 2016 presidential election, social media companies, mainly Facebook and Twitter, now quickly take down state and non-state actors mis and disinformation in mid-term and presidential elections.<sup>56</sup> However, technology companies self-regulating for public relations purposes is not a long-term solution to solving disinformation in elections.

The 1996 "Communication Decency Act" is the framework that guides how U.S. Congress regulates "communications services." Social media did not exist when the bill passed.<sup>57</sup> Even if Congress expanded Section 230 to include regulating decency on social media, how and by whom would content be moderated? What bipartisan entity can screen content in real-time?<sup>58</sup> U.S. freedom of speech watchdogs likely would resist any attempt by any elected officials to respond to disinformation in elections. U.S. politicians have no natural incentive to mitigate positive disinformation support or negative information about opponents.<sup>59</sup>

### **Anti-disinformation case studies for consideration**

Technology companies, political parties, and individuals in power as a result of positive disinformation lack a natural incentive to change the current election environment. However, given moral and ethical considerations, government leaders and citizens must seek to preserve voter integrity in democratic societies. U.S. and Philippine case studies highlight what works and what does not in practice when combating disinformation.

<sup>44</sup> Han and Elemia, Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Jonathan Corpus Ong, Jacob Wallis, Ariel Bogle, Albert Zhang, Hillary Mansour, Tim Niven,

Elena Yi-Ching Ho, Jason Liu, and Ross Tapsell. "Influence for Hire: The Asia-Pacific's Online Shadow Economy." Australian Strategic Policy Institute, August 10, 2021. <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/influence-hire>.

<sup>46</sup> Ong, Wallis, Bogle, Zhang, Mansour, Niven, Yi-Ching Ho, Liu, and Tapsell, Influence for Hire: The Asia-Pacific's Online Shadow Economy, p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, and Adam Moe Fejerskov. "Political Technologies Threaten Developing Countries: Disinformation Goes South." Danish Institute for International Studies, 2019. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21359>.

<sup>48</sup> Winger, China's Disinformation Campaign in the Philippines, p.1.

<sup>49</sup> "Disinformation in 2019 elections repeating in 2022, says independent fact-checker." Senate of the Philippines: 19<sup>th</sup> Congress. February 2, 2022. [https://legacy.senate.gov.ph/press\\_release/2022/0202\\_pangilinan1.asp](https://legacy.senate.gov.ph/press_release/2022/0202_pangilinan1.asp).

<sup>50</sup> Julie McCarthy. "Fake sexual material targets the only woman running for president in the Philippines." National Public Radio (NPR). April 17, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/16/1093189740/philippines-presidential-race-leni-robredo>.

<sup>51</sup> Llanesca Panti. "Leni: Fake news-fueled threat of corrupt politics spurred presidential run." GMA News. February 27, 2022.

<https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/823312/leni-fake-news-fueled-threat-of-corrupt-politics-spurred-presidential-run/story/>.

<sup>52</sup> Office of the Vice President. "Statement of Vice President Leni Robredo: On Disinformation in Social Media." Atty. Leni Robredo Facebook Page. March 21, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/VPLeniRobredoPH/photos/a-statement-of-vp-leni-robredo-on-disinformation-in-social-mediathis-is-to->

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<sup>53</sup> Carmela Fonbuena and Martha Teodoro. "Marcos doubled, tripled or more his 2016 vote in many provinces." Philippines Center for Investigative Journalism. May 11, 2022. <https://pcij.org/article/8522/how-regions-voted-marcos-triple-quadruple-votes>.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Barbaro, Jessica Cheung, Eric Krupke, Michael Simon Johnson, Lisa Tobin, Dan Powell, Marion Lozano, and Chris Wood. "The School Board Wars, Part 1." The New York Times, November 16, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/16/podcasts/the-daily/school-boards-mask-mandates-crt-bucks-county.html>.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Barbaro, Eric Krupke, Jessica Cheung, Lisa Tobin, Corey Schreppel, and Chris Wood. "The School Board Wars, Part 2." The New York Times, November 17, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/17/podcasts/the-daily/school-board-bucks-county.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Devlin and Goodman, Boebart to Lake: how election deniers have fared in US midterms.

<sup>57</sup> Robert Chesney, and Danielle K. Citron, "Disinformation on Steroids: The Threat of Deep Fakes." Council on Foreign Relations, 2018. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29943>.

<sup>58</sup> Jessica Cecil. "Disinformation is a high-stake game threatening freedom." Interview by Dr.

Leslie Vinjamuri. Chatham House, July 12, 2022.

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/07/disinformation-high-stake-game-threatening-freedom>.

<sup>59</sup>Cecil, Disinformation is a high-stake game threatening freedom.

### **Anti-disinformation legislation leads to presidential overreach**

In March 2020, the Philippine Senate passed the *Bayanihan to Heal as One Act*, a COVID-19 emergency response plan. The Act gave the national government specific prosecution authority toward individuals that spread “chaos and doubt” regarding the public health crisis.<sup>60</sup> Former President Duterte cited the law to discredit activists covering the COVID-19 crisis. For example, police interrogated and sent one film and literary artist to jail after they tweeted about a rise in COVID cases in the Zapatera region of Cebu.<sup>61</sup> Police released the individual after one day, and no charges were filed.<sup>62</sup> The *Bayanihan to Heal as One Act* is an example of why a top-down approach to disinformation leads to an opportunity for abuse of power by policymakers.

### **First U.S. inter-agency anti-disinformation initiative fails**

The Biden administration established the Disinformation Governance Board (DGB) within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) with a mission to address “disinformation spread by foreign states such as Russia, China, and Iran, or other adversaries such as transnational criminal organizations and human smuggling organizations,” according to a May 2022 DHS public release.<sup>63</sup> The backlash from government officials of both political parties and a robust online complaint campaign by private citizens caused the DGB to disassemble within three weeks of opening.<sup>64</sup> DGB’s opaque mission and lack of defined success metrics contributed to its demise. Ultimately the board failed to articulate what type of disinformation would be addressed, how mis and disinformation could be categorized, and what multimedia content meets the threshold for government intervention.

### **Impacts of U.S. and Philippines anti-disinformation legislation**

The U.S. Senate passed the “Countering Foreign Propaganda and Disinformation Act” in 2016, which supported funding for the U.S. Department of State’s

Global Engagement Center (GEC). The GEC is “a data-driven Mission Center leading U.S. interagency efforts to proactively address foreign adversaries’ attempts to use disinformation and propaganda to undermine U.S. interests,” according to its website.<sup>65,66</sup> The amended 2021 bill includes an additional \$150 million for GEC, on top of GEC’s original endowment drawn from U.S. Department of Defense funds of \$120 million for the first two years.<sup>67</sup> The U.S. House of Representatives recently introduced the “Educating Against Misinformation and Disinformation Act” in March; it remains unclear if the bill will pass in the Senate and how public schools will implement the directive.<sup>68</sup>

Attempts in 2018 and 2022 by Philippine senators to curb election disinformation failed to gain support.<sup>69,70</sup> Specifically, media outlets such as *Rappler*, a Manila-based online news site founded by Nobel Peace Prize Winner Maria Ressa, did not support the “Act Prohibiting the Publication and Proliferation of False Content on the Philippine Internet, Providing Measures to Counteract its Effects and Prescribing Penalties” in 2019 because of its vague language that the Philippine Department of Justice could misuse.<sup>71</sup> The bill failed within the Senate, and other attempts to pass disinformation bills regularly fail.

### **Effective response to disinformation related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine**

In the months leading up to Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the United States conducted an extensive counter-information campaign, publicizing indisputable facts that Russia deployed troops to the Ukrainian border. After the initial invasion, the United States continued its anti-disinformation campaign by warning the public of Russian “false flag” operations that cited Ukraine as the aggressor.<sup>72</sup> The U.S. government and its allies “pre-bunked” Russian lies in real-time and gained a strong base of allied support for Ukraine.<sup>73,74</sup> The success of the campaign should shape future anti-disinformation efforts against foreign actors.

<sup>60</sup> Republic of the Philippines, Congress of the Philippines, Metro Manila, Eighteenth Congress, Special Session. *Bayanihan To Heal As One Act*. Republic Act No. 11469. Section 6, f. March 23, 2020. <https://legacy.senate.gov.ph/Bayanihan-to-Heal-as-One-Act-RA-11469.pdf>.

