



RESEARCH ARTICLE

CURRENT PHILIPPINE MARITIME SECURITY MANAGEMENT: THE WAY THE PHILIPPINES RESPONDS TO GROWING US-CHINA STRATEGIC COMPETITION

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to analyse how the Philippines has responded to the growing US-China strategic competition by managing its maritime security. The article assesses that the Philippines is facing increasing pressure from China, especially in the South China Sea issue. This is related to the adjustments in foreign policy of President Ferdinand Marcos towards reducing the closeness with China since the time of President Rodrigo Duterte and increasing the alliance with the US. This makes the Philippines one of the arenas of US-China strategic competition in the Southeast Asian region. The article also assesses that, to better manage the issue of maritime security, the Philippines has promoted increased cooperation with the US, as well as other US allies. The Philippines considers this a significant response to China's increasingly assertive moves in the South China Sea.

INTRODUCTION

The US-China competition is taking place extremely fiercely and comprehensively in all fields of economics, military, politics, science and technology, etc. Southeast Asia has become a typical region for the comprehensive competition between the two leading superpowers in the world. The reason why Southeast Asia has become the focus of US-China competition is because this is a dynamically developing place with a total population of over 600 million people and is also the region with the fastest economic growth rate compared to any region in the world since the financial crisis in 2008. Military competition between the US and China in the Southeast Asia region is increasing, not only for the purpose of increasing influence and further gathering allies and forces but also for ensuring maritime security in one of the most important sea routes in the world, thereby protecting the economic interests of both the US and China. The US-China military competition in Southeast Asia can be viewed from two perspectives. First, the competition to enhance the capacity and potential of each country's military presence in Southeast Asia is aimed at increasing influence and ensuring maritime security, protecting the interests of each country in the region. Second, the competition to gather forces and attract Southeast Asian countries to their side. Depending on the interests and strategic intentions of each country in Southeast Asia, these

countries have chosen to cooperate closely in defence with the US or China or to be in a balanced position. The choice to strengthen military cooperation between ASEAN countries with the US and China is also aimed at dealing with non-traditional security challenges that each country in ASEAN cannot cope with. Most countries in Southeast Asia are currently maintaining a neutral, balanced position in the US-China military competition. Some countries have shown that they are leaning towards one side, most notably the Philippines or Cambodia. The growing strategic competition between the US and China is still a comprehensive competition, counterbalancing in all areas. In particular, geopolitical competition, especially competition between the two powers in the South China Sea region, has a direct and profound impact on the security structure of the Asia-Pacific region and China's neighbouring countries with sovereignty over islands in the South China Sea, such as the Philippines. The relationship between the US, the Philippines, and China is currently one of the most complex and important geopolitical issues in the Indo-Pacific region. It can be said that the relationship between the two sides is diverse, with tensions and cooperation intertwined, creating a volatile and unpredictable picture. Over the past several decades, the South China Sea has emerged as an arena for strategic competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China. China's actions in the South China Sea, including the construction of artificial islands and extensive base construction on features it occupies in the

Spratly Islands, as well as actions by its maritime forces to assert its claims against regional neighbours such as the Philippines and Vietnam, have raised concerns among U.S. observers that China is attempting to gain control of the entire South China Sea, an area of strategic, political, and economic importance to the United States and its allies and partners. (U.S. Naval Institute, 2024). After many ups and downs, the bond between the two allies, the US and the Philippines, has been strengthened again under the administration of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. This reflects the importance of the alliance to both countries in the context of strong changes in regional security. In this study, we seek to clarify how the Philippines is responding to the growing US-China competition to ensure its maritime security.

The Philippines is stuck in the US-China strategic competition: Are tensions between the Philippines and China on the rise?: The Philippines' relations with China have shown signs of increasing political, diplomatic, and security tensions, especially in the East Sea issue, but the economy is heavily dependent on Beijing. Meanwhile, the US is still considered the Philippines' security umbrella, but the Manila government is still concerned about the possibility that the US can help the country ensure maritime security. The Philippines-China relationship in recent years has had two parallel aspects: one side is strong economic cooperation, and the other side is increasing tension in the East Sea. According to analysts, despite the tension in the South China Sea, the economic relationship between China and the Philippines has not been affected, and the two countries can be described as "warm economically but cold politically." China and the Philippines are natural partners because of their geographical proximity, close kinship, and complementary advantages. In recent years, under the strategic guidance of the two heads of state, China and the Philippines have enhanced the synergy between the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Philippines' "Build Better More" (BBM) program. About 40 government-to-government cooperation projects have been completed or are underway, including the Binondo-Intramuros Bridge, the Davao-Samal Bridge, and the Chico River Pumped Irrigation Project, bringing tangible benefits to the people of the two countries. (YUICHI SHIGA, 2024).

