The Philippines' strategic outlook

Pendulum swings, maritime tensions and defencemodernisation efforts

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Cover: The US littoral combat ship *USS Savannah* (LCS 28) sails together with the Philippine patrol ships *BRP Ramon Alcaraz* (PS-16) and *BRP Apolinario Mabini* (PS-36) during the Balikatan military exercise in April 2025. Photo by Chief Petty Officer Leonard Adams, Amphibious Squadron 11, Defense Visual Distribution Service, U.S. Media Activity. The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement).

Sammanfattning

Den här rapporten är en översättning av FOI:s rapport *Filippinernas säkerhetspolitiska färdriktning: Pendelsvängningar, maritima spänningar och moderniseringsambitioner* (FOI-R--5789--15) som publicerades i september 2025. Rapporten analyserar Filippinernas säkerhetspolitiska färdriktning genom att studera landets politiska historia, inrikespolitiska aktörer och utmaningar, själv- och hotbild, relationer till stormakterna Kina och USA, samt dess säkerhetspolitiska prioriteringar. Filippinernas geografiska läge i en region med växande stormaktsrivalitet och geopolitiska spänningar gör landet till en vågmästarstat. Svängningar i den filippinska utrikespolitiken, vilket varit en trend under många år, kan därför få stora konsekvenser för det samlade västs intressen. Uppfattningen om Filippinerna som den svagaste länken i det amerikanska allianssystemet i Stillahavsregionen samt landets stora inrikespolitiska utmaningar gör det samtidigt till ett attraktivt mål för externa påverkanskampanjer som ämnar underminera västs inflytande. Sverige har uttalat en ambition om att stärka det försvarspolitiska samarbetet med länder i den indopacifiska regionen, vilket innefattar Filippinerna. Rapporten framhåller därför vikten av att fortsätta stärka kunskapen om Filippinerna som säkerhetspolitisk aktör samt dess geopolitiska sammanhang för att bättre förstå hur utvecklingen i Stillahavsregionen kan påverka svenska intressen.

Nyckelord: Filippinerna, säkerhetspolitik, försvarsmodernisering, utrikespolitik, Stilla havet, Indopacifiska regionen, politiska dynastier, oligarki, terrorism, islamism, stormaktsrivalitet

Summary

This report is a translated version of FOI's report in Swedish from September 2025: *Filippinernas säkerhetspolitiska färdriktning: Pendelsvängningar, maritima spänningar och moderniseringsambitioner* (FOI-R--5789--SE). The report analyses the Philippines' security policy and strategic outlook by examining the country's political history, domestic political actors and challenges, national self-image and threat perception, relations with the great powers China and the US, and its security priorities. The Philippines' geographic location in a region of growing great-power rivalry and geopolitical tensions makes the country a pivotal state. Longstanding shifts in Philippine foreign policy can therefore have significant consequences for the West's collective interests in the region. The perception of the Philippines as the weakest link in the US alliance system in the Indo-Pacific region, together with the country's substantial domestic political challenges, also makes it an attractive target for external influence operations intended to undermine Western influence. Sweden has stated an ambition to strengthen defence cooperation with countries in the Indo-Pacific region, including the Philippines. The report therefore emphasises the importance of continuing to deepen knowledge of the Philippines as a strategic actor and its geopolitical context, in order to better understand how developments in the Pacific region may affect Sweden's interests.

Keywords: Philippines, security policy, defence modernisation, foreign policy, the Pacific, Indo-Pacific region, political dynasties, oligarchy, terrorism, Islamism, great-power rivalry.

Foreword

FOI's department for international security policy has long conducted country studies that contribute to the agency's knowledge development and understanding of specific countries and issues. This study is a contribution to a larger pool of reports and memoranda that have been prepared over the years.

The author would like to thank everyone who contributed to the report: Åsa Rognes Malmström, who reviewed the report and contributed her knowledge of, and many years of experience in, the Philippines; Albin Aronsson, who took part in several interviews for the report and provided comments during the process; Marianna Serveta and Mattias Burell, who contributed with comments and reflections during the review; Patric Karlsson, who helped produce the maps; and Frank Guldstrand from FOI's Department for Space Systems, who helped to obtain and analyse the satellite imagery. Last but not least, sincere thanks to all interviewees who generously shared their time, deep knowledge, and incisive reflections on the Philippines, its geopolitical landscape, and the country's security policy and strategic outlook. Without their help and support, the final product would not have been as complete.

Executive Summary

The Indo-Pacific region is a flashpoint in the growing rivalry between the United States (US) and its allies, on the one hand, and China on the other. Several European countries are stepping up their posture in the region through defence-cooperation agreements, naval transits, and military exercises with multiple partners. The Philippines is among the countries Europe has sought closer ties to and is a central geopolitical actor in the Indo-Pacific region. Although the region lies far from Europe, developments there will inevitably affect the collective West, and thus Sweden. In 2024, the Swedish Government published its first security-policy guidance document focused on the region. Sweden could also play an important role in the Philippines' defence modernisation if it is selected to supply the fighter aircraft the country is seeking. Because an understanding of the Philippines' security policy development remains limited in Sweden, it is important that Swedish institutions deepen their understanding of the country's conduct.

The Philippines is, in many ways, a pivotal state in the great-power rivalry between the US and China. It is the US's oldest ally in the region. Its territory is central to US power projection and deterrence vis-à-vis China. The Philippines faces two main threats. First, China increasingly challenges the country's sovereignty and territorial claims, having expanded its military presence in the South China Sea and stepped up attempts to control the maritime domain. Second, the Philippines' defence alliance with the US means the country would likely be drawn into a US–China conflict over Taiwan.

At the same time, the Philippine–US alliance contends with a degree of mutual mistrust and unease. The Philippines worries about abandonment by the US, while Washington has long feared being drawn into an unwanted armed conflict. This helps explain decades of pendulum swings in Philippine security policy: at times Manila has distanced itself from the US and tilted towards China, at other times it has swung back towards the US. The current administration under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr has clearly moved closer to the US while also seeking to strengthen ties with other US allies, such as Japan.

The Philippines nevertheless remains an actor that must adapt to great-power moves, which requires some flexibility. While geopolitical tensions narrow the country's room for manoeuvre, they also raise its strategic value in the eyes of the great powers. Despite the Philippines' strategic importance and the growing threat from China, the country's defence capabilities are considered among the weakest in the US alliance network. The Philippines has long grappled with internal conflict and threats from communist and Islamist insurgents. This has shaped the armed forces for countering internal, land-based threats. They are therefore ill-adapted to a conflict with an external actor such as China, which would likely play out in the maritime domain.

The Philippines is now undertaking its most extensive defence modernisation in years. The programme aims to renew and replace ageing or retired capabilities and to orient the armed forces towards external defence, with greater roles for the navy and the air force. The process entails opportunities and risks for both the Philippines and Sweden and faces several challenges, which are highlighted in the report's conclusions.

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Abbreviations

AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
BIFF	Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CADC	Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CPP	Communist Party of the Philippines
EDCA	Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement
EDSA	Epifanio de los Santos Avenue
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICC	International Criminal Court
IR	International Relations
ISEA	Islamic State East Asia
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
MDT	Mutual Defense Treaty
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front
NDS	National Defense Strategy
NPA	New People's Army
NSP	National Security Policy
NSS	National Security Strategy
PCA	Permanent Court of Arbitration
POGO	Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators
RAA	Reciprocal Access Agreement
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
VFA	Visiting Forces Agreement

1 Introduction

The geopolitical weight of the Indo-Pacific region is rising. Several Western and European states have expanded their presence in, and cooperation with, countries across the region. The Philippines is among those countries that is strengthening ties with Western partners. The Swedish Government also intends to deepen its engagement with the region, as set out in the July 2024 document *Försvarspolitisk inriktning för samarbete med länder i den indopacifiska regionen* [trans. "Defence policy guidance for cooperation with countries in the Indo-Pacific region"].[1] The document states that the Government is concerned about negative consequences for Sweden's defence arising from "war and conflict and authoritarian states' attempts to undermine the rules-based international order through the use of force."[2] The guidance further specifies that "it is in the interest of Sweden's defence-policy to understand the US's military resource priorities" in the region and proposes three focus areas for Swedish action. The first is to strengthen defence-policy relations, including by participating in relevant defence-policy fora and by increasing the presence of Swedish defence attachés. The second is to increase Sweden's military presence by "seconding liaison officers to headquarters in the region," participating in regional defence exercises and operations, and conducting training and exchanges of experience with regional partners.[3] A third focus area is to promote cooperation on defence materiel, innovation, and technology, in part with other high-technology countries in the region.

Compared with other countries in the region such as South Korea or Japan, the Philippines' high-technology manufacturing base is underdeveloped. Its civilian high-technology capacity, however, has grown rapidly over the past ten to fifteen years. The Philippines is also central to the US's power projection in the region, which indirectly affects Sweden and is relevant to the government's strategy. Two memoranda of understanding on potential defence-materiel cooperation were concluded between Swedish and Philippine authorities in June 2023 and May 2024.[4] When a decision will be taken is, at the time of writing, unclear, but it is reasonable to assume it will occur under the current administration, which prioritises defence modernisation. Sweden's minister for defence, Pål Jonsson, also visited the Philippines in June 2024 and met his Philippine counterpart, Gilberto Teodoro Jr. Taken together, the agreements and the visit signal an ambition to deepen bilateral security-policy cooperation.

Understanding the countries with which Sweden is strengthening relations is essential to a successful and durable security-policy partnership. The state of knowledge in Sweden about the Philippines' security policy and strategic outlook remains limited, and very few publications on the subject are available in Swedish. FOI has published several reports that address the Philippines, but from external vantage points: for example, the US's security policy, alliances in the Indo-Pacific region, or European states' priorities in the region. This report therefore seeks to fill some of the existing knowledge gaps concerning the Philippines' geopolitical context and strategic outlook.

This introductory chapter is divided into three sections. The first sets out the purpose of the study and the research questions that guided it. The second discusses the source material, the function of the different sources, and identifies certain challenges that may affect the conclusions. The third explains how the report is structured.

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[1] Government of Sweden, *Försvarspolitisk inriktning för samarbete med länder i den indopacifiska regionen* [Defence-Policy Guidance for Cooperation with Countries in the Indo-Pacific Region], 24.

[2] In the original, "[k]rig och konflikt och auktoritära staters försök att underminera den regelbaserade världsordningen med vapenmakt"; Government of Sweden, *Försvarspolitisk inriktning*, 6.

[3] In the original, "det ligger i Sveriges försvarspolitiska intresse att förstå USA:s militära resursprioriteringar"; and, regarding the second focus, to "avdela sambandsofficerare till staber i regionen"; Government of Sweden, *Försvarspolitisk inriktning*, 12.

[4] Sweden, Ministry of Defence, "Sverige och Filippinerna undertecknar samarbetsavtal gällande anskaffning av försvarsmateriel," 4 June 2023; Sweden, FMV, "Samarbete med Filippinerna om försvarsupphandlingar," 5 May 2024.

1.1 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is to provide an overview and analysis of the Philippines' security policy and strategic outlook. Its scope is broad and is intended to give readers a basic understanding of the Philippines as a security actor and of its positions on a small number of current security-policy issues of relevance to Sweden and its defence-policy interests, as well as its defence authorities. The study does not seek to produce a forecast or futures assessment; instead, it advances a set of high-level assumptions grounded in historical information.

Given that Sweden is exploring closer engagement with countries such as the Philippines – in many respects a pivotal state in the region – it is essential to build knowledge across Swedish institutions about the country itself, its ambitions, and its place on the geopolitical chessboard.

The overarching research question is therefore: How does the Philippines' security policy and strategic outlook affect the prospects for defence-policy cooperation with Sweden?

This question is addressed through sub-questions designed to capture specific indicators that matter for understanding the country's trajectory, for example:

- What security-policy priorities does the Philippines set, and how have they evolved over time?
- How does the Philippines' self-image shape its security-policy priorities?
- Which security threats shape Philippine decision-making?
- How do the Philippines' actions affect its relations with external actors such as the US and China?
- What is the Philippines economic capacity to strengthen its defence?
- Which domestic political factors are decisive for the country's positions?

This overview also applies certain scope limits. With the exception of the historical section, which reaches back to the early 1900s, the study focuses on developments since the end of the Cold War. Although no precise cut-off is set, 1992 is a key year: the Philippines decided not to renew its bases agreement with the US, and the US bases in the country were closed. This development is central to understanding the Philippines' security-policy priorities since then.

1.2 Methods and sources

The study uses a mixed approach: analysis of primary and secondary textual sources, interviews, and quantitative data. Primary sources include official Philippine policy documents such as the National Security Policy (NSP), the National Security Strategy (NSS), and the National Defense Strategy (NDS). Together, these three documents provide an overarching view of the Philippines' self-image, threat perception, and policy approach. The NSP has been issued in three editions since 2011, whereas only one edition of the NSS and the NDS has been published (both in 2018). The NSP and NSS were published by the National Security Council, and the NDS by the Department of National Defense (DND). These documents help illuminate how the Philippines' threat perception has developed over the past fifteen years. However, the lack of multiple editions of the NSS and NDS means those strategies cannot readily be assessed over time. An additional document is frequently referenced in the literature and media reporting: the *Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept* (CADC). Several interviewees stated that the document, drafted in 2024, is classified, which meant that it could not be consulted for this study. In addition, satellite imagery from the French-owned Pléiades constellation and the US satellite-imagery company Planet is used to illustrate how expanding territorial claims and tensions in the South China Sea are manifesting in practice.

Secondary sources comprise academic articles, as well as reports from think tanks, research institutes, and civil-society organisations, together with media reporting and seminars. Quantitative data have also been gathered from organisations that compile international comparisons based on national statistics; for the purposes of this study, these are treated as

secondary sources. The secondary material serves as an important complement for corroborating sequences of events and for adding nuance to the understanding of the Philippines' self-image, threat perception, and security-policy priorities set out in the policy documents.

Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted between October 2024 and August 2025. All interviews summarised from notes, and a description of the interviewees is available in Annex 1. Each interview followed a question guide that was adapted to the interviewee's profile and to the course of the conversation. The interviews were undertaken chiefly to refine and contextualise the findings derived from documentary sources and quantitative data.

1.3 Structure

Five chapters follow this introduction. Chapter 2 offers an overview of domestic political dynamics: the first section reviews the country's political history over the past hundred years, and the second profiles the key actors shaping contemporary Philippine politics. Chapter 3 sets out the Philippines' geopolitical landscape by discussing the country's self-image and threat perception, as well as its foreign-policy conduct. Chapter 4 examines the Philippines' foreign-policy relations, with a focus on the great powers, the US and China. Chapter 5 outlines the Philippines' security-policy capabilities and priorities, and the changes seen over the past thirty years. Chapter 6, the final chapter, summarises the discussion and considers the prospects for Swedish–Philippine defence-policy cooperation, highlighting both risks and opportunities.

2 Domestic political dynamics

This chapter provides a two-part overview of the Philippines' domestic political history and landscape. The first part traces the country's political history from the process of independence from the US in the early twentieth century to 2025. As this is FOI's first report to focus specifically on the Philippines' security policy, it is relevant to place the country's contemporary political landscape in historical context to clarify its prospects and trajectory. The second part presents the Philippines' current political landscape with a focus on three actors and phenomena that shape national politics, including political clans and armed groups. The aim is to give readers a basic understanding of the formation of the Philippine state and society.

2.1 The evolution of Philippine democracy

The Philippines' history is sometimes jokingly summarised as "three hundred years in a Spanish convent and fifty years in Hollywood," a shorthand for the country's colonial periods under Spain and the United States.[5] Since independence in 1946, political development has passed through phases of war, occupation, authoritarian rule, political instability, armed uprisings, and social unrest, as well as periods of strong economic growth and stabilisation. This section outlines four periods that have shaped today's Philippines and are relevant to this report. The first period is the process of independence from the United States, which gathered speed in the early 1900s. The second covers the first decades of the independent Philippines and the dictatorship established after President Ferdinand Marcos Sr. declared martial law in 1972 and held on to power for fourteen years. The third period describes the return to democracy in the 1980s and the subsequent transition, marked not only by political opening but also substantial mobilisation and instability, at times coloured by military involvement. The fourth and final period begins around the turn of the millennium and is characterised by continued internal unrest, growing regional tensions, and foreign-policy uncertainty.

2.1.1 The Philippines' road to independence (1898–1946)

Independence was formally achieved on 4 July 1946, when the Republic of the Philippines was established. In the Philippines, however, independence is actually celebrated on 12 June to commemorate the 1898 declaration of independence, when, after the Spanish–American War, the Spanish Crown ceded the territory to the United States. In practice, this meant US annexation of the Philippines, which met strong resistance from Filipino revolutionaries. A two-year conflict with the United States broke out in 1899, in which an estimated 4,000 Americans and 200,000 Filipinos were killed.[6]

Resistance to the American presence remained strong, but the road to independence was long and uneven. Several rounds of negotiations on Philippine self-government took place, yet it was only in 1935 that the country adopted its first constitution and established the Commonwealth of the Philippines as a form of internal self-rule.[7] A ten-year transition was to precede full independence in 1946. The 1935 Constitution also created the political system that exists today, with a presidential form of government and a bicameral Congress. The transitional government faced substantial challenges, not least the need to strengthen domestic capabilities. Decades of American rule had in effect made the Philippines a market for US goods: imports from the United States entered duty-free, while exports to the US were constrained by the country's low level of industrialisation. The Philippines also needed

[5] Interview 11, diplomatic representatives, 26 February 2025, Stockholm.