<sup>61</sup> Joaquin, Jeremiah Joven B and Biana, Hazel T. “Philippine crimes of dissent: Free speech in the time of COVID-19.” *Crime Media Culture*, 17 no. 1 (March 1, 2021): 37–41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659020946181>.

<sup>62</sup> “Interview with artist Bambi Beltran from the Philippines.” *FreeMuse Defending Artistic Freedom*. September 15, 2020. <https://freemuse.org/news/interview-with-artist-bambi-beltran-from-the-philippines/>.

<sup>63</sup> “Fact Sheet: DHS Internal Working Group Protects Free Speech Other Fundamental Rights When Addressing Disinformation That Threatens the Security of the United States | Homeland Security,” May 2, 2022. <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2022/05/02/fact-sheet-dhs-internal-working-group-protects-free-speech-other-fundamental-rights>.

<sup>64</sup> Shannon Bond. “She joined DHS to fight disinformation. She says she was halted by... disinformation.” *NPR.org*. May 21, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/21/1100438703/dhs-disinformation-board-nina-jankowicz>.

<sup>65</sup> “Portman, Murphy Amendment to Fight Global Propaganda and Disinformation Passes Foreign Relations Committee, Heads to the Senate Floor.” *Rob Portman, United States Senator for Ohio.gov*. April 21, 2021. <https://www.portman.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/portman-murphy-amendment-fight-global-propaganda-and-disinformation-passes>.

<sup>66</sup> United States Department of State. “Global Engagement Center - United States Department of State,” April 24, 2023.

<https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-public-diplomacy-and-public-affairs/global-engagement-center/>.

<sup>67</sup> Portman, Murphy Amendment to Fight Global Propaganda and Disinformation Passes Foreign Relations.

<sup>68</sup> “All Information (Except Text) for H.R.6971 - Educating Against Misinformation and Disinformation Act.” *Congressional.gov*. March 9, 2022. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/6971/all-info>.

<sup>69</sup> Camille Elemia. “In the Philippines, a Flourishing Ecosystem for Political Lies.” May 6, 2022. *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/06/business/philippines-election-disinformation.html>.

<sup>70</sup> “Sotto files anti-fake news bill.” *Senate of the Philippines*, 19<sup>th</sup> Congress. July 14, 2019.

[https://legacy.senate.gov.ph/press\\_release/2019/0714\\_prib1.asp](https://legacy.senate.gov.ph/press_release/2019/0714_prib1.asp).

<sup>71</sup> Lian Buan. “Human Rights Watch slams Sotto’s fake news bill.” *Rappler*. July 26, 2019. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/236357-human-rights-watch-calls-for-opposition-sotto-fake-news-bill/>.

<sup>72</sup> Alana Wise. “U.S. says Russia is planning a staged attack in Ukraine to justify an invasion.” *National Public Radio (NPR)*. February 3, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/03/1078045214/u-s-says-russia-is-planning-a-staged-attack-in-ukraine-to-justify-an-invasion>.

<sup>73</sup> Adam Kowalski. “Disinformation fight goes beyond Ukraine and its allies.” *Chatham House*. June 3, 2022. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/06/disinformation-fight-goes-beyond-ukraine-and-its-allies>.

<sup>74</sup> Cecil, *Disinformation is a high-stake game threatening freedom*.



## Anti-disinformation proposals for U.S. and Philippines alliance

There are three areas where the United States and the Philippines could collaborate to preserve democratic elections. Combatting disinformation comes with a high risk of failure and can only be mitigated, not eliminated. The proposed options seek to provide creative frameworks for leveraging the alliance.

### *Bilateral response to foreign disinformation*

First, the U.S. Department of State's Global Engagement Center (GEC) should expand its anti-disinformation mission to forge the first direct partnership with an ally – the Philippines. Focusing on foreign disinformation actors as an avenue for democratic capacity building would be timely and impactful for GEC's mission. The GEC should be the foundational partner between the two countries and include entities that encourage reporters and content creators to conduct responsible journalism and combat disinformation. Involving other forums and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as East-West Center's Asia Pacific Journalism

Fellowships (APJF), the Global Forum for Democracy, and the Asia Network for Free Elections is essential.<sup>75, 76, 77</sup> Partners representing Philippine interests should include *Kapisanan ng mga Brodkaster ng Pilipinas* (KBP), a nonprofit organization focused on providing guidelines/ethical standards for broadcast journalists, and the Philippines Press Institute.<sup>78,79</sup>

The U.S. GEC is one way for the United States and the Philippines to modernize their relationship rooted in the executive branches and military aid to an expansive relationship of mutual gain and exchange.<sup>80</sup> For example, one project could be a bilateral comic contest on the topic of disinformation. Humor and satire are part of Filipino and U.S. cultures; a contest would effectively impact a wide audience across key media platforms.<sup>81</sup> Once the Philippines and the United States forge this partnership, observer status should be extended to other democratic countries in the region. Taiwan, Japan, Indonesia, Australia, and Singapore are all natural candidates to partake in a forum led by the Philippines and the United States.

### **Focusing on foreign disinformation actors as an avenue for democratic capacity building would be timely and impactful for GEC's mission.**

### *Execute U.S.-Philippines journalist matching program*

Second, the U.S. Department of State and nonprofit organizations should develop a program that pairs Filipino media outlets with U.S. counterparts. The popular Filipino outlet *Rappler* could host monthly virtual gatherings at the journalist working level with investigative U.S. outlet *The Daily Beast*. *The New York Times* could pair with *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, and so forth. The partnership forum should include both national and province/state news outlets. For instance, state publications in California, Nevada, Texas, Washington, D.C., and Virginia, would be paired with local news outlets in Cebu, Iloilo, Davao, and Palawan.

The matching program would further develop a deeper understanding of the balance between free speech and voter integrity free from malign influence. U.S. participants could learn from their Philippine counterparts how to combat disinformation in various languages and how to mitigate gender-centric disinformation. The Philippines' high number of female presidents and

presidential candidates produces an effective sample size of how media outlets react to gender-based disinformation.<sup>82</sup> Philippine journalists could learn from their U.S. counterparts about political party-centric campaigns and how

major U.S. publications and technology companies regulate misinformation. Philippine citizens remain favorable toward the United States, with 80% holding a positive view, compared to 55% favorable toward China, according to 2020 and 2021 Pew Research Studies<sup>83,84</sup> Philippine content creators could share how they believe effective skepticism of foreign disinformation entered the average Filipino's social consciousness.

### *Standardize the threat of disinformation*

Third, no communication escalation ladder or universal barometer quantifies the degree of disinformation versus factual media within an election cycle. A bilateral disinformation task force would address issues like which government agency should address which issues, balance interests such as state versus federal entities, and consumer protection versus law enforcement agencies.<sup>85</sup> There is also a need to determine de-escalation

<sup>75</sup> "The Asia Pacific Journalism Fellowships (APJF)." East-West Center. Date Accessed November 6, 2022. <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/professional-development/seminars-journalism/asia-pacific-journalism-fellowships>.

<sup>76</sup> "Global Forum on Democracy and Technology." Brookings. Accessed November 6, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/global-forum-on-democracy-and-technology/>.

<sup>77</sup> "Capacity Building." Asia Network for Free Elections. Accessed November 6, 2022. <https://anfrel.org/what-we-do/capacity-building/>.

<sup>78</sup> "Responsible Broadcasting." Association of Philippine Broadcasters. Accessed October 1, 2022. <https://www.kbp.org.ph/>.

<sup>79</sup> "The National Association of Newspapers." Philippine Press Institute. Accessed October 1, 2022. <https://philpressinstitute.net/>.

<sup>80</sup> Angelica Managahas. "Explaining the Divide: Legislative Positions on the U.S.-Philippine Alliance." *Issues and Insights*. 22, no. 1 (March 2022): p. 9-14. [https://pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Resilient-Alliance-Edited-Volume\\_ver2.pdf](https://pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Resilient-Alliance-Edited-Volume_ver2.pdf).

<sup>81</sup> Jude Blanchette, Scott Livingston, Bonnie S. Glaser, and Scott Kennedy. "Introduction: Disinformation and Democracy." *Protecting Democracy in*

*an Age of Disinformation: Lessons from Taiwan*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28659.4>.

