



## ***THE PHILIPPINES' CASE FOR NAVAL DIPLOMACY IN THE ERA OF ASEAN ABANDONMENT***

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*USS Mobile (LCS-26), HMAS Warramunga (FFH-152), JS Akebono (DD-108), BRP Gregorio Del Pilar (PS-15), BRP Antonio Luna (FF-151) and BRP*

*Valentin Diaz (PS-177) sail in formation off the coast within the Philippines Exclusive Economic Zone on April 7, 2024. Credit: Royal Australian Navy Photo*

Countless pieces indicate how the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is under fire for criticisms of autonomy and legitimacy. Given the increasing major power competition between China and the United States, ASEAN's wiggle room is becoming much limited; Beijing and Washington's competing diplomatic, economic, and military presence combined hinders any effective solidarity to collectively balance against them at the regional level. Such a quality of its autonomy puts a significant risk upon its legitimacy.

At the 37<sup>th</sup> iteration of the Asia-Pacific Roundtable (APR) organized by ISIS-Malaysia and ASEAN-ISIS Network in Kuala Lumpur, speakers, instigators, and delegates all wanted to make ASEAN work amid the shifting regional balance of power. However, such an assumption hinges on the fact that each member can leave differences at the door in pursuit of collective regional interest based on a homogenous identity.

The past decade and recent years are apt for reflecting upon what has changed and what has not for ASEAN. In the 2012 and 2016 summits, ASEAN was not able to forge a joint communique to condemn China's revisionist actions in the South China Sea (SCS), due to Cambodia and Laos' direct opposition to antagonize Beijing, and partly due to other ASEAN member-states (AMS) skepticism to bring in "external actors" into the mix. This deadlock scenario perfectly alluded to Chinese policy on territorial disputes, which also generated serious concerns on the part of the US and its allies and partners on its implications for the "rules-based order."

As for the Philippines, an ASEAN founding member, it admittedly had expectations in the earlier stage that ASEAN would call out, if not harshly condemn, China for its unlawful activities. In the 2020s, Manila has realized that calling for another issuance of joint condemnation would simply not work. AMS also vary in their position on the crises in Myanmar and Gaza, which clearly transpired during the 37th APR discussions. As some AMS are passionate about

notions of humanity and humanitarianism, the Philippines understands such universal values should cater to national interests. While respecting the historical and institutional legacy it once built for regional security, the Philippines has now found AMS deficient in demonstrating ASEAN Centrality in the 2020s for its long-term strategic interests; the AMS de facto abandonment of Manila to the mercy of Beijing.

So far, the Philippines is a noteworthy member seeking greater international attention in its fight for territorial integrity and sovereignty in the SCS. In his keynote speech during the 2024 Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. said that the SCS is no longer a regional issue, but rather a global one. While the ASEAN has de facto abandoned the Philippines, it does not mean Manila is a lone ranger, though; far from it. If anything, the Philippines has found the value of naval diplomacy in its statecraft to foster meaningful alignment with like-minded partners.

Naval diplomacy is an old practice, and its literature is vast. Kevin Rowlands defined naval diplomacy as “the use of naval and maritime assets as communicative instruments in international power relationships to further the interests of one or more of the actors involved.” Contrary to expectations, all states can practice naval diplomacy regardless of fleet size and technological prowess of ship designs and combat systems.

As an advocate of the archipelagic doctrine of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the Philippines doubled down on defending such principle through its pronouncement of the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept (CADC) early this year. While CADC is yet to have a public document, its logic is to fill possible gaps in defending the internal waters, chokepoints, vast coastlines, territorial sea, and its exclusive economic zone. Indeed, the Philippine Department of National Defense was not able to materialize all projects of the Armed Forces of the Philippines Modernization Program (AFPMP) given the lack of congressional funding to sufficiently meet the timeline of acquiring the newest systems and platforms. However, the Marcos government has committed to fighting for a

bigger and more granulated defense budget for the AFPMP through the Re-Horizon 3 phase. Such a commitment is now enshrined in National Security Policy 2023-2028.

Despite policy upgrades, power asymmetry is still apparent given China’s continued pace to upset the regional military balance. Moreover, the Philippines’ strategic community agrees that CADC’s logic of archipelagic defense would have many tradeoffs in terms of allocating budget to its army, navy, and air force branches to jointly operate in deterring and defending in each unified command. Simply put, the Philippines is hardly going to be having a “Battle of Midway” scenario or a naval battle in the high seas because of the unique circumstances of geography and budgetary constraints affecting the AFP’s force structure. In this case, the Philippines is capping on naval diplomacy to signal to any willing like-minded partners that whatever the Philippines lacks for sea denial and control, they can freely take on that gap.

Of course, nothing is free; Manila understands the costs of naval diplomacy. At the operational level, it needs candid discussions on improving the logistical gaps of foreign navies to sustain their operational tempo during joint patrols and exercises. At the strategic level, it risks the optics, especially by AMS of allowing “external actors” to have free reign in the maritime space. However, I argue that this cost is calculated; no-free-lunch cooperation is much better than a give-away appeasement as it resonates with ASEAN’s core principle of sovereignty. While this principle is nothing new, it needs reiteration in discussions, such as the missed opportunity in the APR to understand the Philippines’ current policy position in the SCS.

In sum, the analytical angle of naval diplomacy allows observers to observe the strategic paradox of the Philippines: it is risking its national security to de-risk bigger regional insecurities brought by the perceived abandonment of ASEAN, uncertainty in American credibility, relentless Chinese ambitions, and the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific region’s maritime space. Only time will tell whether ASEAN will abandon its abandonment policy, or lady luck will abandon the Philippines’ naval diplomacy card. For

now, ASEAN-based Track II Diplomatic forums like APR must be able to appreciate such a paradox.

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