[6] U.S. Office of the Historian, "The Philippine-American War, 1899–1902."

[7] Ricardo Trota Jose, "July 4, 1946: The Philippines Gained Independence from the United States," The National WWII Museum, New Orleans, 2 July 2021.

to build its own armed forces. During the transition, Washington continued to control the Commonwealth's foreign and monetary policy, and many of the new institutions were designed on American models.[8]

Preparations for independence were interrupted, however, when Japan invaded in 1941. A Japanese military regime governed for two years and, in 1943, again proclaimed Philippine independence in an attempt to win Filipino support. Many Filipinos distrusted the Japanese, and a nationalist guerrilla movement took shape and began attacking the occupation forces. The guerrilla movement comprised around fifty groups, the best-known including the Maoist *Hukbong Bayan Laban sa Hapon* (Hukbalahap); Moro guerrillas in Mindanao, Palawan, and Sulu; and American combat units and soldiers who had remained in the country.[9] The guerrilla war was brutal, and the Japanese committed extensive atrocities. The death toll during the occupation is uncertain, but estimates range from several hundred thousand to one million, either through Japanese abuses or the extensive US aerial bombardment of Manila in 1945.

The post-war years were difficult. Society was deeply divided, and the bombardment had left the economy and trade in ruins, with immense infrastructure needs. Humanitarian assistance and reconstruction financing from the United States, together with war reparations from Japan, were therefore crucial, but they came with conditions. The United States demanded, among other things, that those who had collaborated with the Japanese should be punished severely, that American investors should be granted access to the Philippine market, and that the peso should be pegged to the US dollar.[10] These conditions meant that, despite its formal independence, the Philippines remained dependent on the United States. At the same time, the country played a central role in the US's power projection and control over Southeast Asia during the Cold War.[11]

A Military Bases Agreement in 1947 allowed American forces to remain at Clark Air Base and the Subic Bay naval base, both on the northern island of Luzon. Under the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) of 1951, the United States and the Philippines also entered into a formal defence alliance. In exchange for the alliance and the bases agreement, the Philippines received American security guarantees and extensive defence funding, which meant that political questions other than the pursuit of fully effective independence were often given lower priority.

2.1.2 The first decades of the independent Philippines

At independence, the Philippines established itself as a democracy. The first nearly twenty post-war years were marked by reconstruction and relative economic stability. The regime, however, grappled with the remnants of the Hukbalahap insurgency, whose actors had now turned against the government and American influence. Like many other countries, the Philippines received substantial US support in the fight against communism and had, by the early 1960s, largely suppressed the insurgency.[12]

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[8] Pia Daleke (ed.), "Landguiden: Filippinerna: Modern historia," 2023, Utrikespolitiska institutet – Landguiden; Lynn T. White III, *Philippine Politics: Possibilities and problems in a localist democracy*, 2015, Oxon: Routledge, p.118.

[9] Peter T. Sinclair II, "Men of Destiny: The American and Filipino Guerillas During the Japanese Occupation of the Philippines," 2011, School of Advanced Military Studies, United States Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth; Colin Minor, "Filipino Guerilla Resistance to Japanese Invasion in World War II," 2015, *Legacy*, Vol.15, No.1.

[10] Jose, "July 4, 1946."

[11] Gregory B. Poling, *On dangerous grounds: America's Century in the South China Sea,* 2022, New York City: Oxford University Press.

[12] William Overholt, "The Rise and Fall of Ferdinand Marcos," 1986, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 26, No.11.

The 1960s saw continued economic growth, industrialisation, and rapid infrastructure expansion. However, social unrest and political challenges mounted towards the end of the decade. President Ferdinand Marcos Sr (1965–86) took on large loans to finance major infrastructure projects, credit for imports, and his own 1969 re-election campaign. This produced an increasingly problematic public debt and forced the Philippines to seek support from the International Monetary Fund. In return, the government was required to implement reforms that constrained its ability to spend and to take on new international borrowing, a shift that correlated with rising inflation and social unrest.

Philippine democracy was put on hold in September 1972 when Marcos declared martial law, citing what his administration described as "the communist threat." The backdrop to what was, in practice, a coup d'état was growing social unrest and political uncertainty. A series of violent protests by communist groups, bomb attacks, and an assassination attempt (possibly staged) on defence minister Juan Ponce Enrile fuelled the anxiety.[13] Marcos blamed the incidents on the communist guerrilla New People's Army (NPA; see Section 2.3.2). Political opponents instead claimed that Marcos himself was behind the attacks.[14]

The dictatorship that took shape under Marcos centralised power in the presidency: he became chief executive, legislator, and judge, as well as commander-in-chief.[15] Congress and private media were shut down, public assemblies were banned, and political opponents were arrested or persecuted. More than 3,200 people were killed, a further 34,000 were subjected to torture, and around 70,000 were imprisoned.[16] The already wealthy Marcos family expanded its fortunes during these years. Conservative estimates suggest the Marcos clan stole between USD 5–10 billion from the state during this period.[17]

2.1.3 Political opening, popular resistance, and military influence

Martial law was lifted in January 1981, but that did not end the Marcos regime. A constitutional amendment allowed Ferdinand Marcos Sr. to stand again in the 1982 election and be re-elected, as virtually all opposition parties boycotted the process.[18] Although power remained centralised, there was a degree of political opening: the media gained greater freedom, and strikes in "non-strategic" sectors were permitted. In practice, however, repression and political constraints continued. In this climate, more extremist armed groups grew stronger: the New People's Army (NPA) carried out attacks in cities and in the countryside, and the Islamist and secessionist Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) fought for self-rule in Muslim areas of Mindanao in the southern Philippines. A third group, the April 6 Movement, also carried out several bombings in Manila. The movement consisted largely of middle-class Filipinos who opposed both communism and the Marcos regime, and who considered the use of lethal force morally justified.[19]

The assassination of Benigno Aquino, the president's foremost political opponent, in August 1983 marked the beginning of the end for the Marcos regime. Aquino was shot dead while surrounded by Philippine security forces at Manila International Airport shortly after returning from exile. A CIA report from 1982 described Aquino as "the one man credited with having the political acumen and personal magnetism to defeat Marcos in a free election."[20]

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[13] Michael Bueza, "Enrile's 'ambush': Real or not?" 23 September 2018, Rappler; White III, *Philippine Politics,* p.101; Katerina Francisco, "Martial Law, the dark chapter in Philippine history," 22 September 2018, Rappler.

[14] White III, *Philippine Politics,* 101.

[15] Bonn Juego, "On Martial Law at 50: Fact-checking the Marcos Story, Countering the EDSA History," 23 September 2022, Heinrich Böll Stiftung: Southeast Asia.

[16] Laura Bicker, "Philippines martial law: The fight to remember a decade of arrests and torture," 29 September 2022, BBC News; Reynaldo Santos, "Marcos' Martial Law orders," 23 September 2012, Rappler.

[17] Antonio J. Montalván II, "How much did the Marcoses exactly steal?" 10 February 2023, VERA Files.

[18] Central Intelligence Agency—CIA, "The Philippines: A Year After Lifting Martial Law," February 1982.

[19] "Philippines: No to Marcos," 3 November 1980, *Time*.

[20] CIA, "The Philippines."

No one has been convicted of the murder, but many suspect that Marcos or figures in his inner circle were responsible.[21] The killing eroded support for Marcos, both in the United States and among the political elite and the military, even as the opposition grew stronger.[22]

In an attempt to bolster his political legitimacy and counter the growing opposition, Marcos called a snap election in February 1986. When the election commission once again declared the incumbent the winner, despite widespread reports of fraud, mass protests broke out in Manila. Hundreds of thousands gathered on Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA) to show support for opposition leader Corazon Aquino (Benigno Aquino's widow; for presidents since 1982, see Table 1 below). In the Philippines, the protests are known as the People Power Revolution or the EDSA Revolution, after the thoroughfare where they took place. While the protests unfolded, several military figures – including Marcos's former ally and defence minister Juan Ponce Enrile – activated plans to remove the president. Although the coup attempt was aborted, the popular protests continued and the Marcos family was forced to flee the country.[23]

Aquino succeeded Marcos, becoming the country's first female president. Her time in office (1986–92) was anything but stable. Her administration was a broad, diverse coalition that disagreed on most issues and fractured fairly quickly. Although it pledged to dismantle the patronage politics embedded under Marcos, in practice it instituted its own version. A new Constitution in 1987 reinstated a bicameral system, with a house of representatives and a senate acting in a law-making capacity, and limited the president to a single six-year term.[24] In theory, the constitution was intended to make the country more democratic, but in practice it is considered to have worsened the long-standing relations of dependency between landowning families and farmers who rent the land they cultivate. It also benefited Aquino, whose Cojuangco family owned a large sugar plantation that at the time was earning more than USD 1 million per year in profits.[25]

Nepotism became entrenched and economic inequalities widened under Aquino, who faced ever-stronger resistance from both political and military actors. Between 1986 and 1989, several military conspiracies to depose her were attempted or uncovered.[26] None succeeded, but they reflected underlying political instability. In December 1989, for example, US fighter aircraft scrambled from Clark Air Base after rebels bombed and strafed the presidential palace from the air.

Even though US support helped the Aquino administration remain in power, it also bred resentment in the Philippines. Some viewed it as a sign of continued US involvement in domestic politics and violating Philippine sovereignty. This likely motivated the Senate's 1992 decision, by 12 votes to 11, not to renew the 1947 Military Bases Agreement with the United States (see Section 4.1).[27] Shortly thereafter, Aquino was succeeded by Fidel V. Ramos (1992–98), who inherited an economy in recession. The situation, affected by power outages and high oil import costs, was probably worsened by the non-renewal of the bases agreement, which cost the Philippines an estimated USD 344–408 million per year in rental

[21] Stratfor, "Rumours of Duterte's Demise Are Greatly Exaggerated," 5 December 2016.

[22] Association of Diplomatic Studies and Training, "[Interview with Stephen Bosworth]: Managing the End of the Marcos Regime."

[23] Association of Diplomatic Studies and Training, "[Interview with Stephen Bosworth]."

[24] The Marcos dictatorship adopted a new constitution in 1973 that established a unicameral system, which was then replaced by a bicameral system in 1987.

[25] A. B. Villanueva, "Post-Marcos: The State of Philippine Politics and Democracy during the Aquino Regime, 1986–92," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 1992, Vol. 14, No.2, p.178.

[26] Villanueva, "Post-Marcos"; White III, *Philippine Politics*, p.124.

[27] Julio Amador III, Deryk Matthew Baladjay, and Sheena Valenzuela, "Modernizing or equalizing? Defence budget and military modernization in the Philippines, 2010–2020," 2022, *Defence Studies*, Vol.22, No.3, 305.

income.[28] The economy stabilised again by the mid-1990s, but came under renewed pressure in 1997, when the effects of the Southeast-Asian financial crisis also reached the Philippines. At the same time, the NPA and Islamist rebel groups in Mindanao grew stronger.

2.1.4 Democratic development since the turn of the millennium

Political uncertainty persisted into the new millennium. Fresh EDSA protests broke out in January 2001 over sweeping corruption allegations against the president, including embezzlement and bribery.[29] Three years into his six-year term, President Joseph Estrada (1998–2001) resigned as he faced impeachment and a growing risk of a military coup.[30] Six years later (September 2007), the former president was convicted by an anti-corruption court and barred from public office, but he was pardoned a month later by his former vice-president and successor, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001–10).[31] Her administration, too, faced several coup attempts and mutinies, as well as another EDSA demonstration.[32] Despite multiple impeachment proceedings, also grounded in allegations of corruption and of having rigged the 2004 election, she remained in office thanks to a friendly majority in Congress.[33]

Arroyo's successor, Benigno Aquino III (2010–16), presided over a period of relative stability compared with his predecessors. No military plots against him have been reported. Corruption allegations were indeed levelled at people in his circle, but not at him personally.[34] During his tenure, the Philippines' GDP grew by just over 6 per cent per year.[35] In 2014, his government concluded a peace agreement with the Islamist rebel group Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF; see Section 2.3.3), and in 2013 it challenged China's territorial claims in the South China Sea before the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA). Despite strong growth, an anti-corruption drive, and programmes targeting young people and the poor, unemployment and poverty were still as widespread at the end of his term as when he took office.[36] Several factors help to explain this, including Super Typhoon Yolanda (also known as Haiyan), one of the strongest and most destructive on record, which struck the central Philippines in November 2013 and created major humanitarian needs.[37]

This likely paved the way for Rodrigo Roa Duterte (2016–22), the populist mayor of Davao, to be elected president in 2016 on promises of law and order and improved job opportunities. He also pledged to eradicate crime and internal armed groups such as the MILF, the MNLF, and the NPA. At the same time, he opened the door to Chinese investment to finance his infrastructure programme (see Section 4.2). A few months into his term, he played down the PCA ruling on the South China Sea. Duterte also courted Russia, albeit rhetorically.

Duterte's time in office was marked not only by relative political stability and high popular support, but also repression and abuses. Despite rumours and claims, there are few reports

[28] David E. Sanger, "Philippines Orders U.S. to Leave Strategic Navy Base at Subic Bay," 28 December 1991, *The New York Times*; Frank Cibulka, "The Philippine foreign policy of the Ramos administration: The quest for security of a weak state," Asian Journal of Political Science, 1999, Vol.7, No.1,108–134.

[29] Cristina Eloisa Baclig, "The rise and fall of Joseph Estrada: From people's champion to disgraced president," The Inquirer, 11 June 2025.

[30] White III, *Philippine Politics,* 125.

[31] Manny Mogato, "Philippines' Estrada guilty of plunder, gets life," *Reuters,* 12 September 2007; Manny Mogato, "Former Philippine president Estrada pardoned," *Reuters,* 25 October 2007.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ben Reid, "Historical Blocs and Democratic Impasse in the Philippines: 20 years after 'people power,'" *Third World Quarterly*, 2006, Vol. 27, No.6, 1003–1020.

[34] Patricio Abinales, "Aquino's mixed presidential legacy," 30 December 2015, East Asia Forum.

[35] World Bank, "GDP growth (annual %) – Philippines."

[36] Edsel Tupaz and Daniel Wagner, "Aquino's Legacy in the Philippines," 3 August 2015, *HuffPost*.

[37] Angela Sherwood et al. "Resolving Post-Disaster Displacement: Insights from the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda)," 2015, Brookings Institution och International Organization for Migration.

of any realistic attempts by the military to seize power or organise mutinies.[38] His hardline rhetoric toward Islamist rebel groups was put to the test in May 2017, when several hundred jihadists linked to Islamic State seized the city of Marawi and held it for five months. Despite the uprising, the 2014 peace process with the MILF and the MNLF continued, with the groups promised greater self-rule and investment in the Bangsamoro area in Mindanao. In line with that process, a 2019 referendum approved the creation of a new region with a higher degree of autonomy: the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM; see Section 2.3.3).

Despite his father's record, Ferdinand Marcos Jr succeeded Rodrigo Duterte as president after winning the 2022 election. An extensive PR campaign on social and national media has helped burnish the family's image. However, the new president's term in office has not been free of friction. Marcos Jr initially governed through an alliance with Vice-President Sara Duterte, Rodrigo Duterte's daughter. That alliance progressively frayed during 2024, and in February 2025 the House of Representatives voted to impeach the vice-president, with allegations including embezzlement of public funds and having issued death threats against the president. In foreign policy, Marcos Jr is defined by a tougher line on China, closer ties with the US, and deeper relations with other friendly nations such as Japan, Australia, South Korea, and several European countries.

Table 1: Philippine presidents since the return to democracy, 1986–2025

Presidential term	President
1982–86	Ferdinand Marcos Sr.
1986–92	Corazon Aquino
1992–98	Fidel V. Ramos
1998–2001	Joseph Estrada
2001–10	Gloria Macapagal Arroyo
2010–16	Benigno Aquino III
2016–22	Rodrigo Roa Duterte
2022–present	Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

2.2 The Philippine democracy today

The Philippines is a unitary state and a republic, with a president as the executive leader and a bicameral Congress – a house of representatives (316 seats) and a senate (24 seats) – acting in a law-making capacity. Elections for the presidency and half of the senate are held every six years; the other half of the senate is elected concurrently with the lower chamber, and elections to the house of representatives are held every three years. The president and vice-president are elected separately by simple majority (or plurality of votes). Elections to the house combine single-member constituencies – through which 80 per cent of members are elected by plurality – with a party-list proportional tier for the remainder. General elections were held in May 2025, and the next presidential election is scheduled for 2028.