<sup>82</sup> Luciano P. R. Santiago, "The Flowering Pen: Filipino Women Writers and Publishers during the Spanish Period, 1590-1898, A Preliminary Survey." *Philippine Studies* 51, no. 4 (2003): 558-98. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42633672>.

<sup>83</sup> Shannon Greenwood. "U.S. Image Generally Favorable around the World, but Mixed in Some Countries | Pew Research Center." Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, December 10, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/01/08/u-s-image-generally-favorable-around-the-world-but-mixed-in-some-countries/>.

<sup>84</sup> Jacob Poushter, and Caldwell Bishop. "People in the Philippines Still Favor U.S. Over China, but Gap Is Narrowing." Pew Research Center. September 21, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/09/21/people-in-the-philippines-still-favor-u-s-over-china-but-gap-is-narrowing/>.

<sup>85</sup> Alexander Klimburg. "Of Ships and Cyber: Transposing the Incidents at Sea Agreement." Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

metrics regarding a candidate's engagement in disinformation.

Piloting crisis response task forces for elections is an innovative way to strengthen the U.S.-Philippine alliance. For example, if a political candidate engages in disinformation, the task force would independently notify the public about the misinformation before it becomes disinformation. The task force would "name and shame" candidates while providing an opportunity for the candidates to address and thus not amplify disinformation further in their campaigns. The United States and the Philippines are ideal countries for producing a universal spotlight chart, given that audiences are in both the western and eastern hemispheres.

## Conclusion

Addressing disinformation as a bilateral national security issue would allow the United States and the Philippines to expand their partnership to a more equitable and strategic relationship. The United States and the Philippines are ideal partners for anti-disinformation work because of their

mutual principles of multiculturalism and varied malign influence campaigns. Each

country presents ideal case studies within the executive branches, bureaucratic entities, and civil society to lessen the impact of disinformation on elections worldwide. The program would further serve as a replicable model within the Indo-Pacific region. Other Asian nations, such as Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea, are mitigating disinformation successfully, but these nations do not experience the potent combination of both domestic and foreign disinformation campaigns in key elections.

Poorly implemented anti-disinformation programs plague both U.S. and Philippine governments. Specific examples include President Duterte's abuses of power under a COVID-19 relief package and the U.S. government's first anti-disinformation board closing in less than 30 days of its opening. However, the United States and its allies succeeded in the first weeks of Russia's invasion of Ukraine by mitigating Russian disinformation in real time. U.S. and Philippine legislative branches continue to propose bills that could mitigate fake information impacting elections, but a more specific measures are needed.<sup>86</sup>

A U.S.-Philippines partnership should serve as a first step in the efforts of the United States and its allies to present a united response against foreign actors –Russia and PRC– meddling in democratic elections.<sup>87</sup> President Trump won the U.S. presidential election in 2016 in part

because of an extensive Russian disinformation campaign.<sup>88</sup> Disinformation about vaccine efficacy and the credibility of U.S. voting systems continue to impact national elections and everyday life for Americans.<sup>89</sup> President Marcos Jr. won the presidency with the help of decades-long effort by non-state actors focused on viral social media campaigns.<sup>90,91</sup> After successfully influencing President Duterte during his six-year term, the PRC supported Duterte's daughter's vice presidential candidacy in 2022.<sup>92</sup> The PRC sought to influence Filipino viewpoints on the PRC's excessive maritime territorial claims over multiple social media platforms for five years.<sup>93,94</sup>

Given the vast number of options that can be leveraged to mitigate the spread of disinformation, this article offers three recommendations that would improve the U.S.-Philippine alliance and facilitate more resilient elections. First, the U.S. Department of State should forge its first official anti-disinformation partnership with a foreign nation – the Philippines. Second, the U.S. and Philippine governments and NGOs should initiate a matching program specifically for media, social media, and

public affairs organizations with counterparts in their respective country. Third, the two countries should establish a

## Addressing disinformation as a bilateral national security issue would allow the United States and the Philippines to expand their partnership to a more equitable and strategic relationship.

foundational and universal framework to monitor disinformation threat levels, whether positive or negative, within a democratic election cycle to better focus resources within all sectors of democratic countries.

September 28, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/ships-and-cyber-transposing-incidents-sea-agreement>.

<sup>86</sup> Vojtěch Bahenský. "On Perspectives on Disinformation." Peace Research Center Prague, 2019. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep20620>.

<sup>87</sup> Winger, China's Disinformation Campaign in the Philippines.

<sup>88</sup> Jankowicz, Avoiding the Band-aid Effect in Institutional Responses to Disinformation and Hybrid Threats.

<sup>89</sup> Greenberg, Most Republicans Still Falsely Believe Trump's Stolen Election Claims. Here Are Some Reasons Why.

<sup>90</sup> The election of Marcos Jr. in the Philippines is a big win for misinformation.

<sup>91</sup> David Broughton. "A Re-Written History: How Digital Misinformation is Distorting Facts in the Philippines." International Republican Institute (IRI). May 6, 2022. <https://www.iri.org/news/a-re-written-history-how-digital-misinformation-is-distorting-facts-in-the-philippines/>.

<sup>92</sup> Strangio, Facebook Shuts Down Fake China-Based Accounts Backing Duterte.

<sup>93</sup> Nimmo, Eib and Ronzaud, Operation Naval Gazing, p. 16-23.

<sup>94</sup> Roberts, China's Disinformation Strategy: Its Dimensions and Future/.

# 6

## **Assessing political pressure points in Manila's decision-making in a Taiwan contingency**

*Thomas J. Shattuck*

### *Abstract*

This paper analyzes the Philippines' three key considerations in determining its involvement in a Taiwan-related contingency: (1) bilateral relationships with Washington and Beijing; (2) geographic proximity to Taiwan; and (3) Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) living in Taiwan. These three factors demonstrate how vulnerable the Philippines is in the event of a Taiwan blockade or invasion. Manila's Mutual Defense Treaty with Washington could result in its direct involvement. The Philippines' geography could make the country an immediate victim of conflict spillover, and Beijing could view the evacuation of OFWs with suspicion. After analyzing these three factors, the paper concludes with recommendations for Washington in influencing Philippine decision-making and making the Armed Forces of the Philippines a more capable partner force.

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## Introductions

On August 4-7, 2022, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) carried out a series of joint air-naval, live-fire exercises around the island of Taiwan in response to U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei on August 2. The exercises comprised six zones, three around northern Taiwan, one near Taiwan's east coast, and two to Taiwan's south.<sup>1</sup> Some of the zones, which the PLA announced were closed to naval and aerial travel, overlapped with the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of two U.S. security treaty allies: Japan and the Philippines, demonstrating the risks that Tokyo and Manila face in any potential Taiwan-related contingency.

On the surface, both Japan and the Philippines have similarities that link them to a potential Taiwan contingency. Both countries have security treaties with the United States. Both countries have territorial disputes with Beijing (for Japan in the East China Sea and for the Philippines in the South China Sea<sup>2</sup>). Both countries have territories located within 100 miles of Taiwan. However, according to former U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines Thomas C. Hubbard, "that's where the similarities end."<sup>3</sup> The political and economic contexts of the two have resulted in different approaches to the Taiwan question. Much analysis has been conducted on Japan on these topics, but more research is needed on the Philippines.

With the Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. administration taking office in June 2022 and seeking to turn a new leaf in the U.S.-Philippine relationship and the widening cross-strait power asymmetry, it is time to seriously consider the role of the Philippines in a Taiwan contingency. What factors could draw the Philippines into a conflict?