For years, Beijing has remained the Philippines' largest trading partner, top source of imports, top export destination, and third-largest source of foreign investment under agreements that have effectively fuelled the two countries' post-pandemic economic recovery and prosperity. In 2023, China's total imports and exports to the Philippines were \$41 billion, far exceeding Japan's \$21 billion and the United States' \$20 billion. Philippine Economic Planning Secretary Arsenio Balisacan said the country is open to investment and trade with "any country, including China," even as tensions between the two countries continue to rise in the South China Sea. (YUICHI SHIGA, 2024). However, in late October 2023, the Philippines announced its withdrawal from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with Philippine Transportation Secretary Jaime Bautista telling the media that the abrupt withdrawal came after Beijing failed to meet its funding requirements for the railway projects. China has pledged nearly \$5 billion to build three railway lines—two in Luzon and one in Mindanao—under the BRI, a cornerstone of Beijing's foreign policy that provides Chinese-backed loans for major infrastructure projects, mostly in developing regions of the world. However, China and the Philippines have been locked

in a years-long territorial dispute in the South China Sea, which China claims in its entirety. (Tommy Walker, 2023). On the issue of security and defence, the Philippines and China have repeatedly condemned and expressed strong opposition to each other's moves in disputed areas. Tensions have recently increased between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea, especially near Second Thomas Shoal, also known as Second Thomas Shoal, in the disputed Spratly Islands. The Philippine military lives on the BRP Sierra Madre, a ship used by the US Navy during World War II that was deliberately sunk. The ship has been repaired for many years, so it is still habitable for the soldiers stationed there. China claims sovereignty over almost the entire South China Sea and has been building military facilities on shoals and reefs for years. In 2016, an international court sided with the Philippines and ruled that China's territorial claims in the South China Sea have no international legal basis. Tensions have been rising since the election of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., who has taken a less China-friendly stance than his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte, and has moved closer to the United States on strategic policy. (Tommy Walker, 2023).

In March 2024, the Philippines accused the Chinese coast guard of using water cannons against a civilian ship supplying the military at Second Thomas Shoal, which the Philippines said damaged the ship and injured several crew members. In response, China accused the Philippine ship of illegally entering waters near the shoal. (VOA, 2024) At the same time, China said the United States must refrain from "causing trouble" or taking sides in the South China Sea issue, after US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during a visit to Manila that a security agreement with the Philippines had been extended to attacks on the Philippine coast guard. In April 2024, US, Japanese, and Australian defence forces conducted "cooperative maritime operations" in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea. (Reuters, 2024) The exercise followed repeated confrontations between Chinese and Philippine vessels in the South China Sea in the previous months.

Tensions continued to rise when Chinese militiamen allegedly rammed two Philippine Navy inflatable boats to prevent the Philippine Navy from transferring food and other supplies, including guns, to the Philippine territorial outpost at Second Thomas Shoal, which Beijing had also claimed. In July 2024, substantive talks were held to ease escalating tensions following confrontations in the South China Sea. In a subsequent statement, the Department of Foreign Affairs in Manila said the Chinese and Philippine delegations "affirmed their commitment to de-escalate tensions without prejudice to their respective positions... Significant progress has been made in developing measures to manage the situation at sea, but significant differences remain." (JIM GOMEZ, 2024). Although China regularly declares its support for freedom of navigation and non-interference with freedom of navigation, as evidenced by the fact that in November 2023, China signed a joint communiqué with 18 other Asia-Pacific countries recognising freedom of navigation under the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), adopted in 1982. However, China's move is considered to be contrary to the definition of freedom of navigation pursued by the West and the United States, through which China regularly interferes with the commercial fishing activities of non-Chinese fishing vessels, which some observers consider a form of interference with the freedom of navigation of commercial