Although the president is the country's highest office-holder, political life is decentralised. According to the 2024 edition of the annual Philippine Trust Study, more Filipinos express trust in local leaders than in national leaders.[39] The system is often described as an oligarchy

[38] Stratfor, "Rumours"; Mong Palatino, "Is There Really a New Duterte Coup Plot in the Philippines?" 6 October 2018, The Diplomat.

[39] Eon Group and Ateneo de Manila University Department of Development Studies, "The Accountability Revolution: Why Filipinos Demand Proof Before Trust," Philippine Trust Study, 5 November 2024.

in which dynasties or clans share political and economic power (see Section 2.3.1).[40] These clans are often landowning families active locally as well as in Congress.

The Gothenburg-based democracy research institute V-Dem classifies the Philippines as an "electoral autocracy," ranking it 102nd of 179 countries.[41] The US think tank Freedom House reaches a similar conclusion, rating the country "partly free" and ranking it 109th of 210 countries and territories.[42] Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, which gauges the extent to which citizens view corruption as a problem, ranks the Philippines 114th of 180, with an overall score of 33, virtually unchanged over the past six years.[43] V-Dem also notes that the Philippines' overall score has declined in recent years due to deterioration in civil liberties, including freedom of expression and of the press. Although the media landscape is free and lively, journalists and media organisations are regularly subjected to threats and political pressure in response to their reporting.[44] For example, journalists have been imprisoned for years on fabricated charges later dismissed by the courts. A high-profile case is Maria Ressa, a prominent Philippine journalist and 2021 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who in 2020 was convicted of libel over a 2012 article naming a local businessman. Many organisations campaigning for human rights and press freedom, including Amnesty International, the International Criminal Court, and international media, have argued that the conviction was politically motivated and an attempt by the Duterte administration to silence a critical voice.

Among the human-rights abuses regularly reported in the Philippines are extrajudicial killings of political opponents and suspected criminals, enforced disappearances, so-called "red-tagging" (see Section 2.3.2), the assault and intimidation of journalists and human-rights activists, and an apparently weak political will to prosecute and punish individuals who committed crimes as part of the Duterte administration's "war on drugs." Several human-rights organisations note that the scale of abuses was far higher and more open under the former president and that the Marcos Jr administration has improved the narrative; at the same time, they emphasise that many of the abuses committed under Duterte continue.[45] The International Criminal Court (ICC), which in March 2025 indicted Duterte, estimates that between 12,000 and 30,000 people were killed between 2016 and 2019 as a result of the anti-drug campaign, whose strategy used murder to eliminate crime and what the Duterte-administration deemed immoral behaviours.[46] According to researchers at the University of the Philippines, who track reported extrajudicial killings, more than 1,000 people had been murdered since Marcos Jr took office in 2022 up to June 2025.[47] Most were killed by the police, but a smaller number, primarily rebels, were killed by the military.[48] Responsibilities for law enforcement are in part shared between the police and the military, especially in rural areas. Police armament varies widely, from standard sidearms for most officers to heavier rifles in certain units. In line with the drug-related death counts, the

[40] White III, *Philippine Politics*, 46–56.

[41] V-Dem arranges countries along a scale with four categories that include liberal democracy, electoral democracy, electoral autocracy, and closed autocracy, as well as a democratic and autocratic grey zone; Marina Nord, et al. "Democracy Report 2024: Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot," 2024, Göteborg: V-Dem Institute.

[42] Freedom House, "Philippines."

[43] Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index 2024: Philippines."

[44] Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2025: Philippines – Events of 2024," January 2025; Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2024: Philippines."

[45] Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2025"; Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2024: Philippines."

[46] International Criminal Court – ICC, "Decision on the Prosecutor's request for authorisation of an investigation pursuant Article 15(3) of the Statute," 15 September 2021, ICC-01/21.

[47] Philip Jamilla, "Keeping count, keeping watch: UP's human rights advocates and the continuing "war on drugs", University of the Philippines, https://up.edu.ph/keeping-count-keeping-watch-ups-human-rights-advocates-and-the-continuing-war-on-drugs/ [retrieved 5 November 2025].

[48] John Matthew A. Cabural et al. "Majority of 31 killed in state-related violence in January 2025 attributed to police – Sandatahang dahas monitor," 3 March 2025, VERA files.

Philippine organisations Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility and the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines reach similar conclusions regarding threats to media workers. A 2025 study found that reports of violence and threats against journalists increased by 44 per cent during Marcos Jr's first three years in office compared with Duterte's, driven mainly by threats and red-tagging.[49]

In theory, political elections in the Philippines are free and competitive and are held regularly on a clear schedule. In practice, they are marred by multiple shortcomings, both formal and informal. Formally, recurring electoral fraud is reported, such as ballot stuffing and vote-buying. Informally, many contests, especially at the local level, are effectively decided in advance through alliances, deals, threats, and killings among political actors.[50]In the general elections of May 2025, the EU election observation mission estimated that 20 per cent of all districts lacked an opposition candidate, which meant the incumbent won unopposed.[51]

Despite the fact that political parties formally contest elections, many observers consider them largely irrelevant. What matters instead are political clans (see Section 2.3.1), which dominate the political landscape in their respective strongholds. As scholar Andrea Chloe Wong writes, Filipinos choose who will rule them, but not necessarily how they will be ruled.[52] Parties thus often lack an ideological base and function instead as tools with which political figures assemble support, before and after elections. This helps explain the weak institutionalisation and high volatility of the Philippine party system, especially since the return to democracy.[53] Weak institutionalisation is reflected in the proliferation and turnover of parties over the years.[54] Between the 1987 elections and 2021, the number of parties rose from eight to 174, often due to splits or the creation of new parties to back a particular candidate.[55] Many parties also suffer from intense internal rivalries that regularly lead to splits. Volatility is reflected in large swings in party affiliation observed before and after election periods, and in which parties gain seats in Congress. For example, members may join a party to support a particular candidate before the vote; once results are known, many switch affiliation to align with the winning presidential candidate, hoping for greater access to funding or political posts. Internal rivalries are also evident in the fact that several competing candidates may at times claim to represent the same party.

Taken together, this has made party politics highly fluid and political alliances weak. A telling recent example is the Marcos Jr–Sara Duterte partnership, which forged an alliance ahead of the 2023 presidential election but broke down during 2024 and 2025 (see Section 2.1.4).[56]

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[49] Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, "The State of Media Freedom in the Philippines 2025," Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, 3 May 2025.

[50] White III, *Philippine Politics*, 44.

[51] European Union Election Observation Mission Philippines 2025, "'Voters' commitment to democracy marred by systemic deficiencies.' The EOM presents its Preliminary Statement," 14 May 2025.

[52] Andrea Chloe Wong, "Philippine elections and the politics behind it," 7 February 2022, The Interpreter.

[53] Julio Cabral Teehankee, "Factional Dynamics in Philippine Party Politics, 1900–2019," 2020, Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs, Vol.39, No.1, 98–123.

[54] White III, *Philippine Politics*, 142–3.

[55] Allen Hicken, "Party and Party System Institutionalization in the Philippines," Chapter 13, in Allen Hicken, Ann Arbor, and Erik Martinez Kuhonta (eds.), *Party System Institutionalization in Asia*, 2014, Cambridge University Press, 307–327;Teehankee, Julio Cabral, "An Anarchy of Parties: The Pitfalls of the Presidential-based Party System in the Philippines," Chapter 22, in Thomas Poguntke and Wilhelm Hofmeister (eds.), *Political Parties and the Crisis of Democracy: Organization, Resilience, and Reform*, 2024, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 467–485.

[56] Virma Simonette and Joel Guinto, "Philippines feud escalates as lawmakers vote to impeach vice-president," 5 February 2025, *BBC News*.

2.3 Domestic political (threat) actors

Although the Philippine political system has been inspired by the American model and the central authorities in Manila have made some progress on institutionalisation, sub-national political actors exercise considerable power and challenge the state's monopoly on violence and effective control. This section examines three groups that have shaped the Philippine system: political clans (dynasties), communist rebels, and Islamist armed groups in the southern Mindanao region.

2.3.1 The political clans

The Philippine party system is, as noted, highly fluid and unstable, with frequent party splits and shifts in politicians' party affiliation. What has instead remained constant is the country's political clans (or dynasties), which share power through alliances and political bargaining, despite the fact that Section 26, Article II of the 1987 Constitution prohibits political dynasties.[57] Names such as Aquino, Duterte, and Marcos are three examples of clans whose members have reached the top since independence from the United States. But it is estimated that hundreds of clans have ruled the country at different levels for centuries.[58] In 2024, roughly 70 per cent of the House of Representatives' seats were controlled by political clans that had been in power for decades.[59] The same held for 72 of the country's 82 governors.[60] Clans are repeatedly described as "thin," "fat," or "obese," depending on how many members they have – or how many are seeking re-election – across tiers of public office. Eighteen provincial-level clans were considered "obese" ahead of the May 2025 general elections.[61] Many clan members are linked by blood ties, but some clans are also characterised by local alliances or partnerships. Alliances between clans can shift as quickly as party affiliation. Historically, clans were land-owning, but some now also have extensive business interests.[62] Not all clans are formally active in politics (for example, through elected office), yet they remain influential because of their economic assets.

As a result, Philippine politics has remained highly localised, and central authority in Manila has been diluted, as a single clan can control politics across multiple institutional levels. Control across levels also means greater access to state financing, through which clans can shore up local support and embed a dependency system rooted in clientelism. The former president Duterte, for example, served as mayor of Davao for over 20 years before becoming president. His daughter Sara Duterte, also a former mayor of Davao, became vice-president in 2022. His sons Sebastian and Paolo serve as mayor of Davao and member of the House for a Davao constituency, respectively.[63] The Marcos clan is likewise active at several levels. Beyond the president himself, his sister Imee Marcos is a senator. His eldest son, Ferdinand Alexander "Sandro" Marcos, is representative for Ilocos Norte's first district, the family's power base. Imee's son, Matthew Marcos Manotoc, is governor of Ilocos Norte. Martin Romualdez, a cousin of the president, is the Speaker of the House.

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[57] "The State shall guarantee equal access to opportunities for public service and prohibit political dynasties as may be defined by law," in Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines, 1987, Section 26, Article II.

[58] White III, *Philippine Politics*, 44–56.

[59] Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2024: Philippines."

[60] Angela Ballera, Gab Yanzon and Carmela Fonbuena, "71 of 82 Philippine governors belong to political families," 10 December 2024, *Rappler*.

[61] Ballera, Yanzon, and Fonbuena, "71 of 82 Philippine governors"; Cleo Anne A. Calimbahin and Luie Tito F. Guia, "A Quixotic Quest? Electoral and Political Reforms from Duterte to Marcos Jr." in Aries A. Arugay and Jean Encinas-Franco (eds.) Games, Changes, and Fears: The Philippines from Duterte to Marcos Jr., Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, p.203–228.

[62] White III, *Philippine Politics*, 44.

[63] Since 2025, Sebastian Duterte has served as acting mayor of Davao, because Rodrigo Duterte, who was elected to the post in May, has been arrested and indicted by the International Criminal Court.

While clan control can be extensive, it is continually contested by Manila and by rival clans. This incentivises alliance-building among clans, but it can also lead to political violence. Several groupings already maintain their own informal militias to provide security and protect the local leader. Some definitions classify these militias as private armies – a description that is not unfounded, given that some members are former Philippine soldiers. Some militias have present or historical links to other armed groups in the country, such as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and the New People's Army (NPA). The Islamic State-linked Maute group (see Section 2.3.3) initially operated as a private militia for an influential local matriarch, Farhana Maute, whose sons used violence to threaten and intimidate other clans in local elections.[64] Most militias are estimated to be concentrated in the southern Mindanao region.[65]

When local leaders occasionally come into conflict, militias may be deployed, increasing inter-clan killings. The democracy scholar Kreuzer argues that the level of lethal violence against politicians in the Philippines is comparable to that in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and South Africa.[66] As in those countries, illegal firearms circulate widely in the Philippines, despite very harsh penalties for unlawful possession.[67] Periods of elevated homicide coincide with election cycles, when political rivals settle scores before and after election day. According to Kreuzer, the number of political killings increased under Duterte, although the deadliest incident in the Philippines occurred in 2009, when 58 people – 32 of them journalists – were killed by members of the local Ampatuan clan in the southern province of Maguindanao, on the island of Mindanao.[68] A likely explanation for the emergence of these groups is that the state has been unable to establish effective control beyond metropolitan Manila. Several began as self-defence groups but subsequently gained greater political influence.[69] Some militias, for example, were used by landowners in Mindanao to suppress NPA cells that threatened to take over their estates.

Even though many attempts have been made to curb the influence of political clans, these efforts often face strong resistance within the various law-making bodies.[70] Overall, this makes it highly likely that clan politics will continue to shape Philippine politics for the foreseeable future.

2.3.2 The communist insurgency

Since the late 1960s, a Maoist insurgency has constituted one of the most defining threats in the Philippines.[71] The insurgency, led by the New People's Army (NPA), has its roots in the Hukbalahap revolt (see Section 2.1.2) and is the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). The CPP and the NPA were founded in 1968 and 1969, respectively, and seek to replace the Philippine government with a revolutionary, Maoist regime.[72] According to conflict scholar Buenaventura, the CPP blames the Philippines' problems on

[64] International Crisis Group, "Philippines: Addressing Islamist Militancy after the Battle for Marawi," 17 July 2018.

[65] Jovanie Camacho Espesor, "Soldiers, Rebels, and Overlords," Chapter 15, in Steven Ratuva, Radomir Compel, and Sergio Aguilar (eds.), *Guns & Roses: Comparative Civil-Military Relations in the Changing Security Environment* (2019).

[66] Peter Kreuzer, "Killing Politicians in the Philippines: Who, Where, When, and Why," 2022, Peace Research Institute Frankfurt.

[67] White III, *Philippine Politics,* 39.

[68] Kreuzer, "Killing Politicians," 18; BBC, "Maguindanao: Philippine family clan members found guilty of massacre", 19 December 2019.

[69] Vincent Kyle Parada, "Politics, power and private armed groups in the Philippines," 14 April 2023, East Asia Forum.

[70] White III, *Philippine Politics,* 27–61.

[71] Ibid. 41; International Crisis Group, "Calming the Long War in the Philippines Countryside," *Asia Report,* N. 338, 19 April 2024, 1.

[72] Tomas Buenaventura, "The Communist Insurgency in the Philippines," 13 July 2023, Armed Conflict Location and Events Database (ACLED).

imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism, and holds that a national-democratic revolution is the only solution. The NPA's military strategy is based on Mao Zedong's idea of "protracted people's war," which aims gradually to encircle the cities from the countryside with an army of rural residents.[73] The NPA describes itself as a nationwide movement, but in recent years it has operated mainly in the Visayas and Mindanao regions, and in parts of the northern island of Luzon.[74] Both the central Visayas archipelago and Mindanao in the south are key agricultural centres, for sugar production and fruit, and there are pronounced tensions there between tenant farmers and landowners, which the NPA has sought to exploit.[75]

Exactly how influential the group is today is unclear, but much indicates that the NPA's influence has been greatly weakened. Membership has fallen in recent years from around 45,000 in the 1980s to between 1,200 and 2,000 active fighters.[76] Estimates of the NPA's geographic presence also vary. In 2023, the military estimated that NPA rebels controlled roughly 200 villages, and that a further 300 were monitored by the army due to suspected NPA activity.[77] This can be compared with just over 1,300 villages controlled by the NPA in 2008, and around 42,000 villages in which the NPA had some degree of influence during the 1980s.[78] The NPA's decline is also attributed to logistical and financial constraints resulting from the government's increasingly holistic strategy, which has undermined the group's capacity to plan and conduct operations, as well as to recruit. The fact that the CPP/NPA founder José María Sison died in exile in December 2022 has likely further reduced the group's appeal, potentially leading to demobilisation and fragmentation.[79]

There have been several attempts at peace talks between the government and the NPA over the years, but no formal peace agreement has been concluded.[80] The most recent attempt was launched by Duterte in 2016 but collapsed the following year, owing in part to disagreements over amnesty, prisoner exchanges, and socio-economic incentives for the rebels. When Duterte declared martial law in May 2017 in Mindanao due to the Marawi siege (see Section 2.3.4), the NPA perceived it as a threat and urged its members to attack government forces. Since then, hostilities between the NPA and the government have remained high. One reason for this is that Duterte, in December 2018, formally designated the CPP–NPA a terrorist organisation.

The group's terrorist designation is alleged to have expanded so-called "red-tagging" in the country, whereby left-leaning individuals or organisations are labelled as communists or as proxies and front persons for terrorist organisations.[81] Historically, it was above all journalists, human-rights activists, and other left-wing activists who were affected, but in recent years the practice is reported to have broadened. In addition to police surveillance, threats, and discrimination, people who have been red-tagged have been imprisoned or in some cases killed.[82] The police and the military are chiefly accused of carrying out red-tagging, but other authorities have also been involved. For example, local authorities, such as in *barangays*, must certify that their areas are free of communists before gaining access to

[73] Buenaventura, "The Communist Insurgency."