This article identifies three primary considerations for Manila when making political decisions in the event of a Taiwan contingency: (1) its bilateral political, economic, and military relationships with Washington and Beijing; (2) geographic proximity to Taiwan; and (3) Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) in Taiwan. Susannah Patton of the Lowy Institute highlighted the importance of the latter two factors, explaining how a PRC-controlled Taiwan would have disastrous ramifications for Philippine security and how a conflict would result in a refugee and humanitarian disaster.<sup>4</sup>

First, Manila's most important political issue is its relationships with Washington and Beijing. While the United States is the only country with which the Philippines has a Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) with a security guarantee, the PRC is the country's largest

economic partner. In any Taiwan-related scenario, Manila will have to weigh these two relationships. Second, the northernmost Philippine islands are within 100 miles of Taiwan. The Bashi Channel and Luzon Strait are strategic waterways that cut through the Philippines and are necessary to choke off southern Taiwan. No matter Manila's level of involvement in a Taiwan contingency, geography makes the Philippines an important player in a Taiwan conflict. Third, OFWs living in Taiwan would need to be evacuated in an emergency. A Filipino noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO)—conducted independently or with U.S. assistance—would be viewed with suspicion by Beijing: a U.S. treaty ally sending military assets into Taiwan under the supposed pretense of evacuating its citizens. The NEO would need to locate and evacuate over 150,000 Filipinos.<sup>5</sup>

These three considerations will determine if and how the Philippines decides to involve itself in an array of Taiwan-related contingencies, specifically a blockade or invasion/war. The article analyzes each of the three considerations before making a conclusion on the likelihood that the Philippines would get involved in a Taiwan scenario and then provides recommendations for the United States in influencing the Philippine political decisions of what to do in a cross-strait conflict.

## Balancing two juggernauts: considering Manila's relationships with Beijing and Washington

### *The role of the U.S.-Philippines alliance*

The Philippines is a treaty ally of the United States. If the Chinese military attacked an American asset at any point in a contingency scenario, Washington could invoke Article V of the MDT, forcing Manila into the conflict. Without the MDT, Manila could try to manage its relationship with Beijing and avoid conflict. Further, U.S. troops and assets in the Philippines make the country a target. While the U.S.-Philippine alliance remains strong, a conflict over Taiwan would be the greatest test for the security relationship. While the alliance was tested during the Rodrigo Duterte years, Duterte toward the end of his tenure in office offered the United States a goodwill gesture with great possible ramifications for a Taiwan contingency. In March 2022, Philippine Ambassador to the United States Jose Manuel Romualdez publicly stated that Duterte would allow the U.S. military to use facilities in the Philippines if the Ukraine conflict spilled over into the Indo-Pacific. Amb. Romualdez said, "[Duterte] offered that the Philippines will be ready to open its doors, especially to our ally, the U.S., in using our facilities, any facilities they may need."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> William Gallo, "China Extends Military Drills Around Taiwan," *Voice of America*, August 8, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/chinese-military-drills-continue-around-taiwan-on-monday-/6692487.html>; Kathrin Hille and Demetri Sevastopulo, "China fires ballistic missiles around Taiwan after Nancy Pelosi's trip," *Financial Times*, August 4, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/15877208-4628-45fd-a8ff-2db7a3d57f1c>; Matt Yu, Lai Yu-chen, Novia Huang, Lu Chia-jung and Elizabeth Hsu, "China's military exercises aimed at blockading Taiwan: defense ministry," *Focus Taiwan*, August 3, 2022, <https://focustaiwan.tw/cross-strait/202208030018>; Yimou Lee and Sarah Wu, "Furious China fires missiles near Taiwan in drills after Pelosi visit," *Reuters*, August 5, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/suspected-drones-over-taiwan-cyber-attacks-after-pelosi-visit-2022-08-04/>; and "EXPLAINER: Why is China staging drills around Taiwan?," *Associated Press*, August 4, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/taiwan-asia-united-states-beijing-nancy-pelosi-bcd77a80ddbce51f45c5fca4f60e22e>.

<sup>2</sup> In the Philippines, parts of the South China Sea are officially called the West Philippines Sea.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Thomas C. Hubbard, September 30, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Susannah Patton, "What the Philippines has at stake in Taiwan," Lowy Institute, August 16, 2022, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/what-philippines-has-stake-taiwan>; and Interview with Susannah Patton, September 2022.

<sup>5</sup> According to Taiwan's Ministry of the Interior, National Immigration Agency, as of October 25, 2022, 154,075 Philippine citizens have registered as foreign residents in Taiwan. National Immigration Agency, "2022.9Foreign Residents by Nationality," Ministry of the Interior, October 25, 2022, accessed November 13, 2022, [https://www.immigration.gov.tw/5475/5478/141478/141380/323953/cp\\_new\\_s](https://www.immigration.gov.tw/5475/5478/141478/141380/323953/cp_new_s).

<sup>6</sup> Jojo Riñoza, "Philippines Willing to Open Bases to US if Ukraine Conflict Spreads," *Benar News*, March 10, 2022;

The commitment would occur under an “emergency situation” and include re-opening Subic Bay Naval Base and Clark Air Base to U.S. troops. The key caveat to Duterte’s statement is that the promise applied to an expansion of the Ukraine conflict to the region, not a separate or new conflict over Taiwan. Marcos, who took office in June 2022, has not yet recommitted to Duterte’s promise, and given how the war in Ukraine has progressed, the threat of spillover into the region is minimal. Marcos will not likely face pressure to reaffirm U.S. access to facilities in the Philippines in this context, but he could face similar pressure as cross-Strait tensions escalate and the likelihood of conflict increases. Nevertheless, the Duterte commitment sets a precedent for a Filipino leader to provide the U.S. military with greater access to Philippine territory in certain contexts. Renato Cruz De Castro, a professor at De La Salle University, emphasized that Romualdez’s statements demonstrate the strength of the U.S.-Philippine alliance and its ability to adapt to the present circumstances.<sup>7</sup>

In 2014, Washington and Manila negotiated an official bilateral agreement allowing U.S. military personnel and assets access to specific locations across the Philippines. The agreement, known as the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), would allow the U.S. military to preposition and store “defense equipment, supplies, and materiel, including, but not limited to, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief equipment, supplies, and materiel”<sup>8</sup> at agreed upon locations. Currently, the United States has access to nine locations across the Philippines, including one on the northern coast of Cagayan, which will have implications for a potential Taiwan contingency.<sup>9</sup>

EDCA emphasizes the need for the United States to assist the Philippine military in modernizing and strengthening its external defense capabilities. It also is meant to increase the interoperability of the two militaries and promote maritime security in the region. Through the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and EDCA, the U.S. military has personnel stationed throughout the Philippines, making the country a target in a conflict between the United States and China. Lucio Pitlo III highlighted this exact point in January 2022, months before the August 2022 PLA exercises: “The presence of U.S. troops in the country under the restored Visiting Forces Agreement and positioning of U.S. hardware under the

Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) might put the country in Beijing’s line of fire.”<sup>10</sup> EDCA, as well as the VFA, provides the United States with a legal foundation to prepare for a potential Taiwan contingency granted in an extremely low footprint in the Philippines. An expansion of EDCA sites, U.S. personnel, and assets is required to better prepare for a future conflict. Having sites in northern Luzon would allow the United States to preposition certain assets under the conditions of EDCA and the VFA to prepare for a Taiwan contingency. Even under the strictest interpretations of EDCA’s humanitarian assistance stipulation, the U.S. military would likely get involved in Taiwan since a military conflict over the island would be a humanitarian disaster, given the limited options that Taiwanese citizens will have to flee. EDCA would allow U.S. military personnel in the Philippines to go to Taiwan to evacuate citizens.

In addition to EDCA, the MDT opens the door to greater bilateral cooperation focused on preparing for a Taiwan conflict. Article II of the MDT states, “The Parties separately and jointly by self-help and mutual aid will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.” And Article V states, “An armed attack on either of the Parties is deemed to include an armed attack on the metropolitan territory of either of the Parties, or on the island territories under its jurisdiction in the Pacific or on its armed forces, public vessels or aircraft in the Pacific.”<sup>11</sup> For the Philippines, this assurance includes the South China Sea, and for the United States, it includes an attack on Guam or its forces anywhere in the Pacific. Within the context of the MDT, the U.S. military could expand its prepositioned assets in the Philippines under the authority of Article II, and after a formal invocation of the MDT, the possibilities for the American use of the Philippines as a launching pad for military personnel and weapons to send to Taiwan dramatically increase.