vessels and a serious violation of the UNCLOS. (U.S. Naval Institute, 2024). The increased defence cooperation between the US and the Philippines has been met with opposition from China, which has accused Washington of endangering regional peace and stability. Countries in this part of the world must maintain strategic independence and resolutely resist the Cold War mentality. The Philippines' rapprochement with the US, especially in the military sphere, can be explained by growing concerns over tensions in the Taiwan Strait, with the closest point between the Taiwan Strait and the Philippines being only 159 km apart. The Philippines' next move is its interest in the South China Sea, with Manila announcing it will pursue joint efforts with Washington toward "collective defence" of the disputed waters. Perhaps Mr. Bongbong Marcos has a lot to learn from Mr. Duterte's "misplaced expectations." For years, Filipino fishermen have complained that large Chinese vessels are engaged in "grey zone tactics"—using paramilitary vessels "disguised" as fishing boats and fisheries administration vessels to chase, harass, and intimidate them in traditional fishing grounds in the South China Sea. The nine bases that the US can access under EDCA are therefore part of the Philippines' response to China's behaviour, as these bases not only look up at the Taiwan flashpoint but also look out over the South China Sea. During the 2+2 meeting, US Defence Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III recalled the Mutual Defence Treaty between the US and the Philippines, signed in 1951. He stated, "This remains the foundation of our cooperation," and emphasised that the treaty applies to armed attacks on the armed forces or public vessels of either country anywhere in the South China Sea. (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024b) The statement implied that any attack on Philippine coast guard vessels in the South China Sea could trigger the provisions of the US-Philippines Mutual Defence Treaty. The message was, of course, intended to warn against China's aggressive grey zone tactics and protect Philippine forces in the South China Sea.

Maritime Security Management: Strengthening the Philippines' Alliance with the United States: The most obvious advantage for the US is in the Philippines. After leaning towards China under President Rodrigo Duterte, the new President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has shown a policy of returning to close ties with his old ally since taking office. US-Philippine relations are increasingly close, especially in the military field. In May 2023, during the Philippine President's visit to the US—the first visit by a Philippine leader to the White House in 10 years—both presidents reaffirmed their determination to promote a strong relationship between the two sides, including strengthening cooperation in the fields of security and economy. In a joint statement after the talks, the two leaders agreed to improve the interoperability of US and Philippine forces on land, at sea, in the air, in space, and in cyberspace. In addition, Washington plans to transfer three C-130 transport aircraft and seek to send more patrol boats to Manila. In February 2023, the Philippines agreed to grant the US military access to four more of its military bases as part of the expanded Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) announced by both sides. In April 2023, the US and Philippine militaries also held the annual Balikatan 2023 joint military exercise, the largest ever between the two countries. Under the leadership of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the world has witnessed a marked improvement in US-Philippine relations, especially after the tense developments in the South China Sea. Accordingly, the Philippines has strengthened defence cooperation with the US, while economic and cultural

relations have also continued to be maintained, with the US being an important trade and investment partner of the Philippines. After many ups and downs under former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, when he implemented a policy of balancing major powers, along with closer relations with China, the bond between the two allies, the US and the Philippines, has become closer again under Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. The visit of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to the US in early May 2023 set a new milestone for the relationship between the two countries. Although being one of the important treaty allies of the US, in the past 10 years, Mr. Ferdinand Marcos Jr. is the first Philippine president to visit the US. The visit marked a significant change in relations between the two countries since Ferdinand Marcos Jr. took power in June 2022. (Mikhail Flores and Karen Lema, 2024). The visit of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to the United States in early May 2023 marked a new milestone in the relationship between the two countries. Known as two traditional allies, in the past 10 years, Mr. Ferdinand Marcos Jr. was the first Philippine president to visit the United States. The open and friendly talks between him and US President Joe Biden, with consensus on many cooperation issues, officially opened a new, warm chapter of the US-Philippines alliance. This highly publicised visit took place in the context of the atmosphere of the relationship between the two countries having made significant changes after Mr. Ferdinand Marcos Jr. took office in June 2022. In less than a year, a series of cooperation agreements between Manila and Washington, especially in the defence sector, were signed, showing that the two countries have identified the security foundation as a pillar to strengthen the oldest US alliance in Asia. The clearest sign of the warming of relations between the two countries is the Philippines' agreement to expand the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) signed with the US in 2014. Accordingly, the US will be allowed access to four more Philippine military bases (in addition to the five existing bases committed under the EDCA framework). The new locations are considered to have important strategic positions, including Camilo Osias Naval Base, Lal-lo Airport in Cagayan Province, Melchor Dela Cruz Base in Isabela Province, and Balabac Base in Palawan Province.