[74] International Crisis Group, "Calming the Long War," 16–21; White III, *Philippine Politics*, 41; Buenaventura, "The Communist Insurgency."

[75] Ibid.

[76] International Crisis Group, "Calming the Long War," 14.

[77] Ibid. 10.

[78] Cibulka, "The Philippine foreign policy," 112.

[79] Seth Mydans, "Jose Maria Sison, Philippine Communist Party Founder, Dies at 83," *The New York Times*, 19 December 2022.

[80] Ruby Roselle L. Tugade, "Persistent red-tagging in the Philippines as violation of the principle of distinction in international humanitarian law," September 2022, *Philippine Law Journal*, No.3, 560–581.

[81] Tugade, "Persistent red-tagging."

[82] Human Rights Watch, "Philippines: Dangerous 'Red Tagging' of Labor Leaders," 24 September 2024.

public funds.[83] Although anti-communist rhetoric has eased since Duterte, observers question whether red-tagging has in practice declined under Marcos Jr.[84]

The NPA's decline can partly be explained by the government's shift to the offensive after the latest peace talks collapsed in 2017. Whereas historically the guerrillas were countered primarily by military means and intelligence operations, the campaign against the NPA has become much broader, with civilian agencies playing a larger role. According to the International Crisis Group, the approach has been effective, as the state has become more visible and present in affected areas.[85] At the same time, it has opened the way for an intensification of abuses, such as red-tagging or contract killings carried out by local militias. Despite the NPA's severe weakening, clashes between the military and the rebels continue to be reported with some regularity.[86] The Army has been the central actor in the armed forces' campaign against the NPA, but the Air Force has at times provided air support, using light attack aircraft such as the Brazilian A-29B Super Tucano and the South Korean FA-50 to strike selected NPA positions.[87]

Although the NPA is now much weakened, the group has not been fully defeated, and there is concern that new factions may emerge. Multiple splits have occurred over the years. Some groupings have had more local or ethnic roots and aims – for example, the so-called Cordillera People's Liberation Army, which broke away from the NPA in 1986 and consisted of indigenous peoples in the Luzon highlands.[88] Given the death of the NPA/CPP founder in 2022, there is a risk of further fragmentation, which could create opportunities for negotiations with the government while also posing a risk of renewed violence.

2.3.3 Islamist insurgencies in the Bangsamoro region

Islamist armed groups have constituted one of the most defining threats to the Philippine state for more than fifty years, and to some extent still do so today (see Section 3.2). The Mindanao region, where most Philippine Muslims live, has long been a locus of resistance.[89] Neither the Spaniards, the Americans, nor the Japanese succeeded in establishing effective control over the region. The Philippine state's twentieth-century attempts to consolidate its authority there, including through migration and land reforms that favoured Christian and landowning groups, sowed the seeds of the Islamist insurgency known today.[90]

Several violent armed groups operate in the Bangsamoro province in Mindanao, including Islamist, communist, and clan-based militias.[91] The first of these constitutes the principal threat, but its interactions with clan militias are an important factor for understanding its drivers. Closely related is the competition among militias and their leaders, which has led to splintering and the emergence of other, smaller factions. The presence of multiple actors

[83] Barangays are the lowest administrative unit in the Philippines, roughly corresponding to small towns, villages, or districts; Human Rights Watch, "Philippines: Dangerous."

[84] International Crisis Group, "Calming the Long War," 29.

[85] Ibid. 11.

[86] Amir Latif, "Philippine army claims killing 'top' rebel commander," 12 February 2025, *Anadolu Agency*; Leilanie Adriano, "Public urged to stay vigilant as Army, NPA clash anew in Apayao," 7 April 2025, Philippine News Agency; Merlinda A. Pedrosa, "2 NPA leaders killed in Negros clash," 10 March 2025, *Sunstar*.

[87] John Henric Mendoza, "PH Army used airstrikes vs NPA in Abra, spox confirms," 5 April 2024, *Inquirer*; J.C. Gotinga, "Military launches airstrikes on alleged NPA lair in Northern Samar," 29 October 2019, *Rappler*.

[88] White III, *Philippine Politics*, 44.

[89] The island of Mindanao is the largest in the island group of the same name. The group also includes the islands of Basilan, Jolo, Tawitawi and Dinagat.

[90] Georgi Engelbrecht, "The logics of insurgency in the Bangsamoro," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 2021, Vol.32, No.6, 891.

[91] Bangsanao is a province, stretching from the island of Mindanao, in the east, to Basilan, Jolo, Tawitawi, and Dinagat.

has created a complex security situation that will likely continue to undermine the state's effective control for years to come.

The Islamist insurgency in Mindanao began to take shape in the 1960s as a result of decades of rising tensions between Christian and Muslim communities.[92] This culminated in 1972, when various clan-based armed groups joined forces to form the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) with the goal of achieving self-rule. The MNLF split in the late 1970s over disagreements about a 1976 peace agreement, which envisaged greater autonomy for the region.[93] Only a small portion of MNLF members abided by the accord; many fighters continued the armed struggle. Amid the splits, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was formed in 1984 with the aim of establishing an independent Islamic state. MILF grew much larger and stronger than its predecessor, and is estimated to have had up to 60,000 members at its peak. The group also relied on a support base of local networks totalling around half a million people.

The government in Manila held multiple rounds of peace talks with MILF, but it was not until 2014 that the parties agreed to the peace process that continues today.[94]As part of the agreement, a 2019 referendum approved self-rule in Bangsamoro, formally establishing the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Following the conclusion of regional elections in BARMM in October 2025 (which had been delayed at the time of writing), MILF and MNLF are to assume greater governance of the province.

Although significant progress has been made, the peace process with MILF remains fragile, owing to slow demobilisation and reintegration. Among other things, MILF members contend that promised economic support has not materialised, and many have yet to be disarmed. Media reporting in 2023 estimated that just over half of the group's 40,000 members had been disarmed. Sporadic fighting has also continued, although the ceasefire has largely been respected.[95] In January 2025, for example, two Philippine soldiers were killed and twelve wounded when MILF members attacked a military convoy escorting aid workers on Basilan island.[96]

2.3.4 Islamist insurgencies in the Bangsamoro region

As a result of splits within the MNLF and MILF, more extremist armed groups began to emerge in the 1990s. On the southwestern islands of Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi, the so-called Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) established itself towards the end of the decade and later aligned with the al-Qaeda terror network. ASG became notorious for kidnappings for ransom, including of foreign tourists and aid workers, and for bombings in Manila and several other cities.[97] Although the group initially advocated a more fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, its activities increasingly shifted into criminality. The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), a splinter from MILF, also adopted a more jihadist and extremist ideology and sought to establish an independent Islamic state. BIFF, too, fragmented, and in 2014 the group's leaders pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ASG likewise joined ISIS around this time, and its leader Isnilon Totoni Hapilon was appointed emir of Islamic State East Asia (ISEA) province. Several other factions emerged out of BIFF, including the so-called Maute group, which, from May 2017 and together with Hapilon's ASG, laid siege to the city of Marawi in Lanao del Sur province for five months.[98]

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[92] Engelbrecht, "The logics of insurgency," 892,

[93] Ibid. passim, for more details about the agreement.

[94] Ibid. 894.

[95] Ibid. 895.

[96] John Unson, "2 soldiers dead, 12 hurt in Basilan ambush," 23 January 2025, *PhilStar*.

[97] International Crisis Group, "Philippines: Addressing Islamist Militancy after the Battle."

[98] Amira Jadoon, Nakissa Jahanbani, and Charmaine Willis, "Rising in the East: The evolution of the Islamic State in the Philippines," December 2020, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point: United States Military Academy, 10.

Around 600 local and foreign jihadists took control of the city, forcing many of its roughly 200,000 residents to flee. It was the first, and only, time that ISIS-linked fighters controlled territory in the Philippines.[99] Accordingly, a major military operation was launched, and air strikes were carried out using attack helicopters and FA-50 aircraft, targeting suspected positions in densely built-up areas of the city.[100] Around 1,000 jihadists are estimated to have been killed in the fighting.

Since the siege of Marawi, Philippine jihadist groups have been severely weakened, even though the Philippines has figured prominently in ISIS propaganda.[101] In February 2025, the UN expert group on ISIL estimated that ISEA had no more than a few hundred fighters.[102] Even so, analysts warn that the group still poses a latent threat, as several of the drivers of its growth and recruitment remain unresolved.[103]

Although this report highlights three groupings, several other smaller factions have also been active in the country since the 1900s. Broadly, these groups have had strong local roots, yet they have also been influenced to some extent by transnational ideologies promoted by al-Qaeda and ISIS. Some members have travelled abroad to join al-Qaeda or ISIS, though it is difficult to assess the extent to which Philippine factions have received direction or funding from overseas, even if this probably occurred.[104]

Historically, the authorities' hard-line counterterrorism policy has been dominated by a strong military presence and offensive operations in Mindanao. Decades of counterterrorism against jihadists and communist guerrillas have made the region one of the country's most militarised areas. This has led parts of the local population to mistrust and oppose the formal security forces, the military and the police. Although over the past fifteen years the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) have undertaken reforms that opened the way for more "soft" measures and strengthened relations with local communities, military means remain an important component of the counterterrorism response.[105] The aerial campaign to retake Marawi caused extensive material destruction, complicating the city's reconstruction and thereby delaying the return and resettlement of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and creating space for further frustration.[106] Despite the AFP's reform efforts, media reporting years after the Marawi crisis shows that air strikes are still being used, against both jihadists and the NPA.[107]

[99] Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis, "Rising in the East," 10; Charles Knight and Katja Theodorakis, "The Marawi crisis – Urban conflict and information operations," 31 July 2019, Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

[100] John Spencer, Jayson Geroux, and Liam Collins, "Case Study #8 – Marawi," Modern War Institute, 23 May 2024; Adolf Ian M. Garceron, "Urban warfare: Lessons learned from the Marawi crisis," June 2020, Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School.

[101] Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis, "Rising in the East," 1.

[102] United Nations, Security Council, "Letter dated 6 February 2025 from the President of the Security Council acting in the absence of a Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council," 6 February 2025.

[103] Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis, "Rising in the East," 2.

[104] International Crisis Group, "Addressing Islamist Militancy in Southern Philippines," *Asia Report N. 323*, 18 March 2022.

[105] Espesor, "Soldiers, Rebels and Overlords," 277–299.

[106] Kenneth Yeo Yaoren, "Decapitation, Retaliation, and the Indicators of Escalation in Mindanao," November 2023, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism Policy Brief.

[107] *Sunstar*, "30 Dawlah Islamiyah supporters surrender in Lanao," 8 March 2022.

3 The geopolitical landscape of the Philippines

This chapter surveys the Philippines' geopolitical landscape in three sections: the first sets out the country's self-image; the second outlines its threat perception; and the third examines its grand strategy and the policy responses to these threats.

The Philippines is situated in a geopolitically uncertain environment shaped by both internal and external challenges. Internally, elements of the country's geography, its character as an island nation and its topography, have made it difficult for the state to consolidate and centralise authority across its entire territory. The Philippines lies in the eastern part of Southeast Asia and consists of more than 7,600 islands, of which fewer than 1,000 are inhabited.[108] The consequence is that local interests and local-level political actors exert substantial influence, which, in turn, has affected the country's internal security situation and its security policy.

Externally, the Philippines is surrounded by a region of rising geopolitical tension in a strategically important setting. To the north are China and Taiwan. To the west lie the South China Sea and the states of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. To the south are Malaysia, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea. To the east lie the smaller island states of Palau, Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands. Across all these areas, tensions between the world's superpower, the United States, and the challenger, China, are key security-policy factors, even though the South China Sea and Taiwan are the principal theatres.

From a geopolitical perspective, the immediate neighbourhood consists of one great power (China) and several middle and small powers. The Philippines falls somewhere between the latter two categories (see Section 3.1). As China's economic, military, and political influence has grown, Beijing has pursued an increasingly assertive and expansionist policy through extensive territorial claims, new restrictions, and an expanded presence of maritime forces (the navy, the coast guard, and so-called maritime militias). China, as a great power, is increasingly challenging the regional status quo that the United States, the superpower, guaranteed during the Cold War and still seeks to uphold today. The Philippines is key to the United States' continued power projection in the immediate region. The rising tensions in the neighbourhood therefore, to a large extent, shape the Philippines' own self-image and threat perception.

3.1 The Philippines' self-image

Perceptions vary as to what kind of power the Philippines is in the international community. Assumptions in the academic literature range from descriptions of the Philippines as a small power to a middle power.[109] The literature also diverges in its interpretations of the Philippines' behaviour – whether the country hedges, balances, or aligns with ("bandwagons") the threatening power.[110] Identifying what kind of power a state is, or considers

[108] Renato Cruz de Castro, "Philippine Strategic Culture: Continuity in the Face of Changing Regional Dynamics," *Contemporary Security Policy*, 2014, Vol. 35, No.2, 249–269.

[109] See, for example, Aries A. Arugay and Herman Joseph S. Kraft (eds.), 2020, *Towards an Enhanced Strategic policy in the Philippines*; Bama Andika Putra, "The Philippines' acquiescent ascension," 2024, *Frontiers in Political Science*, Vol.6; Richard J. Cook, Maximilian Ohle, and Zhaoying Han, "Geopolitical Kingmakers: South Korea and the Philippines as Linchpins amid the China–US Competition," 2024, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No.4, 379–403; Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Getting hedging right: A small-state perspective," China International Strategy Review, 2021, Volume 3, 300–31.

[110] See, for example, Kuik, "Getting hedging right"; Cook, Ohle, and Han, "Geopolitical Kingmakers"; Edcel John A. Ibarra, "Articulating a Philippine grand strategy: Policy continuities on the South China Sea," *Asian Politics & Policy*, 2024, Vol. 16, 317–336; Renato Cruz de Castro, "Caught between appeasement and limited hard balancing: The Philippines' changing relations with the eagle and the dragon," 2022, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol.41, No.2, 258–278; Renato Cruz de Castro, "Exploring the Philippines' Evolving Grand Strategy in the

itself to be, is helpful for understanding its conduct or grand strategy in the international arena, especially in relation to great powers. It also helps explain the country's self-image and threat perception. The aim here, however, is not to provide an exhaustive analysis of small-state or middle-power theory, but to problematise the Philippines as a security actor and to place the country in a broader context.

The difficulty of categorising the Philippines as a small or a middle power stems, in part, from the theoretical framework used. Definitions of small and middle powers are not uniform, either. This study adopts small-state theorists Godfrey Baldacchino's and Anders Wivel's definition of small states, based on two criteria: 1) states whose political, economic, and administrative capacities are limited; and 2) weaker states in an asymmetric relationship that have limited ability to effect change on their own.[111]

In many ways, this description fits prevailing understandings of the Philippines. The country's political, economic, and administrative capacities are clearly limited in the regional context. At the same time, the country relies on an asymmetric alliance with the United States to balance an increasingly asymmetric relationship with an antagonistic China. The Philippines' close security ties with Washington and its focus on multilateralism further confirm its limited ability to achieve change on its own. Nevertheless, several scholars and interviewees for this study describe the Philippines as a middle power.[112]

Definitions of middle powers vary across analytical traditions in the study of international relations (IR).[113] Broadly, middle powers share many characteristics with small states but possess greater influence. They are understood to have less influence than great powers, yet they still perform a strategic role, not least in competition among great and/or superpowers.[114] The first tradition in IR theory, *(neo)realism*, has sought to define middle powers by their material power resources: territory, population, economy (GDP), natural resources, military power, and so on. The second tradition, *liberalism*, places greater weight on states' foreign-policy behaviour. Middle powers advocate multilateralism, act as "good international citizens" that respect international agreements and standards, or practise so-called "niche diplomacy" on issues where they can exert greater influence.[115] In other words, middle powers are distinguished by more proactive conduct. The third tradition, *constructivism*, defines middle powers as those that identify and behave as such. Constructivists argue that neorealists' focus on material factors is insufficient to explain state behaviour. They instead underscore that underlying state identity and the social context matter for explaining states' interests and strategies.[116]

Interviewees also highlight the difficulty of categorising the Philippines as either a small or middle power.[117] Depending on which indicators are used, the country can appear as one or the other. The population of 118 million places the Philippines among the twenty most populous countries in the world. The country is also close to reaching upper-middle-income status. Both factors could qualify it as a middle power.[118] Yet when its military capabilities

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Face of China's Maritime Expansion: From the Aquino administration to the Marcos Administration," 2024, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 43, No.1, 94–119.

[111] Godfrey Baldacchino and Anders Wivel, "Small states: concepts and theories," Chapter 1, in *Handbook on the Politics of Small States*, 2020, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., 6–7.

[112] Interview 10; Interview 11.