### **PRC: an important economic player**

While the United States remains the Philippines’ most important political and military partner, the PRC has emerged as an important economic partner—potentially complicating Manila’s political decisions in a Taiwan crisis. In 2021, the United States was the top recipient of Philippine exports at \$11.85 billion (15.9 percent of total exports). The PRC was the second-highest country at \$11.55

<https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/philippine-bases-ukraine-crisis-03102022124347.html>; “Philippines ready to back US if it gets embroiled in war,” *Associated Press*, March 10, 2022,

<https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-united-nations-general-assembly-xi-jinping-united-nations-3ac8ace02978b67a20f1fbce695d23b>; and Sebastian Strangio, “Philippines Pledges to Back US if Ukraine Conflict Spreads to Asia,” *The Diplomat*, March 11, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/philippines-pledges-to-back-us-if-ukraine-conflict-spreads-to-asia/>.

<sup>7</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, “Post-Duterte admin revitalized Philippine-US alliance: Implication on ongoing Taiwan crisis,” *The Philippine Star*, October 8, 2022, <https://www.philstar.com/news-commentary/2022/10/08/2215211/post-duterte-admin-revitalized-philippine-us-alliance-implication-ongoing-taiwan-crisis>; and Renato Cruz De Castro, “The Philippines, the Ukraine-Russia War, and the Taiwan Strait Crisis,” *Global Taiwan Institute*, October 19, 2022, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2022/10/the-philippines-the-ukraine-russia-war-and-the-taiwan-strait-crisis/>.

<sup>8</sup> “Agreement between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Government of the United States of America on Enhanced Defense

Cooperation,” April 28, 2014,

<https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2014/04apr/20140428-EDCA.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> “Philippines, U.S. Announce Four New EDCA Sites,” U.S. Department of Defense, February 1, 2023,

<https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3285566/philippines-us-announce-four-new-edca-sites/>; and Sui-Lee Wee, “U.S. to Boost Military Role in the Philippines in Push to Counter China,” *New York Times* February 1, 2023,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/01/world/asia/philippines-united-states-military-bases.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Lucio Blanco Pitlo III, “Philippine neutrality amid tensions,” *Taipei Times*, January 22, 2022,

<https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2022/01/22/2003771844>.

<sup>11</sup> “Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines,” August 30, 1951,

[https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/phil001.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/phil001.asp).

billion (15.5 percent), with Hong Kong ranked fourth at \$9.93 billion. Taiwan was ranked ninth for Philippine exports at \$2.5 billion. On the Philippine import side, the PRC outpaces the rest of the world significantly. The PRC sent \$26.80 billion of goods to the Philippines (22.7 percent of total imports), while the United States ranked fifth at \$7.8 billion (6.6 percent) and Taiwan eighth at \$5.8 billion.<sup>12</sup>

The PRC's economic importance to the Philippines is a major issue for the United States to consider when thinking about the country's role in a potential Taiwan

contingency. The Philippines' trade deficit with the PRC was \$15.245 billion for 2021 (35.27 percent of the

total trade deficit).<sup>13</sup> Year-on-year Chinese goods sent to the Philippines increased by 28.4 percent.<sup>14</sup> Beyond trade, the PRC has a total of \$1.1 billion in loans to the Philippines to complete several infrastructure projects, including the Chico River Pump Irrigation Project, the Kaliwa Dam Project, and the Philippine National Railways South Long Haul Project.<sup>15</sup> The first two agreements are constructed in a way that favors Beijing because arbitration must be conducted by Chinese- or Hong Kong-based centers instead of the norm of multilateral groups taking part in that process. The loan agreements also include asset seizure.<sup>16</sup> President Marcos ordered his government to renegotiate the terms of the rail project because Beijing failed to follow through on its funding pledges.<sup>17</sup> According to the China Index 2021, created by the Taiwan-based Doublethink Lab, the Philippines ranks sixth in overall Chinese influence across various sectors ranging from the economy and media to domestic politics and foreign policy. It ranks behind Cambodia, Singapore, Thailand, Peru, and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>18</sup>

It is a reasonable assumption that the PRC can eclipse the United States on the export list in the coming decade and likely sooner, thus solidifying the immense

## **While the United States remains the Philippines' most important political and military partner, the PRC has emerged as an important economic partner – potentially complicating Manila's political decisions in a Taiwan crisis.**

importance of Beijing to Manila. As Beijing increases its economic footprint in the Philippines, Washington will need to be wary of the future of its political influence in the country. To complicate matters in the context of a Taiwan contingency, East Asia<sup>19</sup> ranked as the top region for Philippine exports at \$56.33 billion, and Southeast Asia<sup>20</sup> ranked second at \$32.5 billion.<sup>21</sup> In a Taiwan blockade or conflict scenario, the Philippines' ability to conduct trade with its neighbors will be put into jeopardy as planes or ships traveling anywhere north of the Philippines will need

to avoid the conflict zone. According to a U.S. State Department report, a Chinese blockade of Taiwan would result in \$2.5 trillion in global economic losses. A

*Financial Times* report highlighted the effect on Southeast Asia: "It said Southeast Asia – a region where many countries want to avoid taking sides and argue that a China-Taiwan conflict has nothing to do with them – would see heavy economic losses."<sup>22</sup>

While the Philippines and the United States have a strong alliance, the importance of the bilateral economic relationship between Manila and Beijing cannot be discounted when assessing involvement in a Taiwan contingency.

### *The Philippine view of Taiwan*

Manila's policy aligns with the PRC's "One China Principle," which refers to Taiwan as an official province of China. In August 2022, in the aftermath of the Pelosi visit to Taiwan, then-Philippine National Security Advisor Clarita Carlos said, "We are subscribing to what we call a One-China policy which means there's only one China and Taiwan is its province."<sup>23</sup> This policy is not as liberal as the American policy that merely "acknowledges the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China."<sup>24</sup> "Acknowledges" does a lot of heavy lifting. As a result, Manila is constrained in its direct political and

<sup>12</sup> "Highlights of the 2021 Annual Final International Merchandise Trade Statistics of the Philippines," Philippine Statistics Authority, April 20, 2022, <https://psa.gov.ph/content/highlights-2021-annual-final-international-merchandise-trade-statistics-philippines>.

<sup>13</sup> Cai U. Ordinario, "Deficit with China hits \$15.2B, or 35% of total PHL trade gap," *Business Mirror*, April 22, 2022, <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2022/04/22/deficit-with-china-hits-15-2b-or-35-of-total-phl-trade-gap/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ben O. deVera, "PH posts 3-year high trade deficit in 2021 as economy recovers," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, January 27, 2022, <https://business.inquirer.net/339657/ph-posts-3-year-high-trade-deficit-in-2021-as-economy-recovers>.

<sup>15</sup> Elijah Felice Rosales, "China loan pledges to Philippines reach \$1.1 billion," *The Philippine Star*, June 15, 2022, <https://www.philstar.com/business/2022/06/15/2188351/china-loan-pledges-philippines-reach-11-billion>.

<sup>16</sup> Nithin Coca, "China's Loan Agreements with Philippines Skewed in Beijing's Favor, Contracts Show," *Benar News*, June 11, 2021, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/china-philippines-loan-agreements-06112021175305.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Karen Lema, "Marcos wants Philippines to renegotiate loans on China-backed rail projects," *Reuters*, July 16, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-marcos-wants-renegotiate-loans-49-blm-china-backed-rail-projects-2022-07-16/>; and Richard Javad Heydarian, "In a reset, Marcos scraps Duterte's China loans," *Asia Times*, July 19, 2022, <https://asiatimes.com/2022/07/in-a-reset-marcos-scraps-dutertes-china-loans/>.

<sup>18</sup> Doublethink Lab, "China Index 2021," <https://china-index.io/>.

<sup>19</sup> According to the Philippines Statistics Authority, this region includes: China, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Mongolia, and North Korea. Philippine Statistics Authority, <https://psa.gov.ph/content/highlights-2021-annual-final-international-merchandise-trade-statistics-philippines>.

<sup>20</sup> Countries included are: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and Timor-Leste. Philippine Statistics Authority, <https://psa.gov.ph/content/highlights-2021-annual-final-international-merchandise-trade-statistics-philippines>.

<sup>21</sup> Philippine Statistics Authority, <https://psa.gov.ph/content/highlights-2021-annual-final-international-merchandise-trade-statistics-philippines>.

<sup>22</sup> Kathrin Hille and Demetri Sevastopulo, "US warns Europe a conflict over Taiwan could cause global economic shock," *Financial Times*, November 10, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/c0b815f3-fd3e-4807-8de7-6b5f72ea8ae5>.