This will allow the US to have nine military bases that will allow its troops to be stationed on a rotational basis in the Philippines. The next push for the expansion of security cooperation between the two countries is the resumption of the 2+2 dialogue between the two countries' top diplomats and defence officials after a 7-year hiatus, which represents a significant improvement in the US-Philippines alliance. Not stopping at statements on paper, the two allies have planned more than 500 joint military activities in 2023—more than any US ally and partner in the Indo-Pacific, including the resumption of joint maritime patrols in the South China Sea and the organisation of the largest annual Balikatan exercise in the past 30 years. The fact that President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. personally inspected the ship-sinking exercise in the South China Sea within the framework of Balikatan left a strong impression. This is the first time in more than a decade that a Philippine president has attended the event, and it also sends a clear signal of determination to restore the military alliance between the US and the Philippines. (Camille Elemia and Jason Gutierrez, 2023). In recent years, the Philippines has tried to restart relations with the US by agreeing to expand the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) signed

with the US in 2014. Accordingly, the US has 04 more military bases in the Philippines, bringing the total number of bases where the US is allowed to rotate troops to 09. The next milestone in the process of strengthening cooperation between the two countries is the resumption of the 2+2 dialogue between top diplomatic and defence officials of the two sides after 07 years of stagnation. The two sides have also held many joint exercises in key areas, including the annual Balikatan exercise, which is the largest in the past 30 years. In fact, since taking office, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has pursued a foreign policy that contrasts sharply with that of his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte. During his tenure, former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte clearly distanced himself from the United States, refusing to allow the US to stockpile weapons systems, as well as expanding rotational military access to strategically located bases near the South China Sea under the EDCA, ending most large-scale joint exercises, and downgrading relations with allies across the Pacific. In stark contrast to his predecessor, in his first days in office, President Marcos “shunned” any criticism of Washington in any major speech. He quickly adjusted his strategy and gradually leaned toward his historic partner. This shift stems from the 65-year-old leader's awareness that the Philippines is in the world's most complex geopolitical region, stemming from both open and simmering disputes in the Asia-Pacific region, including the South China Sea. The Philippines has also repeatedly complained about China's activities in its 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone. Even during the tenure of former President Rodrigo Duterte—who actively maintained close relations with China—tensions in the South China Sea did not improve, even tending to escalate, putting him under heavy pressure from domestic public opinion and forcing him to delay the termination of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and the presence of US troops in the Philippines. The public's expectation of a leader who can deal with sovereignty issues was one of the reasons that brought Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to the presidency, as he pledged to pursue a more balanced foreign policy if he won. Having asserted that the Philippines would not cede “even an inch of territory,” President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s search for new security guarantees with the world's number one military power through a series of moves to upgrade defence ties with the United States clearly demonstrates his determination to protect the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. (Ruth Abbey Gita-Carlos, 2023).

The restoration of the US-Philippines alliance is not only an achievement of the new administration in Manila but also a great victory for Washington. Through upgrading military cooperation with the Philippines, the US continues to expand its strong footprint in Southeast Asia—a region of particular importance in implementing the Asia Pivot Strategy initiated by former President Barack Obama in the 2010s. That time marked a clear change in the US's strategic calculations when the Obama administration took a tougher stance in the South China Sea. Next, the Trump administration officially rejected China's ‘Nine-Dash Line’ claim. Entering his term, with US-China relations showing no improvement, President Joe Biden has prioritised strengthening US alliances and partnerships. By promoting strategic security dialogues and investing in a variety of diplomatic, military, and economic initiatives, the United States is working to realise its commitment to restore its leadership in the Indo-Pacific as a core part of its Asia policy. This is also an area with an important geostrategic position, attracting attention and competition for influence

among the world's established and emerging powers. In the context of traditional and non-traditional security threats that have caused this region to always be unpredictable, strengthening the US-Philippines alliance is of particular importance to the Indo-Pacific strategy that Washington is pursuing. With many advantages, the Philippines is the “key” to US calculations. Geographically, this country is located in the core area of the first island chain in the US's three-island-chain strategy in the region to contain opponents. At the strategic level, the US identifies the Philippines as an important fulcrum for small-scale multilateral cooperation, used as a “frontline base” to build many cooperation platforms to respond to security fluctuations in the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, analysts believe that in the new version of cooperation, the Washington-Manila relationship is evolving from the traditional “hub and spokes” model in the US alliance network to a more modern structure with the participation of Washington's allies in the region. The Philippines has agreed to strengthen trilateral cooperation with Japan and Australia, and the prospect of joint patrols between the countries is completely feasible in the near future. The shift in US policy in the South China Sea towards increased deterrence. After many years of being relatively “passive” in the issues in this sea area, the US has dramatically increased its presence and built a new approach strategy. Accordingly, the massive stationing of soldiers and the construction of two large military bases at Clark Field, Pampanga province, and Subic Bay, Zambales province, of the Philippines are no longer suitable options. Instead, the US will focus on investing in small bases to easily deploy “light and flexible” activities such as supply and surveillance. Therefore, increasing the number of bases accessed in the Philippines as committed is the optimal solution. Although technological advances may reduce the importance of many military bases, they are still strategically important to the US on the periphery of Asia due to the vast distance of the Pacific.