[113] Gabriella Körling, "Bortom stormakterna – En forskningsöversikt över mellanstora och regionala makters aktörskap," 2025, FOI-R--5754--SE, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency – FOI.

[114] Tim Sweijs and Michael J. Mazaar, "Mind the Middle Powers," 4 April 2023, War on the Rocks; Cook, Ohle, and Han, "Geopolitical Kingmakers."

[115] Körling, "Bortom stormakterna"; Putra, "The Philippines' acquiescent ascension."

[116] Ibid.; Sarina Theys, "Constructivism," in Stephen McGlinchey, Rosie Walters and Dana Gold, *Getting started with international relations theory*, 2017, Bristol: E-International Relations.

[117] Interview 10; Interview 11; Interview 12.

[118] Interview 11.

are examined, the Philippines is perceived as among the weakest in the region and is repeatedly described as the weakest link in the US alliance system in the Indo-Pacific.[119] By absolute military expenditure in 2023, the Philippines ranked 41st globally and 11th out of 33 countries in Asia and Oceania.[120]

There is also disagreement within academia and expert circles about the Philippines' status. Those who consider the Philippines a small power emphasise its limited capacity to pursue a security policy that achieves results through its own coercive means.[121] Others argue that the Philippines is increasingly seen as a middle power because of how it acts internationally, especially in the South China Sea.[122] For example, the Australian think tank the Lowy Institute has, since 2018, classified the Philippines as a middle power in Asia in every edition of its Asia Power Index.[123] In 2024, the Philippines rose to 15th among 27 states in the index. This places the Philippines toward the lower end of the middle-power category in Asia, but above those classified as small powers, such as Cambodia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar. The component that lifts the Philippines' overall score is its defence network, with particular weight on its defence alliance with the United States and security-focused partnerships with countries such as Australia and Japan. The Philippines' principal weakness is deemed to be limited resilience, owing to historical internal conflicts (see Chapter 2).[124]

The difficulties in categorically defining what kind of power the Philippines is in the international community are primarily theoretical, and definitions vary widely both across and within schools of thought. Even so, it can be noted that while the country may be seen as a small state from a realist perspective, liberals and constructivists may view it as a middle power. Realists may point out that the Philippine economy is small relative to its population, or that its defence capabilities are insufficient to protect the country without a powerful ally such as the United States. Even so, the Philippines remains a pivotal factor in the balance of power between China and the United States. Without the Philippines in the US alliance system, American power projection would be significantly weakened, and China likewise has much to gain from disrupting Manila–Washington relations. Liberals, by contrast, may argue that the Philippines is a middle power because it places great weight on multilateral-ism and seeks to resolve disputes through international law. For example, the Philippines has been an active participant in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional organisation, where it advocates solutions grounded in international law. Not least, it has pushed for a code of conduct for claimant states in the South China Sea and regularly invokes the 2016 arbitral ruling that found China's maritime claims there invalid (see below).[125] Finally, constructivists may argue that, although many Filipinos are aware of the country's limitations and weaknesses, they see the Philippines' identity as a rising middle power and as an active, responsible international actor.

Official documents similarly do not provide a clear picture of what kind of power the Philippines considers itself to be. The security-policy papers do, however, contain some indications. The latest edition of the National Security Policy (NSP) 2023–2028 is the only

[119] National Security Strategy, 2018, 9; Interview 12.

[120] SIPRI Military Expenditure Database.

[121] Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby and Robert Joseph Medillo, "The Tragedy of Small Power politics: The Philippines in the South China Sea," (2020) *Bandung: Journal of the Global South*, Vol.7, Issue 1; Kuik, "Getting hedging right"; Edcel John A. Ibarra, "'Pendulum Swings' in the Philippines' South China Sea Approach?" February 2024, Strategic Studies Program Discussion Paper Series, Manila: University of the Philippines – Center for Integrative and Development Studies, 6.

[122] Putra, "The Philippines' acquiescent ascension"; video conference with a professor of international relations and a consultant for the armed forces of the Philippines, 18 February 2025.

[123] Lowy Institute, "Asia Power Index 2024."

[124] Ibid.

[125] In 2002, ASEAN and China adopted a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, in which they expressed an ambition to establish a joint code of conduct for the South China Sea. Although talks on the code of conduct have continued and a draft was jointly cleared in 2018, no formal decision had been taken at the time this report was written.

official security-policy document that addresses the country's international status. It states an ambition for the Philippines to become "a middle power within a multipolar system."[126] The phrasing implicitly acknowledges that the Philippines is not a middle power today but intends to become one. Other documents, such as the NSS, do not use status-signalling terminology. They do, however, acknowledge limited capacity to counter internal and external threats, while also stressing the Philippines' strategic importance amid regional competition.[127]

Although the Philippines' status is hard to pin down, all of the security-policy documents advocate values aligned with those of the collective West: democracy, a rules-based international order, multilateralism, human rights, and peaceful relations and dispute settlement.[128] While the documents overlook domestic shortcomings in democratic governance and respect for human rights, they set out ambitions that align with Western positions. On a liberal reading, the emphasis on multilateralism and the rules-based order could qualify the Philippines as a middle power.

Like several neighbours, including Vietnam and Malaysia, the Philippines has pursued its claims in the South China Sea through the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and ASEAN.[129] Under UNCLOS, the PCA in 2016 found in favour of the Philippines in a maritime dispute with China over competing claims in the West Philippine Sea. China has consistently refused to recognise the tribunal's jurisdiction in this issue. Even so, the verdict represented an important political victory for the Philippines, which continues to press its maritime claims and frame its foreign policy with reference to the ruling.[130] The Philippines has also sought to advance its interests in the South China Sea within ASEAN, but progress there has been more modest. In 2002, ASEAN and China adopted their joint *Declaration on the Code of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea*.[131] The declaration was a compromise on a Philippine proposal from five years earlier to establish a code of conduct for the maritime area. China has bilaterally concluded similar conduct arrangements with several Southeast Asian states but has opposed a multilateral code within ASEAN.[132] Following intensive Chinese political pressure on ASEAN members, the declaration was adopted as a compromise, since, unlike a code of conduct, it is not legally binding.[133]

3.2 The Philippines' threat picture

The Philippines' threat picture consists of actors that challenge and constrain the state's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the country's culture and values. The security-policy documents set out multiple threats, some more defining and of a higher priority than others. This report focuses on five threats that recur in the documents and are relevant to the analysis.

There is little doubt that the Philippine government regards China as the foremost and principal threat today. Although the security-policy documents (NSP, NSS, and NDS) do not explicitly single out China as the top threat, it is inferred implicitly. The reason is likely political and intended to temper Chinese aggression. The NDS, for example, describes "the massive construction of artificial islands in the SCS [South China Sea]…as a grave threat

[126] National Security Council, "National Security Policy 2023–2028," August 2023, 32.

[127] National Security Strategy, 9.

[128] Ibarra, "Articulating"; Ibarra, "'Pendulum Swings.'"

[129] In the Philippines, these areas of the South China Sea are referred to as the West Philippine Sea. ASEAN's member states, in addition to the Philippines, are Brunei, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

[130] Ibarra, "Articulating," 328–329.

[131] Ibid. 327–328.

[132] Ibid.

[133] Ibid.

to its national security."[134] The document further states that "The past years have been witness to the occupation of numerous key features in the SCS including Mischief Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, and Scarborough Shoal, as well as massive creation of artificial islands done by China to assert its claim." Similarly, the NSS does not name China as a specific threat but characterises "the concerns in the West Philippines Sea (WPS). . . as the foremost security challenge."[135] By contrast, one interviewee for this study reports that the NMS specifically identifies China as an existential threat.[136] Even if Beijing is not named in the open documents, it is clear that Philippine security and defence policy is being shaped to counter an increasingly antagonistic China (see Section 4.2).

The threat from China manifests itself on two levels. First, the government fears direct incursions and territorial losses to China. In the 1990s, China began to press its maritime claims in the region more vigorously, and in 2010 the Chinese Communist Party for the first time listed the South China Sea among the regime's core interests (see map on p.41).[137] Several of the areas claimed by the Philippines fall within the zone that China asserts as Chinese territory under the so-called ten-dash line (also known as the nine-dash line). Within some of the areas that China controls inside the ten-dash line, military infrastructure has been expanded, while patrolling and surveillance have increased (see Figures 1–2 and Annex 2).[138]

Time-stamped satellite imagery produced using Pléiades and Planet shows, for example, extensive infrastructure build-out and dredging at Mischief Reef since 2015 (see Annex 2). The Philippines has also expanded infrastructure on atolls in the West Philippine Sea, for example Thitu Island (see Annex 2).

Figure 1: Expansion of military-adapted infrastructure at Mischief Reef

Source: Pléiades satellite data, with material from CNES and Astrium Services

[134] Author's italics; Department of National Defense, National Defense Strategy (NDS) 2018–2022, 11.

[135] Department of National Defense, NDS 2018–2022, 11.

[136] Interview 10.

[137] The others are Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Tibet Autonomous Region (Xizang) and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

[138] For further reading, see Greg Poling, "On Dangerous Grounds," or François-Xavier Bonnet, "Geopolitics of Scarborough Shoal," Irasec Discussion Papers—Irasec, No.14.

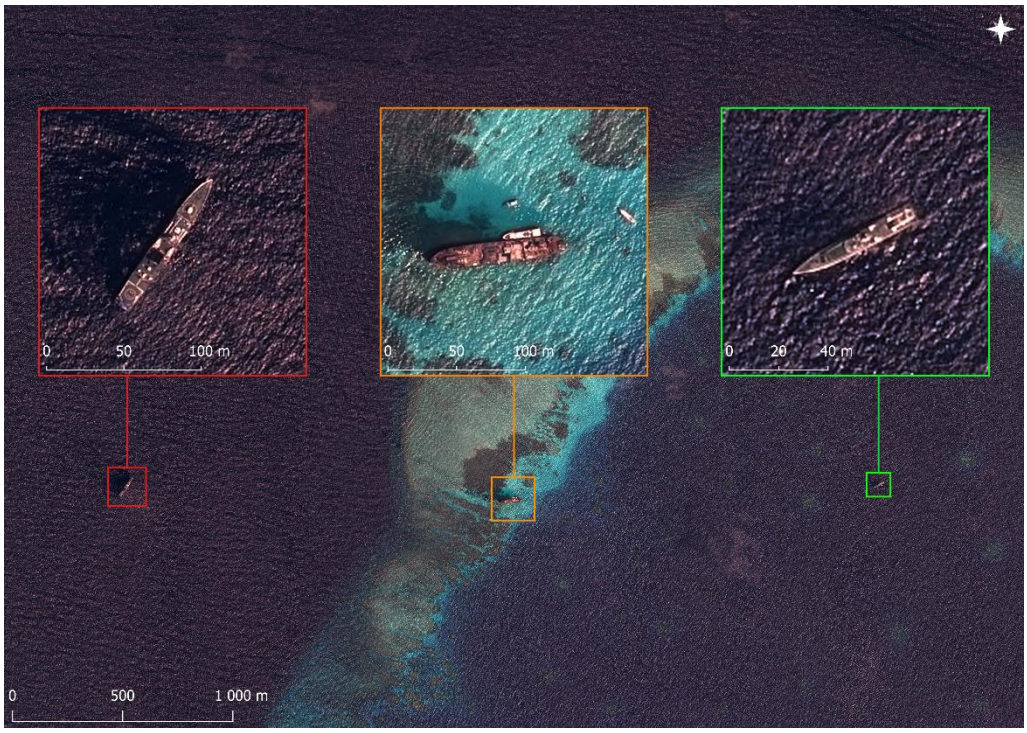

Figure 2: Increased Chinese presence in the Second Thomas Shoal

Source: Pléiades satellite data, with material from CNES and Astrium Services

Secondly, Manila worries about the implications of rising geopolitical tensions, especially what the great-power rivalry between the US and China, as well as growing tensions between Taiwan and China, could mean for the Philippines. The NSP 2023 warns that "[a]ny military conflict in the Taiwan Strait would inevitably affect the Philippines given the geographic proximity of Taiwan to the Philippine archipelago and the presence of over 150,000 Filipinos in Taiwan."[139] The document does not elaborate, but interviews conducted for this study and consulted articles add nuance. There is awareness in the Philippines that national capabilities would likely be insufficient to evacuate all expatriate Filipinos quickly.[140] This implies reliance on support from the United States and other partners, such as Japan. Alternatively, China could use this as leverage by allowing Manila to evacuate its citizens in exchange for a commitment that Philippine bases would not be used by US forces.[141] A conflict between Taiwan and China would also almost certainly draw in the United States, which in turn would need to rotate troops and defence materiel through the Philippines, thereby generating a direct Chinese threat, not least to the northern parts of the country. This concern is reflected in statements by Philippine politicians opposing the establishment of enhanced defence cooperation agreement (EDCA) sites in the north, where US forces and materiel could be rotated (see Chapter 4).[142]

The second category, or level, of threats identified in Philippine security policy consists of domestic armed groups. The first grouping is the remnants of the NPA (see section 2.3.2).

[139] National Security Policy 2023–2028, 12.

[140] Wu, Shang-Su, "The Philippines' Security in the Face of China's Rising Threats," 2024, *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters*, Vol.54, No.4, 60.

[141] Wu, "The Philippines' Security,'" 60.

[142] Richard Javad Heydarian, "Coalition of the unwilling? Resistance to Marcos Jr.'s EDCA deal," 26 April 2023, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative; Senate of the Philippines, "Senate: EDCA is a prohibited treaty," 10 November 2015; Liezle Basa Iñigo, "Gov. Mamba urges Cagayanos to oppose EDCA sites in Cagayan," 11 April 2023, *Manila Bulletin*.

The second is the Islamist armed groups in the Mindanao region (see Section 2.3.3). The third category, closely related to the threat from domestic armed groups, involves terrorism and transnational crime linked to organisations such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda.[143] Several Philippine factions—ASG, BIFF, and the Maute group—have had connections to both global networks (see Section 2.3.3).

The fourth, broader category comprises non-military threats that periodically expose the country to systemic risk. Foremost are natural disasters, which strike annually. The Philippines is affected by around 21 typhoons each year and is also at risk of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions (there are more than 20 active volcanoes), and tsunamis. Estimates suggest the country loses roughly 2 per cent of GDP growth annually due to natural disasters.[144] Finally, the documents also cite cyber threats, widespread violence, crime and corruption, as well as economic uncertainty and trade wars, as challenges facing the country.[145]

3.3 The Philippines' grand strategy: A pendulum between the great powers

Like many small and middle powers, the Philippines lacks an open, explicitly articulated grand strategy.[146] *Grand strategy* here is understood as a state's use of its aggregate means to achieve objectives that ensure its longevity or survival in the international system.[147] Despite the absence of a formal grand strategy, certain principles of Philippine conduct can be discerned in official texts, notably the Constitution and the security-policy documents. According to small-state scholar Anders Wivel, this is consistent with other small states, whose behaviour over time – internationally and domestically – reveals distinct security-policy priorities.[148] The Philippine texts set out principles and objectives that guide state practice. Article II of the 1987 Constitution contains a declaration of state policy. It reads:

> The Philippines renounces war as an instrument of national policy, adopts the generally accepted principles of international law as part of the law of the land and adheres to the policy of peace, equality, justice, freedom, cooperation, and amity with all nations.[149]

The article clearly signals support for a rules-based international order and encourages diversified, peaceful relations with other states. Sections 7, 8, and 19 further clarify foreign-policy interests that the Philippines should seek to uphold and that feed into grand strategy. Section 7 provides that the Philippines shall pursue an independent foreign policy and shall give primacy to national sovereignty, territorial integrity, the national interest, and the right of self-determination.[150] Section 8 states that the Philippines shall be free of nuclear weapons on its territory, while Section 19 expresses an ambition to develop a self-reliant and independent national economy effectively controlled by Filipinos.[151]

The security-policy documents build on this with some nuances. The National Security Policy (NSP) sets out seven national security interests. The National Security Strategy (NSS) lists nine "core interests," and the National Defense Strategy (NDS) articulates six "national security objectives." What they share is a focus, each in its own way, on the four

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[143] National Security Strategy 2018, 86–87; National Security Policy 2023–2028, 13.

[144] White III, *Philippine Politics*, 104.

[145] National Security Policy 2023–2028, 12–15; National Security Strategy 2018, 85–93.

[146] Anders Wivel, "The Grand Strategies of Small States" Chapter 30, in Thierry Balzacq and Ronald R. Krebs (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy*, 2021, 490–505.

[147] Wivel, "The Grand Strategies," 491.

[148] Wivel, "The Grand Strategies."

[149] Official Gazette, "1987 Constitution."

[150] The article does specify what the national interest is.

[151] Official Gazette, "1987 Constitution."

interests in the Constitution: national sovereignty, territorial integrity, the national interest, and the right of self-determination.