<sup>23</sup> Arlie O. Calalo, "BBM will honor 'One China' policy – Carlos," *The Manila Times*, August 7, 2022, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2022/08/07/news/national/bbm-will-honor-one-china-policy-carlos/1853709>; and Joseph Pedrajas, "PH reaffirms support for 'one-China policy,'" *Manila Bulletin*, August 4, 2022, <https://mb.com.ph/2022/08/04/ph-reaffirms-support-for-one-china-policy/>.

<sup>24</sup> "Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China (Normalization Communiqué)," January 1, 1979, <https://www.ait.org.tw/u-s-prc-joint-communic-1979/>.

military dealings with Taipei, a key hindrance in joint planning and cooperation for a contingency. While Manila's policy seems to fall closely under the Chinese preference, President Marcos advocated that all sides take a breath after the Pelosi visit: "We are certainly concerned about rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait, just north of the Philippines. We urge all parties involved to exercise maximum restraint. Dialogue and diplomacy must prevail."<sup>25</sup> Even though Manila has limited engagement with Taipei, Marcos' statement reflects an understanding that escalation would envelop the region. Marcos struck an even more realistic tone about the current state of U.S.-China-Taiwan relations in a joint press conference with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on August 6 in Manila. He explained that the Pelosi visit "did not raise the intensity" of the already volatile situation, "We have been at that level for a good while, but we have sort of got used to the idea."<sup>26</sup>

Since Marcos took office, the Biden administration has attempted to re-solidify its relationship with Manila—and likely discussed the importance of stability in the Taiwan Strait with Filipino government officials. In addition to Secretary Blinken's August 2022 visit to Manila, there were other key

meetings between high-ranking officials of the two countries: U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin met with Philippine National Defense Senior Undersecretary and Officer in Charge Jose Faustino, Jr., in Hawaii in September 2022; U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman met with Marcos in June 2022 before his inauguration; Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro visited Manila in July 2022; Vice President Kamala Harris visited Manila and met with President Marcos in November 2022; Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel J. Kritenbrink visited Manila for the U.S.-Philippines Bilateral Strategic Dialogue in January 2023; and Secretary Austin revisited Manila in February 2023 to meet with Philippine Secretary of National Defense Carlito Galvez for the EDCA expansion announcement. President Biden also met with Marcos on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York in September 2022.<sup>27</sup> President Biden invited Marcos to the White House in a handwritten note delivered by U.S. Second Gentleman Douglas Emhoff

during Marcos' inauguration.<sup>28</sup> On May 1, 2023, Biden welcomed Marcos to the White House, marking the first time that a Filipino head of state visited the White House since 2012, when President Benigno Aquino III visited President Barack Obama.<sup>29</sup> In the joint statement released by both leaders, Biden and Marcos "affirm[ed] the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of global security and prosperity."<sup>30</sup> Biden also pledged to send a Presidential Trade and Investment Mission to the Philippines to encourage greater American investment in the country.

For now, both Manila and Washington are sending the right messages about the bilateral relationship, and the many high-level meetings point to a renewed alliance when Washington is putting on a charm offensive to combat Chinese influence regionally and globally. It is unknown how much Taiwan has come up in the political conversations. While the political element of a Taiwan contingency is a difficult conversation to have in the open,

it is clear that the two countries' militaries have that in mind during their joint exercises, specifically Balikatan and Kamandag, for one important reason (from the U.S. perspective): the Philippines' strategic location close to southern Taiwan.

### **While the political element of a Taiwan contingency is a difficult conversation to have in the open, it is clear that the two countries' militaries have that in mind during their joint exercises, specifically Balikatan and Kamandag**

#### **The importance of geography**

The Philippines is extremely close to Taiwan and thus highly vulnerable—and valuable. The geographic issue alone will immensely affect Philippine security, no matter Manila's choices. Former Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines General Emmanuel Bautista said: "We are a U.S. ally, we are in a strategic location. We are so near that if anything happens in Taiwan, we will be involved."<sup>31</sup> And "involved" can mean various things, including being a passive victim of the conflict to sending military assets and personnel to Taiwan.

In an interview, William Wise, chair of the Stimson Center's Southeast Asia Forum, stressed how geography makes the Philippines particularly vulnerable in a Taiwan-related crisis.<sup>32</sup> Marcos himself acknowledged this reality during his February 2023 visit to Tokyo. In an interview, Marcos said, "When we look at the situation in the area, especially the tensions in the Taiwan Strait, we can see that just by our geographical location, should there in

<sup>25</sup> Catherine S. Valente, "Marcos on Taiwan tensions: Dialogue and diplomacy must prevail," *The Manila Times*, September 24, 2022, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2022/09/24/news/marcos-on-taiwan-tensions-dialogue-and-diplomacy-must-prevail/1859645>.

<sup>26</sup> David Brunnstrom and Karen Lema, "Blinken commits U.S. to defending Philippines against armed attacks," *Reuters*, August 6, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/blinken-says-philippines-ties-extraordinary-us-committed-defence-pact-2022-08-06/>.

<sup>27</sup> "Readout of President Biden's Meeting with Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.," The White House, September 22, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/09/22/readout-of-president-bidens-meeting-with-philippine-president-ferdinand-marcos-jr/>.

<sup>28</sup> Rambo Talabong, "Biden invites Marcos to Washington despite US court contempt order," *Rappler*, July 3, 2022, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/biden-invite-marcos-washington-despite-contempt-order/>; and "Biden invites Marcos to White House," *The*

*Philippine Star*, July 3, 2022,

<https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2022/07/03/2192748/biden-invites-marcos-white-house>.

<sup>29</sup> "Remarks by President Obama and President Aquino of the Philippines after Bilateral Meeting," The White House, June 8, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/06/08/remarks-president-obama-and-president-aquino-philippines-after-bilateral>.

<sup>30</sup> "Joint Statement of the Leaders of the United States and the Philippines," The White House, May 1, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/01/joint-statement-of-the-leaders-of-the-united-states-and-the-philippines/>.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Javad Heydarian, "US-Philippines drawing closer on defense of Taiwan," *Asia Times*, October 3, 2022, <https://asiatimes.com/2022/10/us-philippines-drawing-closer-on-defense-of-taiwan/>.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with William Wise, October 2022.

fact be conflict in that area . . . it's very hard to imagine a scenario where the Philippines will not somehow get involved."<sup>33</sup> He acknowledged that the Philippines is very much indeed on the "front lines" of a potential crisis or conflict.

The Philippines' northernmost island, Mavulis, part of Batanes Province, is less than 90 miles from the southern tip of Taiwan and is closer to Taiwan than Luzon.<sup>34</sup> The issue of geography for these islands—i.e., the proximity to Taiwan—puts the Philippines at risk of getting embroiled in a potential crisis or conflict. In an interview, Hank Hendrickson, Executive Director of the U.S.-Philippines Society, emphasized the geography issue in a Taiwan crisis, saying that the tensions are quite real and tangible for those in the northern Philippines.<sup>35</sup> During drills, the PLA intentionally fired missiles into the atmosphere over Taiwan and into Japan's EEZ, sparking diplomatic protests from Tokyo.<sup>36</sup> While no missiles were fired into the Philippine EEZ, the issue of Chinese debris had already caused controversy after a Filipino fisherman found debris from China's Long March 5B near Mindoro Strait in July 2022.<sup>37</sup>

As already discussed, one location of PLA's August 2022 exercise overlapped with the Philippine EEZ. The overlap was likely an intentional signal from Beijing to demonstrate the Philippines' vulnerability. While it is reported that Xi Jinping personally decided to have PLA missiles land inside Japan's EEZ, he did not make that decision for the Philippine EEZ—hinting at the fact that Xi (and the Chinese leadership) understand that Tokyo has a more significant role to play in supporting the United States in a Taiwan conflict. The fact that missiles did not land inside the Philippine EEZ may point to Beijing's hope that Manila would try to stay out of such a conflict. The question remains: As U.S. cooperation with the Philippines increases and contingency planning for a Taiwan scenario is taken more seriously, what would Beijing do during the next major exercise to send a more direct warning to Manila?