However, the close US-Philippines relationship also has many difficulties for the US because of the Philippines' unstable politics. There is no certainty that the next president after President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. will continue to lean towards the US or return to the same policies as during the time of President Rodrigo Duterte. That depends on many different factors, such as the views of each presidential candidate, the socio-economic context of the Philippines during the election period, and whether each candidate's policies are popular or not... But at least during the 6 years in power under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the US can be completely assured of its ally in the Southeast Asian region to create an advantage in the military competition with China. In a meeting with US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin, Mr. Marcos affirmed that the views and future of the Philippines and possibly the entire Asia-Pacific region will always have the participation of the US. (.S. Department of Defense, 2024a). The Philippines' security alliance with the US has so far deterred China from carrying out more serious attacks on Philippine troops or other government assets. But the 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty, which commits Washington to coming to Manila's aid if it comes under military attack, has been ineffective in deterring Beijing from escalating its “grey zone” tactics to carry out aggressive actions without resorting to military means, such as increasing the presence of maritime militia vessels, using surveillance equipment, water cannons, lasers, and other means to block the Philippine militia's food supply lines.

CONCLUSION

The US and China both have strategic interests and goals in the South China Sea region. Although both sides have made efforts to negotiate to reduce escalating tensions and limit direct conflicts, the results so far have not been much of a breakthrough, and disputes continue to occur between China and US partners and allies in the region. The Philippines plays an important role in helping the United States realise its goal of strengthening its commitment to its allies and ensuring freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific strategy to counter China. For the US, strengthening alliances in the Asia-Pacific region is important to contain China, and improving US relations with the Philippines is key to preventing China's expansion in the South China Sea and protecting US interests in the region. (CSIS, 2025).

On the Philippines side, its geographical location has put it at the centre of territorial disputes and military activities. Despite many difficulties in the diplomatic process in the face of China's disruptive actions, the Philippines still tries to maintain good relations with both the US and China to maximise economic and security benefits. With the US, the Philippines wants to ensure defence support, while with China, the Philippines seeks to maintain trade and investment relations but is firm on sovereignty issues in the South China Sea. On the Chinese side, it values its neighbourly relationship with the Philippines and maintains economic relations with the Philippines.

However, China has also repeatedly asked the US to limit its intervention in the region, while China continues to strengthen its claims in the South China Sea and prevent military cooperation between the US and the Philippines from becoming too strong. Despite their differences in geopolitical perspectives, both the Philippines and China have tried to limit the prospect of a major conflict in the South China Sea. Raul Lambino, president of the Philippine-Chinese Understanding Association, said the Philippines and China share a long history of being neighbours, friends, brothers, and even family members. Any differences between the two countries can be resolved through negotiations, consultations, and a commitment to respect without causing more serious consequences.

In fact, the Philippines' closer ties with the United States are a "natural" choice. Washington is by far the most important defence partner for Manila, where security commitments have become a mainstay. The two countries share important military agreements, and the US is a sponsor of many modernisation projects for the Philippine military. The US is also the only country on the planet that is bound to the Philippines by a Mutual Defence Treaty (MDT) signed in 1951.

Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s shift in approach to the US has also been relatively smooth given the close relationship between the two countries for decades. In Philippine politics, the desire to be close to the US and maintain a close alliance with the US, although it varies from period to period depending on the international and regional context, is still the main trend. In particular, when the security environment in the region is being challenged, former President Rodrigo Duterte's "vigilant" stance in relations with the US has become increasingly blurred. Philippine politicians and public opinion seem to have

lost faith in individual diplomatic efforts to resolve issues in the East Sea and see strengthening defence cooperation with the US as a more effective guarantee, while also strengthening the country's power to protect its territorial sovereignty. Aside from national security concerns, the Philippines' exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea also holds vast natural resource benefits.

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