Although these documents specify goals and principles, they are insufficient on their own to fully explain the country's grand strategy. Since the concept of grand strategy has its roots in realism, IR theory can again serve as a practical tool for understanding the Philippine approach and behaviour. Few studies have analysed the Philippines' grand strategy as such; those that have often examine it through the country's positioning vis-à-vis China and the United States, or in relation to developments in the South China Sea. Philippine scholars disagree on what the strategy consists of, its components, and when it took shape. Even so, a pattern, indeed a continuity, can be traced over at least the last twenty years.

This report summarises that pattern in four overarching objectives:

1. Preserve national sovereignty
2. Protect territorial integrity
3. Advance economic development
4. Strengthen national defence.

From a Philippine perspective, *national sovereignty* can be understood as the ability to pursue an independent policy, both domestic and foreign, and to limit external economic dependencies.[152] Manila's tilts toward the United States or accommodation of China can, in part, be read through this objective. Maintaining the defence alliance with the United States allows the Philippines to avoid subordination to China. At the same time, the Philippines seeks to avoid a permanent US military presence, which has historically undermined domestic capability development (see Chapter 5). It also aims to limit dependence on the United States by diversifying relations and partnerships with countries within the US alliance system, notably Australia, Japan, and several European states (see Sections 4.1 and 4.3).

The second objective is to protect *territorial integrity*, with both external and internal dimensions. Externally, this means defending Philippine territory and the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) against Chinese encroachments. Internally, it concerns social cohesion and protecting political authority in Manila against regional uprisings that threaten national unity. External actors also matter here, for example through extremist ideologies originating abroad or foreign direct investment that can limit state control over critical infrastructure and local authorities.

The third objective is to advance *economic development*. Above all, the Philippines seeks a more innovative, high-technology, and diversified industrial base, a modernised agricultural sector, reduced trade dependencies, and greater national resilience. Manila intends to reduce exposure to specific trading partners such as China (see Section 4.2), not least in strategic manufacturing such as semiconductors. The emphasis, however, is on diversifying trade flows, since China remains an important partner and market. The Philippines also aims to reduce import dependence on sensitive security goods such as small arms and ammunition, through expanded domestic production to bolster resilience and growth.[153]

Finally, the Philippines seeks to *strengthen its defence*. Over time, the ambition is to develop a whole-of-government approach to defence that integrates military and civilian capabilities, as stated in several security-policy documents.[154] In practice, this involves reorienting historically inward-facing armed-forces capabilities to an external defence posture (see Chapter 5). The aim is to reduce reliance on US security guarantees by developing indigenous capabilities. In parallel, the Philippines is working to strengthen and conclude new

[152] In other contexts, *strategic autonomy* is spoken of, for example; however, that concept does not appear to be relevant in the Philippine context, since the Philippines is compelled to adapt its policy to the great powers.

[153] Presidential Communications Office, "PBBM signs law for independent, dynamic, future-ready PH defense posture," 8 October 2024; National Security Strategy 2018, 36.

[154] National Security Policy 2023–2028, National Security Strategy 2018; National Defense Strategy 2018.

partnerships with friendly states, especially within the US alliance system in the Indo-Pacific, and also with NATO members such as France, Sweden, and Germany.

The objectives are not always in symbiosis; at times they are reprioritised or come into direct conflict with one another. This becomes evident when one analyses the Philippines' foreign-policy shifts over the past 30 years, during which time the country has at times moved closer to the United States to balance against China and, at other times, yielded to Chinese pressure. Philippine foreign policy – above all toward the great powers and on the South China Sea – is therefore often likened to pendulum swings.[155]

Why does the Philippines' security policy swing so much? Many analysts link the swings to individual presidents' own agendas and to the constitutional limit of a single six-year term. Philippine presidents are regarded as the chief architects of the country's foreign policy and therefore wield extensive influence over security policy, unlike fiscal policy, where Congress has retained substantial influence.[156] The term limit means that presidents try to distinguish themselves by distancing their foreign policy from that of their predecessor, in order to increase their influence in other areas after leaving office. Recent analyses particularly highlight the large swings under the last three presidents – Benigno Aquino III (2010–16), Rodrigo Duterte (2016–22), and the current president, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. (from 2022) – but the swings can be traced further back. Already during Corazon Aquino's administration (1986–92), anti-American currents intensified, leading to the closure of the two US military bases in the country.

An interpretation confined to individual presidential terms is, however, insufficient and misses changes in the geopolitical landscape that have occurred while a president is in office. For example, presidents must relate to developments in the immediate region or at home, regardless of whether the initial policy aimed in one direction or another. The Philippines, as noted, remains a small or middle power that must adapt to the behaviour of the great powers, which entails a degree of flexibility. Although this reduces the country's room for manoeuvre, it also raises the country's strategic significance vis-à-vis the great powers to a kingmaker role.[157] Duterte, for example, initially pursued a China-friendly and US-critical policy, but toward the end of his term was forced to recalibrate because of shifts in the geopolitical landscape, both internal and external. The Marcos administration, which was initially expected to pursue a China-friendly policy, has likewise moved closer to the United States in response to Chinese aggression (see Chapter 4).

[155] Jaime B. Naval, "The South China Sea and East China Sea disputes: Juxtapositions and implications for the Philippines," in Arugay and Kraft (eds.), *Towards an Enhanced Strategic policy*.

[156] Ibarra, "Articulating," 325; Ibarra, "'Pendulum Swings,'" 5; Interview 12.

[157] Cook, Ohle, and Han, "Geopolitical kingmakers, 402.

4 The Philippines' international relations

This chapter describes and analyses the Philippines' international relations, which are dominated by the country's ties to the great powers, the United States and China. These relationships are central to understanding the Philippines' posture over the past thirty years. As Chapter 3 showed, the extent to which the Philippines perceives China as a threat, and the degree to which it trusts the United States to honour the defence alliance, are key drivers of state behaviour. In some periods, the Philippines has sought to strengthen relations with the United States in order to balance against the Chinese threat. In others, Manila has pursued accommodation with Beijing to gain access to vital capital for domestic economic development.

While the Philippines has deepened its relationship with the United States over the past fifteen years, it is important to underscore that Manila has also diversified its relations and strengthened partnerships with other countries within the US alliance system in recent years, both in the Indo-Pacific and with NATO members. Since 2007, Manila has concluded Visiting Forces agreements with Australia (2007) and Japan (2025), signed a similar accord with New Zealand (2025), and begun negotiations on a comparable arrangement with France (2025). It has been reported that a similar agreement with South Korea is under way, and that a new security agreement was signed with Germany in 2024.

This report is, however, limited to relations with the great powers – the United States and China, which are the principal external factors for the Philippines – and with Japan, one of Manila's most strategic partners. The chapter is therefore divided into three sections. The first analyses relations with the United States, and the second relations with China; both sections also trace how the pendulum swings have played out since the 1990s. The third section examines relations with Japan as one example of how the Philippines seeks to reduce its dependence on the United States while balancing the threat from China.

4.1 Relations with the United States

The former colonial power, the United States, is the Philippines' only ally and a central component of Philippine security policy. The Philippines was a US colony from 1898 to 1946, and the state apparatus is deeply influenced by its American counterpart. That the largest American military cemetery outside the United States, by number of burials, is located in Manila further symbolises how close the countries have been historically.[158]

Since independence, security relations have been anchored in the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT), under which the two countries entered a formal defence alliance. The treaty was one of several the United States concluded with states in the Indo-Pacific early in the Cold War and helped establish the so-called hub-and-spoke system, the US bilateral alliance network that also includes Australia, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand. From 1947 to 1992, a separate agreement allowed US forces to be stationed at Clark Air Base and at the naval base in Subic Bay. In 1992, however, the Philippine Senate voted against renewing that agreement amid growing domestic opposition. Although many analysts view the Philippines as the weakest state in the hub-and-spokes system, the country is also deemed to play a strategic role because of its geography. Without the Philippines as an ally, US power-projection in the region would be weakened and its strategic depth within the first island chain constrained.[159] The Philippines' strategic value increased dramatically after the

[158] Interview 3.

[159] The first-island chain stretches from Japan in the north via Okinawa and Taiwan to the Philippines; Renato Cruz de Castro, "The Philippines-U.S. Alliance and 21st Century U.S. Grand Strategy in the Indo-Pacific region: From the Obama Administration to the Biden Administration," 2022, *Defence Studies*, Vol.22, No.3, 414–432; Interview 6; Poling, "On dangerous grounds," 9.

United States was forced out of Vietnam.[160] US bases in the Philippines were, moreover, critical for American logistics and support during the Vietnam War (circa 1955–75).[161] At the same time, few analysts believe the Philippines could, on its own, deter or repel an attack from China. The alliance is therefore critical for both parties.

Today, the MDT remains the anchor of US–Philippine relations, but several other agreements have deepened ties since the 1990s. The Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) of 1998 and the EDCA of 2014 constitute two additional pillars of the security partnership. The VFA affords US military and defence department personnel legal status and protections while in the Philippines on official duty.[162] The EDCA permits the rotation of US military personnel through nine Philippine naval and air bases for security training or military exercises, in exchange for US investments in base infrastructure such as training facilities and storage.[163] The initial 2014 EDCA granted access to five Philippine bases; in February 2023, the number of EDCA sites was expanded by four (see Map 1). Even so, construction under EDCA-funded projects has proceeded slowly.[164] By April 2023, only five of sixteen EDCA projects had been completed at the original five sites designated in 2014.[165]

[160] James A. Gregor, "The Key Role of U.S. Bases in the Philippines," 10 January 1984, The Heritage Foundation.

[161] US perceptions of when their country engaged in the war differ. The Department of Defense has recognised 1 November 1955 as the earliest date upon which a soldier's death in Southeast Asia would qualify the deceased for inclusion in the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial. This report, therefore, uses this date as a start of the conflict; Gregor, "The Key Role."

[162] U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation with the Philippines," 20 January 2025.

[163] Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "More than meets the eye: Philippine upgrades at EDCA sites," Center for Strategic and International Studies.

[164] Interview 8; Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "More than meets the eye."

[165] Ibid.

Map 1: EDCA sites and flashpoints in the South China Sea

Sources: ESRI, GEBCO, Garmin, NaturalVue

Map created by Patric Karlsson, FOI

The EDCA and the VFA are fundamental to the countries' close defence and security cooperation, and their armed forces train together regularly. Balikatan ("shoulder to shoulder" in Tagalog) is the most high-profile exercise. It is a bilateral exercise that has been held for the past forty years, sometimes with other states invited. For thirty years, the Philippines has also taken part in the US bilateral exercise series in Southeast Asia, Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT).[166] As part of the Balikatan exercises over the past two years, the United States has deployed two batteries of the Typhon missile system to northern Luzon.[167]

The Philippines also receives extensive US security assistance in the form of funding and training for both military and civilian personnel. Since 2015, such programmes have amounted to at least USD 700 million.[168] As one of nineteen countries designated by the United States as a "major non-NATO ally," the Philippines additionally gains access to further US privileges, including financing and loans for the procurement of materiel and equipment, as well as for research and development.[169]

After two years of negotiations, the countries concluded the General Security of Military Information Agreement in November 2024, which sets the terms for mutual sharing and handling of military intelligence and for Philippine access to high-technology US defence materiel.[170] In April 2025, the US state department also announced the approval for the sale of 20 F-16 fighter aircraft to the Philippines, corresponding to half of the country's planned fighter-aircraft procurement.[171]

The Philippines procures the majority of its defence materiel from the United States. Between 1999 and 2024, 59 per cent of major arms transfers to the Philippines came from the United States, according to SIPRI.[172] The remainder came exclusively from states friendly to, or allied with, the United States, such as Israel, South Korea, and the United Kingdom, as well as Sweden.

Beyond agreements and security assistance, the two sides meet regularly in various formats. Since 2011, they have held an annual bilateral strategic dialogue, and since 2012 a "2+2" ministerial dialogue has been convened four times.[173] Marcos and Joe Biden also launched a Democracy Dialogue in September 2024, though it is unclear whether it will continue under Trump. The US development agency, USAID, was, up to March 2025, one of the Philippines' largest bilateral partners.[174]

4.1.1 The pendulum swings to the United States

Although the seventy-year alliance appears robust today, it has swung over the years. One of the most significant downturns came in 1992, when the Philippine Senate declined to renew the 1947 bases agreement.[175] The decision meant that, for the first time since the

[166] CARAT is held in different formats with different names, such as Sama Sama.

[167] Gerry Doyle and Karen Lema, "Exclusive: US deploys Typhon missile launchers to new location in the Philippines," *Reuters*, 23 January 2025.

[168] U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation."

[169] U.S. Department of State, "Major Non-NATO Ally Status," 20 January 2025.

[170] Jim Gomez, "US and Philippines sign a pact to secure shared military intelligence and weapons technology," 18 November 2024, *Associated Press*.

[171] Leila Chavez, "US approves sale of F-16s to the Philippines in $5.5bn weapons package," 2 April 2025, *Defense News*.

[172] SIPRI, "Arms Transfers Database."

[173] In 2+2 minister dialogues, each country's defence and foreign ministers meet.

[174] U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, "U.S.–Philippines Relations," 29 July 2024.

[175] Cruz de Castro, "The Philippines-U.S. Alliance," 418; Amador III, Baladjay, and Valenzuela, "Modernizing or equalizing?" 305.

Second World War, the United States would not have a permanent military base in the Philippines.[176]

A second downturn occurred under President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001–2010). In 2004, she recalled Philippine troops from Iraq in exchange for the release of a Filipino lorry driver held by Iraqi rebels.[177] At the same time, she pursued a China-friendly policy that is sometimes described as the "golden age of friendship" in Philippine–Chinese relations.[178] Her successor, Benigno Aquino III (2010–2016), likewise began with a China-friendly line but executed a complete about-face in 2012 after the Scarborough Shoal incident (see section 4.2).[179]

A third downturn took place under former president Rodrigo Duterte, who sharply downgraded relations with the United States and other Western states while moving closer to China and Russia.[180] Duterte openly questioned the value of the US defence alliance and whether the United States would aid the Philippines in an armed conflict with China. He threatened to terminate the VFA and all joint military exercises, barred the United States from using Philippine ports for freedom of navigation operations (commonly referred to as FONOPS), and delayed several EDCA projects.[181] Even so, ties between the Philippines and the United States remained strong, and the then Trump administration proved accommodating.[182] For example, Balikatan continued, albeit in a sharply reduced format, with fewer troops and a reformulated purpose. Instead of territorial defence, which had gained prominence under Aquino III, the emphasis shifted to counterterrorism and humanitarian assistance.[183]

The dips in the relationship have alternated with peaks in response to Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. President Fidel V. Ramos began to adopt a US-friendly policy only after China planted Chinese flags and built stilted shelters for fishermen on Mischief Reef in 1994.[184] Before the Philippines discovered them the following year, he had prioritised multilateralism through ASEAN. The move towards the United States culminated in the VFA in 1998, which the Senate ratified the following year. In just seven years, the Senate had thus torn up the bases agreement and ratified a new accord. Joseph Estrada continued Ramos's US-friendly policy, although it came to an abrupt end in 2001 when he was forced to step down over corruption allegations.

A new upswing in US–Philippine relations came early in Aquino III's term, as China escalated its aggressive actions in the South China Sea. The trend culminated in 2012, when China took control of Scarborough Shoal, which compelled Manila to seek new security guarantees from the United States. The following year, Aquino filed a case with the PCA in The Hague concerning China's and the Philippines' competing claims in the South China Sea. In April 2014, the two countries signed the EDCA.

Although US–Philippine relations strengthened under Aquino, the Scarborough Shoal incident also increased mistrust of the United States and of the defence alliance. Duterte's scepticism toward the alliance and the United States, and his desire to appease China, partly stem from that episode. That Washington allowed China to take control of the shoal during a period when the Obama administration claimed to be pivoting to Asia was seen as particu-

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[176] Poling, "On dangerous grounds," 152.

[177] John Aglionby, "Filipino hostage gains his freedom," 21 July 2004, *The Guardian*.

[178] Ibarra, "'Pendulum Swings.'"

[179] Ibid. 4.

[180] Renato de Cruz de Castro, "Strategic Shift in the Philippine Defense: From the Aquino to the Marcos Administration," November 2024, Potsdam-Babelsberg: Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Friheit.

[181] Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "More than meets the eye," 414–432

[182] Ibarra, "Articulating," 329; Cruz de Castro, "The Philippines-U.S. Alliance," 424.

[183] Ibid. 425.

[184] Philip Shenon, "Manila Sees China Threat on Coral Reef," 19 February 1995, *The New York Times*.

larly problematic. Despite the marked strengthening of the relationship in recent years, a degree of mistrust endures, which partly explains the stream of political statements by both the Trump administrations (first and second) and the Biden administration aimed at clarifying Washington's commitment to the alliance.