The PLA's August 2022 drills, and the prior discovery of Chinese debris in the Philippines EEZ, should motivate Manila to take the spillover effect of a Taiwan conflict more seriously. For the PLA to successfully blockade or invade Taiwan, Chinese military assets would need to secure the air and seas to Taiwan's south, particularly the Bashi Channel and Luzon Strait. If secured by China, these waterways would cut off some of the Batanes from the rest of the country. The population of

Batanes Islands, slightly under 20,000, would be on their own in this scenario. All air and shipping traffic that used to pass through the Bashi Channel and Luzon Strait would have to divert towards a longer route via the Sulu Sea and the Celebes Sea and then towards the Philippine Sea (or vice versa) to avoid the South China Sea and southern Taiwan. That route would dramatically increase travel time and fuel costs for commercial vessels.

The PLA already regularly conducts air missions through the Bashi Channel during air defense identification zone (ADIZ) incursions to Taiwan's southeast coast, and naval vessels transit these waterways on their way to exercises in the western Pacific. The Bashi Channel and Luzon Strait would be critical waterways for either side to secure: for China, to cut off southern Taiwan from the world, and for the United States, to keep open the possibility of utilizing the Philippines as a launching pad to defend Taiwan. In the words of Gregory Winger and Julio Amador III, this would allow Manila to "serve a role akin to Poland in the Russo-Ukrainian War, with Luzon and the northern islands like the Batanes group as critical links between American allied territories and the primary theater of combat."<sup>38</sup> In this respect, if the United States had the upper hand in southern Taiwan, the Philippines' geography would become a great asset.

Broadening the issue of geography from the northern Philippines to the South China Sea, the Philippines' situation becomes even more complicated. Taiwan currently occupies the largest land feature in the Spratlys: Itu Aba. If Beijing were to target Itu Aba before a Taiwan invasion, then Philippine security in the region would be severely jeopardized. Resources and assets would need to be diverted to the South China Sea to monitor the situation and to ensure that the conflict did not expand to Thitu and other Philippine-occupied features. In the event of a successful PRC takeover of Taiwan (and presumably, several South China Sea features), the PRC would have a significantly more formidable presence in areas close to the Philippines through which to potentially coerce Manila. The PRC has already been able to dominate the South China Sea via its artificial islands, but the nature of those spaces limits the Chinese military's ability to expand.

### Evacuating Filipino citizens

In addition to geography, the Philippines has a national interest in the safety of its 150,000+ citizens living

<sup>33</sup> Cliff Venzon, "Marcos says 'hard to imagine' Philippines can avoid Taiwan conflict," *Nikkei Asia*, February 12, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Interview/Marcos-says-hard-to-imagine-Philippines-can-avoid-Taiwan-conflict>.

<sup>34</sup> "Philippines plans marine base on island near Taiwan to deter poaching," *Reuters*, March 22, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-defence/philippines-plans-marine-base-on-island-near-taiwan-to-deter-poaching-idUSKBN1GY1EO>; David Santos, "PH, US forces continue wargames facing WPS, Taiwan," *CNN Philippines*, October 4, 2022, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2022/10/4/PH--US-forces-continue-wargames.html>; and Richard Javad Heydarian, "Philippines president looks to rebuild alliances in the Indo-Pacific region," *The Japan Times*, November 14, 2022, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2022/11/14/commentary/world-commentary/marcos-philippines-alliances/>.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Hank Hendrickson, October 2022.

<sup>36</sup> "Xi let missiles fall in Japan's EEZ during Taiwan drills, sources say," *The Japan Times*, August 11, 2022,

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/08/11/national/china-japan-missiles-eez/>; "Japan protests after Chinese missiles land in its exclusive economic zone," *Reuters*, August 4, 2022,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-protests-after-chinese-missiles-land-its-exclusive-economic-zone-2022-08-04/>; and Ryo Nemoto and Rieko Miki, "5 Chinese missiles land in Japan's EEZ: defense chief," *Nikkei Asia*, August 4, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Taiwan-tensions/5-Chinese-missiles-land-in-Japan-s-EEZ-defense-chief>.

<sup>37</sup> Frances Mangosing, "Chinese rocket debris found near Mindoro Strait," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, August 3, 2022, <https://www.thestar.com.my/aseanplus/aseanplus-news/2022/08/04/rocket-debris-found-near-mindoro-strait>.

<sup>38</sup> Gregory Winger and Julio S. Amador III, "Aim Higher: The U.S.-Philippine Alliance Can Do More," *War on the Rocks*, August 3, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/08/aim-higher-the-u-s-philippine-alliance-can-do-more/>.



and working throughout Taiwan. According to Taiwan's National Immigration Agency, around 780,000 foreigners live in Taiwan.<sup>39</sup> In a similar situation to the Russian buildup of forces along the Ukrainian border in the lead-up to an invasion of Taiwan, it would be clear that the PLA is amassing forces in critical and relevant locations for the operation. Countries around the world would advise their citizens to leave Taiwan immediately. Beyond the Philippines, countries such as Indonesia (230,000+), Vietnam (230,000+), and Thailand (72,000+) would need to evacuate a significant number of people. Japan (15,000+) and the United States (11,000+) will also have to evacuate their citizens. A key difference between the Philippines and the rest of these countries is that the Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines, Huang Xilian, made a direct threat against OFWs at the Eighth Manila Forum in April 2023. In his speech, Huang stated, "The Philippines is advised to unequivocally oppose 'Taiwan independence' rather than stoking the fire by offering the US access to the military bases near the Taiwan Strait if you care genuinely about the 150,000 OFWs."<sup>40</sup> The speech caused a political firestorm in the Philippines.

Philippine Senator Rafael Tulfo, aware of the risks OFWs face, called for his country's government to develop a "coordinated plan to ensure the safety of Filipino workers in Taiwan" in the aftermath of the August 2022 exercises. Tulfo expressed the need for a proactive, not reactive, plan to ensure the safe return of OFWs.<sup>41</sup> After Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen met with U.S. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in California in April 2023, additional politicians, such as Senator Francis Tolentino, emphasized the need to prepare plans to evacuate OFWs in Taiwan. Tolentino called for the Balikatan exercises to include OFW evacuations as a part of the exercises.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to Tulfo, then-Defense Undersecretary Faustino admitted that a Taiwan invasion would be a "humanitarian crisis," causing an influx of refugees.<sup>43</sup> A Philippine NEO would not occur in a vacuum, given that hundreds of thousands of foreigners, not to mention millions of Taiwanese, would be scrambling to evacuate. In an interview, Julio Amador III, Founder and CEO of Amador Research Services, emphasized the need for more planning and conversations from the United States to prepare for this eventuality, arguing that current refugee contingency planning is minimal at best.<sup>44</sup> In all likelihood, the United States would attempt to assert its presence in the region as intelligence showed the buildup of Chinese troops and assets. The U.S. Navy would likely move to secure important sea lanes, such as those relevant for the Philippines (Bashi Channel and Luzon Strait) and Japan, making NEOs easier to carry out.

However, a notable recent example shows just how complicated a NEO is. During the U.S. withdrawal

from Afghanistan, the United States evacuated 130,000 individuals (only 6,000 Americans) in one month. That NEO was conducted against an inferior enemy, and evacuees had to reach one central location. The number of OFWs in Taiwan exceeds the number of people evacuated from Afghanistan. In Taiwan, the adversary (PRC) is not the Taliban: it has near-peer-level military capabilities that would complicate any NEO. How would Beijing react to foreign militaries entering Taiwan to evacuate their nationals during the chaos leading up to a potential invasion? How would the PRC respond specifically to the United States sending in its military to evacuate its citizens and other foreign nationals? What about treaty allies like Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines? It is not difficult to imagine a scenario in which Beijing threatens to shoot down U.S. and allied planes seeking to land in Taiwan for a NEO under the pretense that it is a covert effort by the U.S. military to either send Taiwan arms or to preposition U.S. personnel to assist in the island's defense. The NEO issue, in particular, constitutes a micro-security dilemma.<sup>45</sup> The sheer act of evacuating citizens could trigger the conflict.