The mistrust should be placed in a historical context, however. The American scholar Gregory Poling explains that the asymmetry in the US–Philippine relationship has long meant that Manila worries about abandonment, while the United States worries about entanglement in a particular conflict it does not support.[185] The problem rests on the countries' somewhat divergent interests in the South China Sea. The Philippines has long asserted claims in the West Philippine Sea and regards the area as part of its EEZ. The United States, by contrast, has maintained neutrality regarding the territorial claims of not only the Philippines, but also Vietnam, and has instead encouraged solutions through rules-based frameworks.[186] The sole exception is Scarborough Shoal, which was considered US territory before independence and thus part of Philippine territory after 1946.[187]

In addition to Scarborough Shoal, a far-reaching and central US interest in the South China Sea is the principle of *freedom of navigation*.[188] Specifically, Washington seeks to ensure that US commercial and naval vessels can exercise freedom of navigation and, where applicable, the right of "innocent passage" through other states' waters, including their EEZs and territorial seas.[189] China, which asserts sovereignty over most of the South China Sea as Chinese territorial waters (see Map 1), by contrast holds that all foreign-flagged vessels must notify planned transits before entering Chinese territorial waters; they must also carry the necessary permits and accept Chinese monitoring and control.[190] China also authorises its coast guard to use coercive measures, including force, against foreign vessels it deems to be violating Chinese territory. China's maritime territorial claims and its construction of artificial islands therefore risk undermining US freedom-of-navigation interests, which are central to US trade and power projection.[191]

There is also uncertainty about when the alliance treaty should be invoked. The United States has indeed clarified that an attack on Philippine security forces (the armed forces and the coast guard) would trigger the treaty, but what exactly constitutes an attack is less clear. This is due in part to China's grey-zone tactics (see Section 4.2), in which non-military means are used to deny or disrupt a Philippine presence in certain areas. It is also unclear what threshold must be met for the Philippines to invoke the treaty. In a 2024 speech, Marcos said it would be "very, very close to what the Philippines would define as a declaration of war" if a Filipino were killed by a deliberate act.[192] It is important to note, however, that neither party has an interest in drawing clear red lines, which could force escalation if such an incident occurred.

What is clear is that the more aggressive China becomes, the more likely Manila is to tilt towards Washington. Even though Duterte is associated with a US-critical policy, US–

[185] Poling, "On dangerous grounds," 8.

[186] Ibid.

[187] Taiwan also has a claim on the area; Poling, "On dangerous grounds," 19.

[188] Ibid. 2.

[189] *Innocent passage* is a specific term in public international law. Passage is innocent if it does not prejudice the peace, good order, or security of the coastal state.

[190] Adriana Lins de Albuquerque, "Brinkmanship in the South China Sea: Increasing the odds of an unintentional US-China military clash," June 2016, FOI Memo 5725, Kista: Swedish Defence Research Agency – FOI, 1; Nguyen Thanh Trung and Le Ngoc Khanh Ngan, "Codifying waters and reshaping orders: China's strategy for dominating the South China Sea," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative – Center for Strategic and International Studies, 27 September 2021; Jacob Fromer, "US says Chinese rule that vessels register for South China Sea access threatens freedom of navigation," *South China Morning Post*, 2 September 2021.

[191] Poling, "On dangerous grounds," 2.

[192] Ferdinand Marcos Jr, "IISS Shangri-La Dialogue 2024: Keynote Address," International Institute for Strategic Studies, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwC6xScHzKA.

Philippine relations have remained strong. The Balikatan exercises continued and the VFA was not terminated. One reason is thought to be the armed forces' close ties to the United States and their historically critical stance on China.[193] In other words, the armed forces act as a stabilising factor in US–Philippine relations.

Marcos Jr. has further strengthened the alliance on several fronts. EDCA was expanded in 2023 to include four new sites and a further 63 sub-projects.[194] The Balikatan exercises have grown markedly, shifted focus to external defence, and simulated conflict scenarios in the South China Sea. Closely linked to Balikatan 2024 and 2025, the United States deployed two batteries of the Typhon medium-range missile system to northern Luzon, prompting sharp statements from China.

How the relationship will develop in the coming years remains to be seen, but much suggests it will remain strong. From a Philippine perspective, there is an ongoing need to balance the military threat from China. Even as the Philippines diversifies its relationships, US security guarantees remain invaluable for the country's defence and deterrence. For the United States, the need for a regional foothold for power projection has increased with the competition with China and China's rapidly expanding military capabilities. The second Trump administration has also signalled continued strong support for the Philippines. The US Secretary of War, Pete Hegseth, visited the Philippines in March 2025 as the first stop on his Asia trip and again underscored America's ironclad commitment to the alliance.[195] Shortly thereafter, the US Department of State approved the sale of F-16 aircraft to the Philippines, a clear signal of continuing US support.[196] Domestically, the Marcos clan's influence appears to have strengthened as the Duterte clan has weakened during 2024 and 2025. Rodrigo Duterte awaits ICC proceedings in The Hague. His daughter Sara faced calls for impeachment on accusations of corruption and issuing death threats against Marcos.[197] If both processes result in convictions, this could indicate a reduced risk of fresh, acrimonious political swings.

4.2 Relations with China

The Philippines' ties to China date back several centuries through trade and intermarriage. Presidents Marcos – father and son – have repeatedly claimed descent from the Chinese pirate and warlord Lim Hong (also known as Limahong or Lin Feng), who attacked Manila in 1574, shortly after the Spaniards established a foothold there.[198] The scholar William Martindale notes that Lim Hong's memory varies across Philippine nationalist narratives: one strand recalls him as an intruder threatening the Philippines from the sea; another sees him as a typical Chinese trader; a third casts him as a freedom fighter against the Spaniards.[199]

The memory of Limahong is a fitting analogy for the state of Philippine–Chinese relations today. On the one hand, China is viewed as an antagonist and a threat, owing to its sweeping

[193] Alvin Camba, "From Aquino to Marcos: Political survival and Philippine foreign policy towards China," 2023, *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, Vol.12, No.1, 25.

[194] John Eric Mendoza, "PH, US agree to 63 more projects inside all Edca sites—Brawner." 19 October 2023, *Inquirer*.

[195] Shubhangi Derhgawen, "US vows 'ironclad' support to Philippines, eyes China," 28 March 2025, DW.

[196] Jim Gomez, "Hegseth to fly to the Philippines and Japan in first visit to Asian treaty allies at odds with China," 22 March 2025, *Associated Press*; Chavez, "US approves sale."

[197] In February 2025, the House of Representatives voted to impeach her. In July of the same year, the Supreme Court announced that the vice president could not be tried until February 2026 owing to procedural technicalities in the impeachment process. The decision came after the Senate had delayed the proceedings for several months.

[198] White III, *Philippine Politics,* 16.

[199] William Martindale, "The Many Names of Limahong: Remembering a Chinese Pirate in the Philippines," 2024, BYU Asian Studies Journal, Vol.9, No.6.

territorial claims (see Map 1), construction of artificial islands with military infrastructure, and grey-zone tactics against Philippine vessels in disputed areas of the South China Sea. There is also an underlying mistrust of the Chinese diaspora in the Philippines and concern about espionage because of Chinese investment in sensitive sectors such as telecommunications and infrastructure. On the other hand, China is seen as an economic alternative through which the country can loosen its dependence on the United States and create new opportunities for domestic industry. The consequence of the latter is that China's influence is reinforced via subnational actors, mayors and governors, whose jurisdictions have received Chinese investment.

Although the current Marcos administration clearly pursues a China-critical policy, the Philippines' relations with Beijing have swung markedly since the Cold War. These shifts are driven in parallel by domestic political currents in the Philippines, geopolitical changes in the neighbourhood, and geo-economic needs.[200] Perceptions also vary across political actors and regions within the country. Domestically, the Philippines' single six-year presidential term means leaders have sought to break with their predecessors to bolster their influence at home. In foreign policy, the Philippines' stance toward China has been shaped by Beijing's behaviour in the South China Sea and by fears of abandonment by the United States.

4.2.1 The pendulum swings to China

As with its ties to the United States, the Philippines' relations with China have swung widely since the 1990s. The Mischief Reef incidents (see Map 1 and Table 2) between 1995 and 1998 marked the first major escalation in bilateral tensions, prompting President Fidel V. Ramos (1992–98) to seek a rapprochement with the United States. Relations with China then improved for a time, against the backdrop of warmer ties both between the US and China and between ASEAN and China. Under Arroyo, relations with China strengthened again after she withdrew the Philippine contingent from Iraq in 2004 and ties with the United States soured.[201] The period is sometimes described as a "golden age of friendship," as cooperation expanded on several fronts: roughly sixty bilateral agreements were signed, and Chinese investment in major infrastructure projects, such as telecommunications and power generation, grew steadily.[202] The two countries also conducted joint exploration for natural gas and crude oil in the South China Sea.

Benigno Aquino III (2010–16), similarly, began with a China-friendly line. New tensions in the South China Sea, and rising domestic discontent linked to corruption allegations against Arroyo and her allies, forced a change of course.[203] Through legal proceedings against Arroyo and other families that backed her, Aquino consolidated his position at home; a side-effect was to worsen relations with Chinese actors in the Philippines. In parallel, tensions in the South China Sea flared as several Southeast Asian states, and China, pressed their maritime claims more energetically from 2009 onward.[204] Between 2010 and 2016, bilateral tensions spiked, with two incidents at Reed Bank (2011) and one at Scarborough Shoal (2012), the latter effectively annexed by China (see Table 2). The following year, the Philippines brought a case against China before the PCA. Trade relations frayed: China halted imports of Philippine bananas (then worth about USD 24 million per year), and Aquino sought to limit Chinese ownership in the National Grid Corporation of the

[200] Camba, "From Aquino to Marcos," 9–31.

[201] Ibarra, "'Pendulum Swings,'" 4.

[202] Samantha Custer, et al. "Beijing's Big Bet on the Philippines: Decoding two decades of China's financing for development," 2024, AidData, 59–83; Alvin Camba, "Why did Chinese investment in the Philippines stagnate?" 12 December 2017, East Asia Forum.

[203] Camba, "From Aquino to Marcos," 14–15.

[204] John Burgess, et al. (eds.), "The South China Sea Tribunal," Chapter 10, in *Law of the Sea: A primer*, 2017, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy; Council of Foreign Relations, "1895–2024: China's Maritime Disputes."

Philippines.[205] Also relevant is the Obama administration's 2011 security-policy "pivot" to Asia, culminating in EDCA (signed in 2014), which China perceived as threatening.

Table 2: Timeline of Philippines–China tensions in the South China Sea, 1995–2025

Period	Description
1995 (January)	The Philippines discovers that China has placed markers and built small structures on Mischief Reef, leading to months-long standoff between Philippine and Chinese military vessels. Tensions eased after a bilateral code of conduct was signed a few months later, and China withdrew its naval vessels the following year.
1999	The Philippines intentionally grounds the landing ship BRP Sierra Madre at Second Thomas Shoal. The Philippine Navy has since used the ship as an outpost.
2000 (January)	A Philippine naval patrol fires three warning shots at Chinese fishermen near Scarborough Shoal.
2010 (March)	For the first time, China lists the South China Sea among its "core interests," along with Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang.
2010 (July)	China conducts a large-scale military exercise in the South China Sea that includes its newest combat platforms and live-fire missile tests, which ASEAN countries perceive as a deterrent signal.
2011	Chinese patrol vessels prevent a Philippine survey ship from exploring for natural gas at the Sampaguita gas field near Reed Bank. After Philippine protests, Beijing demands that Manila seek China's permission before conducting similar operations within what it considers its EEZ.
2012	Two China Coast Guard vessels prevent a Philippine vessel from taking into custody Chinese fishermen who had been apprehended with their catch at Scarborough Shoal. The incident leads to months of tension, including several Chinese trade restrictions.
2013	The Philippines challenges China at the PCA over the parties' maritime and territorial claims in the South China Sea.
2016	The PCA issues its verdict in the case between the Philippines and China, finding China's maritime claims inconsistent with UNCLOS.
2021	Around 200 Chinese fishing boats, with maritime militia aboard, occupy Whitsun Reef, roughly 175 nautical miles east of Palawan. The boats depart without major escalation, but the episode triggers Philippine diplomatic protests.
2022	The China Coast Guard blocks the Philippine Navy from accessing Second Thomas Shoal.
2022	Chinese fishing boats repeatedly swarm reefs and banks within the Philippines' EEZ.
2023	The China Coast Guard uses a military-grade laser against the Philippine forces on BRP Sierra Madre at Second Thomas Shoal.
2024	The China Coast Guard issues new guidelines authorising officers to use "lethal measures" to stop foreign vessels within "Chinese waters." Shortly thereafter, the China Coast Guard rams a Philippine resupply vessel at Second Thomas Shoal and, for the first time, boards a Philippine ship. Eight Philippine soldiers are injured in the incident.
2024–2025	The China Coast Guard issues new guidelines authorising officers to use "lethal measures" to stop foreign vessels within "Chinese waters." Shortly thereafter, the China Coast Guard rams a Philippine resupply vessel at Second Thomas Shoal and, for the first time, boards a Philippine ship. Eight Philippine soldiers are injured in the incident.

Aquino's successor, Duterte, signalled a pro-China political stance early, both at home and abroad. At home, he weakened the anti-China currents that had grown under his predecessor, including targeting Aquino's allies and blaming them for the country's drug epidemic, which he had sworn to eradicate with hard-line measures. Duterte also needed help to finance his major infrastructure programme, "Build! Build! Build!", which promised

[205] Chinese state-owned State Grid Corporation owns forty per cent of the company; Camba, "From Aquino to Marcos," 16.

investments worth PHP8.4 trillion, equivalent to 5 per cent of annual GDP, over five years.[206] The financing was to be secured through Chinese investment under China's overseas infrastructure strategy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which the Philippines joined in 2018. The number of China-financed projects grew from 14 to 44 by the end of Duterte's term (2016–22), and several billion dollars were mobilised in various credit pledges, but very few projects have actually been realised.[207]

Despite this, many media outlets and analysts report that the number of Chinese workers and firms in the Philippines rose rapidly during Duterte's presidency. The precise figures are unclear and vary widely, from a few hundred thousand to as many as one million per year. According to the Philippine Department of Tourism, visitor numbers increased by more than 250 per cent over Duterte's first three years, from 675,663 in 2016 to 1,743,309 in 2019.[208] Chinese firms likewise reportedly grew quickly, from between 500 and 600 during 2010–2016 to more than 1,200 in 2017.[209] They were active across several sectors, but most of the new entrants targeted the gaming industry, building casinos, hotels, and resorts for Chinese visitors, which contributed to the rapid expansion of foreign gambling operators in the Philippines (Philippine Offshore Gaming Operations, POGOs). POGOs were first established in 2003 but were formalised in 2017, when Duterte, by executive order, placed them under the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation, which was responsible for issuing licences to operators.[210] POGOs are companies registered in the Philippines that provide casino services in specially designated areas on Philippine territory, such as special economic zones and free ports, as well as online gambling aimed primarily at foreign markets, especially in Southeast Asia and China.[211] These operators are illegal in China, and those active in Hong Kong and Macau have faced increasingly strict regulations from Beijing over the past decade. In the Philippines, and in several other Southeast Asian countries, however, they flourished after 2017. Between 2016 and 2020, an estimated 300 hubs of these firms were set up in the Philippines, along with many thousands of Chinese workers and migrants.[212]

In foreign policy, Duterte largely pursued a policy of accommodation towards China, including, early in his term, downplaying the PCA's 2016 ruling and downgrading relations with the US. Although his approach at first appeared to reduce tensions in the South China Sea, reflected in the absence of serious incidents, he shifted course towards the end of his term. Despite substantial investment pledges, very few Chinese projects were actually implemented, often because of local resistance from the economic elite.[213] Only 1.5 per cent of the planned projects are estimated to have been carried out between 2015 and 2022.[214]

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[206] Jan Carlo Punongbayan, "Continuity, Complacency, and Crisis in the Philippine Economy," Chapter 2, in Aries A. Arugay and Jean Encinas-France (eds.), *Games, Changes, and Fears: The Philippines from Duterte to Marcos Jr*. (2024), 39.

[207] Custer et al. "Beijing's Big Bet"; Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby, "How the Philippines Won and Lost the South China Sea on Social Media," Chapter 3, in Aries A. Arugay and Jean Encinas-Franco (eds.), *Games, Changes, and Fears: The Philippines from Duterte to Marcos Jr.* (2024), 59–83.

[208] Department of Tourism of the Philippines, "Visitor Arrivals to the Philippines 2016–19—Tourism Demand Statistics," https://tourism.gov.ph/tourism/demand-statistics [accessed 4 August 2025].

[209] Misalucha-Willoughby, "How the Philippines Won," 64.

[210] LawPhil, "Executive Order No.13: Strengthening the fight against illegal gambling and clarifying the jurisdiction and authority of concerned agencies in the regulation and licensing of gambling and online gaming facilities, and for other purposes," 2 February 2017.

[211] John Reed, "Manila's online gambling boom highlights pivot to China," 5 August 2019, Financial Times.

[212] The exact number of migrants who have moved to the Philippines to work within the POGO sector is unclear. Estimates vary widely, from tens of thousands to several hundred thousand. Camba, "From Aquino to Marcos," 20; Asia Sentinel, "The POGOs Close in the Philippines: Where Do They Go Next? And where do they bank?" 12 December 2024.