### **The NEO issue, in particular, constitutes a micro-security dilemma. The sheer act of evacuating citizens could trigger the conflict.**

While debating how to proceed in the leadup to a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, Manila needs to consider what it does *before* such an event even happens. It is one question to ask whether or not the Philippines would join the fight; it is an entirely different question to ask how the Philippines would get its people out before the fight commences. Considering the Philippines' alliance with the United States, Manila must ask itself: What would Beijing allow in the days before the invasion? The NEO question is perhaps the most complicated and politically fraught issue for Manila to consider when discussing Taiwan contingencies. As Filipino politicians have warned, they need to commence planning for such a situation now.

### **Conclusion: U.S.-Philippine collaboration?**

After considering Manila's relations with Washington and Beijing, the Philippines' geographic vulnerability, and the need to evacuate OFWs, the paper has demonstrated that the Philippines cannot sit out the entirety of the conflict. Philippine security expert Gregory Poling argued, "the Philippines would find it difficult to remain neutral in any conflict over Taiwan. . . . [T]he long-standing alliance with the United States makes Philippine territory an attractive staging point for U.S. intervention and a possible target for Chinese retaliation."<sup>46</sup> There are so

<sup>39</sup> National Immigration Agency, "2022.9 Foreign Residents by Nationality," [https://www.immigration.gov.tw/5475/5478/141478/141380/323953/cp\\_new\\_s](https://www.immigration.gov.tw/5475/5478/141478/141380/323953/cp_new_s).

<sup>40</sup> "Remarks by Ambassador Huang Xilian at the 8th Manila Forum," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of the Philippines, April, 16, 2023, [http://ph.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgdt/202304/t20230416\\_11060060.htm](http://ph.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgdt/202304/t20230416_11060060.htm).

<sup>41</sup> Bernadette E. Tamayo, "Contingency plan for Taiwan OFWs pushed," *The Manila Times*, August 9, 2022, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2022/08/09/news/national/contingency-plan-for-taiwan-ofws-pushed/1853879>.

<sup>42</sup> Francis Tolentino, "Taiwan OFW contingency plan," *Manila Bulletin*, April 20, 2023, <https://mb.com.ph/2023/4/20/taiwan-ofw-contingency-plan>.

<sup>43</sup> Daniza Fernandez, "DND warns of humanitarian crisis if armed clashes erupt in Taiwan Strait," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, August 10, 2022, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/205975/dnd-warns-of-humanitarian-crisis-if-armed-clashes-erupt-in-taiwan-strait>.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Julio Amador III, September 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Thank you to Dr. Joshua Byun for making this connection.

<sup>46</sup> Gregory B. Poling, "The U.S.-Philippine Alliance Is Looking at Taiwan, Too," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 6, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/are-washington-and-beijing-collision-course-over-taiwan#Poling>.

many different pressure points that could trigger Manila's involvement. Evacuating OFWs might irk Beijing. Even if Manila decided not to get involved, it would be the most vulnerable country in Southeast Asia to spillover effects: some of its sovereign, undisputed territories could get cut off from the rest of the country, debris could wash ashore, its two strategic waterways might be unsafe and unusable, and the "battle" for the South China Sea would end in the PRC's favor. Washington could also formally invoke Article V of the MDT, in which Manila's response would also determine U.S. commitment to defending Philippine-occupied features, troops, public vessels, and aircraft in the South China Sea.

The geography issue and the U.S. security relationship make it difficult for the Philippines to be neutral.<sup>47</sup> The United States has much work to do to influence the conversations in the Philippines regarding Taiwan contingencies. In an interview, Julio Amador III emphasized the need for Washington to respect Manila's agency in these issues and that conversations on contingencies should take greater importance on the U.S. side and not make assumptions about what Manila can be pushed to do.<sup>48</sup> The sooner the conversations and planning commence, the less of a shock or a controversy such an ask from Washington would be. The United States and the Philippines have a decades-long military relationship that will serve as a strong foundation to build upon. Lt. Col. Kurt Stahl, spokesperson for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marines Division, said in a statement, "The Philippines is an important Ally with close and abiding security ties to the United States. . . . The Philippines and the United States have a continued interest in strengthening our military-to-military relationship and reinforcing our maritime security efforts in support of our treaty commitments to each other. Our strength, resolve, and commitment to our Allies and partners in the region are our most effective deterrent. Together, we can deter potential adversaries from ever testing our capabilities or our relationships."<sup>49</sup>

Amb. Hubbard, in an interview, underscored that the process of getting Manila on board would be long and that there is a long way to go before the Philippines hardens its views on Taiwan.<sup>50</sup> Recent statements by Marcos point to a subtle shift in how Manila perceives its own risk if a cross-Strait conflict were to erupt. Due to Manila's rigid "One China" Policy, Manila is quite limited in its interactions with Taipei. The United States can (and must) serve as the link between the two governments for contingency planning because Manila will need to communicate with Taipei at a much higher level. This is not to say that Manila and Taipei do not communicate; the two host unofficial diplomatic offices in each other's capitals and use those offices primarily for economic purposes. Washington needs to help break down barriers and work with both countries together.

Washington also needs to take more seriously the development of the Philippine military capabilities. According to the Lowy Institute's 2022 Asia Power Index, the Philippines ranks 16 of 26 countries in "comprehensive power" and scores 12.8 out of 100.<sup>51</sup> According to the Lowy Institute, "While [China's military] remains less powerful than the United States, its relative lead over its neighbours—including India, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines—continues to grow." The 2021 report emphasized in a similar point: "...this is as true of U.S. allies Thailand and the Philippines... as it is of communist Vietnam... Most countries in Southeast Asia... lack the military capability required to confront the PRC..."<sup>52</sup> The Philippines' defense budget is only \$4.30 billion, almost a quarter of Taiwan's (\$19 billion). Its military personnel is only at ~140,000 on active duty, compared to Taiwan's ~170,000. The United States needs to develop the Philippines' ability to defend itself and, in extreme situations, assist the United States in the event of a conflict in the Indo-Pacific. The MDT loses its value for the United States if the Philippines does not work to improve its military capabilities. The treaty becomes a mechanism to protect the Philippines without any boon for the United States. By making the Philippines a more capable partner force, Washington can further internationalize a cross-Strait conflict and expand the map that Beijing must contend with. As Joshua Espeña argued, embracing a greater role in a Taiwan scenario would allow Manila to flex its muscles as a rising middle power.<sup>53</sup> One mechanism already in place to help the Philippine military in its capacity building is EDCA. As Susannah Patton highlighted, "This access [via EDCA] would make it easier for the United States to support the Philippines through capacity building, including on maritime security, and help the U.S. respond quickly in the event of a humanitarian crisis."<sup>54</sup> Key pieces are in place—both sides now need to fully utilize and implement them to bolster the Philippine military's capacity.

This article contributes to the hard, but necessary, emerging conversation about the role of the Philippines in a Taiwan contingency. Much work needs to be done by all sides to prepare for conflict. It would serve Washington well to take the role of the Philippines in a Taiwan contingency quite seriously. The country has much at stake and similar vulnerabilities to Japan, but Tokyo has taken steps to prepare itself. The Philippine conversation is at a much earlier stage, and Washington needs to appreciate the importance of securing Manila's involvement before it is too late.

<sup>47</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, "Can the Philippines stay neutral in a Taiwan Strait military confrontation between the US and China?," Think China, October 5, 2022, <https://www.thinkchina.sg/can-philippines-stay-neutral-taiwan-strait-military-confrontation-between-us-and-china>.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Julio Amador III, September 2022.

<sup>49</sup> Emailed statement to author, Lt. Col. Kurt Stahl, October 7, 2022.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Ambassador Thomas C. Hubbard, September 2022.

<sup>51</sup> Asia Power Index 2023 Edition, "Philippines," Lowy Institute, <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/countries/philippines/>.

<sup>52</sup> Susannah Patton, Jack Sato, and Hervé Lemahieu, "2023 Key Findings Report," Lowy Institute, 2023, p. 10; and Hervé Lemahieu and Alyssa Leng, "Key Findings 2021," Lowy Institute, 2021, p. 17, <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/downloads/lowy-institute-2021-asia-power-index-key-findings-report.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> Joshua Espeña, "The Philippines and the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis," *The Diplomat*, September 8, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/the-philippines-and-the-fourth-taiwan-strait-crisis/>.

<sup>54</sup> Patton, "What the Philippines has at stake in Taiwan," Lowy Institute, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/what-philippines-has-stake-taiwan>.

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