[213] Alexandre Dayant and Grace Stanhope, "Hedging bets: Southeast Asia's approach to China's aid," 26 March 2025, Lowy Institute.

[214] Dayant and Stanhope, "Hedging bets."

He also began to raise the PCA's verdict with China's leader, Xi Jinping, and in international fora.[215] At the same time, several military facilities on islands controlled by the Philippines in the South China Sea were upgraded. A notable example is Thitu Island (see Annex 2), where several upgrades were undertaken during Duterte's presidency.[216]

Since President Marcos Jr took office in 2022, the Philippines' China policy has become more critical. Even so, Marcos initially pursued a more China-friendly line and was widely seen as favourably disposed towards Beijing.[217] Leaked US embassy documents claim, for example, that Marcos lobbied for the establishment of a Chinese consulate in the city of Laoag in Ilocos Norte province, where the Marcos clan has its power base.[218] Marcos's alliance with Vice-President Sara Duterte, and his state visit to China in January 2023, also appeared to confirm expectations of a China-friendly policy. Only a few months later, however, the discourse began to shift as a result of renewed tensions in the South China Sea and growing dissatisfaction with China's presence in the country.

Domestically, Marcos capitalised on growing discontent with the gaming operators and Chinese migration to Manila, which was blamed for overloading public services and driving up the city's property prices.[219] In July 2024, the operators were declared illegal, and all POGO workers were given 60 days to leave the country because of suspected links to money laundering, trafficking, and other organised crime.[220] POGO firms have also been accused of ties to Chinese intelligence activity.[221]

In parallel, Marcos's rapprochement with the US and other US allies strengthened his influence vis-à-vis the Duterte clan, with which he was in open conflict. In October 2023, the Senate opened an inquiry into several BRI projects that had been launched under Duterte. In addition, in February 2025, the House of Representatives voted to impeach Vice-President Sara Duterte on allegations of embezzlement of public funds and of issuing death threats against President Marcos. However, in July the Supreme Court announced that the impeachment could not proceed owing to legal technicalities, which in practice means that Congress cannot begin a new impeachment process until February 2026.[222]

Marcos has clearly shifted towards hard balancing against China in foreign policy by strengthening military ties with the US and other US allies in the Indo-Pacific region and Europe. Rhetorically, he has taken a tough line, emphasising the Philippines' sovereign right to explore and exercise control over its EEZ in the South China Sea. He has done so, among other things, through a transparency initiative that invites media aboard Philippine vessels to film and report when and how China conducts grey-zone attacks on Philippine ships.[223]

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[215] Ibarra, "'Pendulum Swings,'" 5.

[216] Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "Philippines Launches Spratly Runway Repairs," 25 May 2018, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative: Center for Strategic and International Studies; Pléiades satellite data, "Thitu Island 2016–2025."

[217] Camba, "From Aquino to Marcos," 24; Cook, Ohle, and Han, "Geopolitical kingmakers, 379–403.

[218] China has also established a consulate in Davao, which is the Duterte clan's power base; Wikileaks, "Political Concerns in Ilocos Norte," 19 October 2009.

[219] Camba, "From Aquino to Marcos," 23.

[220] "Philippines' Marcos bans offshore gaming operators," *Reuters*, 22 July 2024; Philippines Bureau of Immigration, "All POGO workers to leave," 24 July 2024.

[221] Kelly Ng and Virma Simonette, "'Chinese spy mayor' wanted by Philippines arrested," BBC, 4 September 2024.

[222] The Supreme Court unanimously held that the case could not proceed to the Senate for trial because the process initiated by the House of Representatives was invalid. In its ruling, the Court explained that three earlier complaints filed by private citizens, and dismissed on the same day the House moved to initiate impeachment, mean that no further impeachment proceedings may be initiated for one year.

[223] Don McLain Gill, "Examining Manila's Contemporary West Philippine Sea Strategy," May 2024, *ORF Issue Brief No.712*, Observer Research Foundation; Kurtis H. Simpson, Raphael Racicot and Jacob Benjamin, "Below-the-threshold deterrence, Philippine style," 5 March 2025, War on the Rocks.

He has also come very close to defining a red line for such attacks that could lead to the invocation of the defence alliance with the US.[224]

Despite the Marcos administration's clear balancing policy, the Philippines remains economically dependent on China, one of its largest trade partners. In 2022, China accounted for about one fifth of the Philippines' imports and just over 13 per cent of its exports.[225] Early in his term, Marcos also sought to attract Chinese investment. During his first state visit to China, 14 bilateral cooperation agreements were signed, with investment pledges worth USD 20 billion.[226] He also committed to finding constructive solutions to tensions in the South China Sea. Given that tensions have escalated markedly since then, it is unlikely that the investment pledges will bear fruit.

How the Philippines' relations with China develop in the coming years remains to be seen. As this study shows, both domestic and foreign-policy factors are important drivers shaping the relationship. Marcos has clearly aligned with the US and other US-allied countries. Opinion polls also show that a growing share of Filipinos distrust China or see it as a threat.[227] Even so, there are opponents among Filipino political actors, especially at the local level. Several interviewees for this study also raise the risk of Chinese co-optation of local actors.[228] For example, the governor of Cagayan province, Manuel Mamba, has expressed his opposition to the establishment of EDCA-related projects in the province.[229] His line of argument has been that placing EDCA projects in Cagayan exposes the province to a greater risk of attack from China, although several analysts also note that the region received BRI investments and gaming operators during Duterte. The president's sister, Senator Imee Marcos, has also opposed the EDCA agreement in the past and questioned the choice of new bases in northern Luzon as part of the expanded arrangement.[230]

The Philippines' relations with China are likely to continue to be characterised by tension as friction between Washington and Beijing grows. It is therefore quite possible that the Philippines' political behaviour will continue to swing periodically, either to reduce both the direct and indirect threat from China or to satisfy Filipino power players.

4.3 Relations with Japan

The Philippines' relations with Japan have undergone major changes over the past eighty years. After the Japanese occupation during the Second World War and the extensive abuses committed by Japanese soldiers against the Philippine civilian population, ties hit rock bottom. Since then, relations have improved markedly, and for many years Japan has been one of the Philippines' three most important partners for aid, trade, and investment. Over the past fifteen years the relationship has become increasingly strategic and security-oriented, and in 2024 the two countries concluded an agreement allowing reciprocal visits by their respective armed forces. What explains the strength of the relationship, and what forces have driven developments in recent years?

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[224] Marcos Jr. "IISS Shangri-La Dialogue 2024."

[225] World Integrated Trade Solution, "Philippines trade balance, exports and imports by country 2022."

[226] Paul Haenle and Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby, "The Missed Opportunity of Philippine President Marcos Jr's First Visit to China," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 31 January 2023.

[227] *PhilStar*, "Filipinos distrust China amid bullying at West Philippine Sea – Survey"; Sebastian Strangio, "76% of Filipinos View China as Country's 'Greatest Threat': Survey," 7 June 2024, *The Diplomat*; Sharon Sheah, et al. "The State of Southeast Asia 2023: Survey Report," 9 February 2023, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

[228] Interview 1; Interview 6.

[229] Iñigo, "Gov. Mamba urges."

[230] Aries A. Arugay, "The Curious Case of Cagayan: Localisation of U.S.-China Rivalry in the Philippines," 6 April 2023, *Fulcrum*.

4.3.1 From war reparations to a strategic partnership

Relations after the Second World War were characterised by deep suspicion on the Philippine side and demands for Japanese war reparations as part of the peace treaty signed in San Francisco in 1951. Diplomatic relations were not resumed until 1956, when a war-reparations agreement was formalised. Japan then agreed to pay USD 550 million in war reparations over twenty years.[231] In addition, Japanese companies were to provide USD 250 million in various types of loans to Philippine firms.[232] Of the thirteen Asian countries that received reparations from Japan in the post-war period, the Philippines received the largest amount. Over time, this reconstruction assistance laid the groundwork for the extensive development support that Japan continues to provide to the Philippines today.

According to the economist Dennis D. Trinidad, Japanese aid to the Philippines can be divided into four periods. The first mirrors the reparations period and runs from 1956 to the mid-1970s. The second, from 1976 to 1991, was marked by growing Japanese aid, and Japan overtook the US as the Philippines' largest source of assistance.[233] Japanese development support was at its peak during the Marcos regime (1968–86) and the Aquino and Ramos administrations (1986–91). Japanese development assistance has primarily consisted of loans but has also included grants and technical assistance, and has focused on infrastructure projects and financing imports of goods during periods of budget deficits.[234] The scale of Japanese aid was substantial. Unlike that from Western states, Japan did not condition its aid on democracy or governance, an approach that proved controversial. Japan was criticised for continuing to lend to the Marcos regime and contributing to the Philippines' rising public debt during the dictatorship years. Several Japanese companies were also accused of having paid more than USD 1 million in bribes to Marcos and his allies, thereby contributing to the regime's pervasive corruption. Other critics argued that the aid was designed in ways that favoured Japanese firms and exports. Despite the controversies under the Marcos regime, Japanese assistance continued to increase under Presidents Corazon Aquino and Fidel V. Ramos.

During the third period, 1992–2010, aid diversified from an earlier focus on infrastructure projects to various forms of support for civil society and for authorities at the municipal level. It also became increasingly oriented towards tackling climate change as Japan took a leading role in the run-up to the 1997 Kyoto climate conference. In addition, Japanese aid began to emphasise human security, and in the 2000s introduced support for stabilisation and reconstruction in conflict areas such as Mindanao.[235] Japan has also played, and continues to play, an important role in the peace process between the government and MILF, and it participated as an observer in the peace talks during the Aquino administration.

The fourth period, from the 2010s to the present, reflects shifts in the geopolitical landscape in which both countries see China as a growing threat. Japanese aid has therefore focused more on security-policy issues, such as capability development in the maritime domain and the stabilisation of Mindanao province. In 2011, the Philippines and Japan concluded a strategic partnership and expressed an ambition to deepen defence cooperation that could lead to transfers of Japanese defence materiel and capabilities, joint exercises, and port calls

[231] Dennis D. Trinidad, "Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) to the Philippines," *Japan's Development Cooperation: A Historical Perspective: Background Paper No.12* (2021), JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development, 8.

[232] Trinidad, "Japan's Official Development Assistance," 18.

[233] Ibid. 22.

[234] Ibid. 12, 23.

[235] Dennis D. Trinidad, "Towards strategic partnership: Philippines–Japan relations after seventy years," in Mark R. Thompson and Vincent C. Batalla (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of the Contemporary Philippines*, 2018, Oxon: Routledge, 186–196.

by Japanese vessels.[236] In 2015, the two countries' leaders announced a "strengthened strategic partnership" and a further broadening of cooperation.

In practice, the strategic partnership has produced regular political dialogues at multiple levels, high-level meetings between the countries' presidents, and diplomatic support in multilateral fora on issues where they share interests, such as the South China Sea.[237] During his first two years in office, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo (2012–16) met the Philippine president eight times.[238] Between 2013 and 2024, a total of 16 high-level meetings were held (including telephone calls during the COVID-19 pandemic).[239] Their defence and foreign ministers met seven times, including their first "2+2" meeting, a joint session of those ministers, in 2022.[240] Despite Duterte's downgrading of relations with the US and his outreach to China and Russia, the strategic partnership with Japan continued, although aid priorities shifted somewhat. A much larger share of assistance, for example, was directed to Duterte's home region, Mindanao, both for infrastructure expansion and for stabilisation and reconstruction following the 2017 Marawi siege.[241]

In security policy terms, the strategic partnership rests on three pillars. The first is increased Japanese aid focused on building Philippine capability in the maritime domain, with an emphasis on the Coast Guard. Since 2014, Japan has transferred five TC-90 surveillance aircraft, four radar systems, a new communications system, ten large patrol vessels, and a dozen smaller patrol boats to the Philippines.[242] Some of these systems were procured through loans, while others were delivered as grants.[243] A further five large patrol vessels are scheduled for delivery between 2027 and 2028.[244] Japan has also offered training for both the radar systems and the surveillance aircraft.

The second, closely related pillar is Overseas Security Assistance (OSA), introduced in 2023, which aims to support the capability development of the armed forces of "like-minded states" in non-combat areas such as humanitarian operations, international peacekeeping, and stabilisation measures.[245] The Philippines is the only one of four Asian countries to have received some form of Japanese security assistance every year since 2023 and, according to media reporting, is also a candidate for 2025.

The third pillar is strengthened cooperation between the two countries' armed forces. Since 2015, the two countries have conducted several bilateral military exercises. In 2025, Japan took part for the first time as a "Full-fledged Participant" in the joint US-Philippines Exercise Balikatan.[246] In July 2024, the two countries signed a Reciprocal Access Agreement

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[236] Bjørn Elias Mikalsen Grønning, "Japan's security cooperation with the Philippines and Vietnam," 2018, *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 31, No.4, 536, 538.

[237] Grønning, "Japan's security cooperation," 536–538; Pratnashree Basu and Don McLain Gill, "Strategic Diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific: The Case of Japan and the Philippines," 2025, Issue Brief No.771, Observer Research Foundation.

[238] Grønning, "Japan's security cooperation," 537; Amane Yamazaki, "Japan's Defense Cooperation with the Philippines under the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Initiative: The Emergence of a Quasi-Alliance as a New Chapter in Japan–Philippines Relations," 2025, *Security & Strategy*, Vol.5, No.1, 3–24, Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies.

[239] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-Philippines Relations (Archives)," 10 December 2025.

[240] Grønning, "Japan's security cooperation," 537; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "First Japan–Philippines Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting ('2+2')," 9 April 2022.

[241] Trinidad, "Japan's Official Development Assistance," 34–37.

[242] Ibid. 34.

[243] Ibid.

[244] Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, "Philippines and Japan Finalize Largest Coast Guard Project to Date," 17 May 2024, *NavalNews*.

[245] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan's Security Policy: Official Security Assistance"; Basu and Gill, "Strategic Diplomacy," 6.

[246] Japan previously participated as an Observer; Yamazaki, "Japan's Defense Cooperation," 18; Grønning, "Japan's security cooperation," 539; Christopher Woody, "Japan steps up new security assistance to countries caught between US and China," 8 July 2025, *The Diplomat*.

(RAA) for their respective armed forces. Less than a year later, the agreement was ratified. The Philippines has comparable agreements with the United States (1998) and Australia (2007), and has signed or plans similar agreements with New Zealand, France, and South Korea. As with the VFA with the United States (see Section 4.1), the RAA streamlines the administrative process for Japanese military personnel and defence materiel needing access to Philippine territory during exercises, and vice versa. Several Japanese warships and submarines have also called at Philippine ports since 2016.[247] Both countries, moreover, exchange defence attachés.

Further deepening of the security relationship can be expected under the Marcos administration. In spring 2025, the two countries began talks to establish an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement, which would simplify the procurement of food and fuel when Japanese forces are in the Philippines, as well as an agreement on the exchange of military intelligence.[248] Whether cooperation continues to deepen under subsequent administrations remains to be seen. It is notable, however, that cooperation was not significantly downgraded or slowed under Duterte; the main change was a reprioritisation of assistance towards the president's home region. Since Marcos took office, cooperation has continued to strengthen, not least since 2024.

That relations between the two countries have become more strategic over the past fifteen years reflects several factors. First, their threat perceptions appear to converge, particularly regarding China's behaviour along the first island chain.[249] Both Japan and the Philippines are concerned about tensions between the United States and China over Taiwan and the risk of being drawn into a conflict between the great powers.[250] Their assessments of China's behaviour in the South China Sea also overlap, albeit with nuances. The Philippines views China's territorial encroachments as a threat to its sovereignty. Japan, by contrast, sees China's actions as a threat to its economic interests, especially freedom of navigation.[251] As an island state wholly dependent on seaborne trade, China's construction of artificial islands and its increased maritime presence and control of sea traffic are seen as threats to Japanese merchant shipping.[252] A further, closely related driver is both countries' concern about abandonment by their sole ally, the United States.[253] Both therefore seek to strengthen their security ties with Indo-Pacific countries in the hub-and-spokes system as a way to reinforce their respective alliances with the United States.[254]

Despite these tighter ties, Japan–Philippines relations also face several constraints. The first is that the partnership is not fully reciprocal.[255] Japan is a regional great power with far greater military resources and more developed capabilities than the Philippines. This makes the relationship asymmetric, with Japan carrying the heavier load in security support, in exchange for being able to project power and deter China by expanding its circle of strategic partners. The second constraint is that this is not a defence alliance: neither country is committed to providing military assistance in the event of a Chinese attack on their territory or EEZ. This must be seen in light of the fact that, together, they remain numerically inferior

[247] Grønning, "Japan's security cooperation," 538; Yamazaki, "Japan's Defense Cooperation," 18.

[248] "Japan and Philippines to start talks on 2 defense pacts in the face of China's growing aggression," 29 April 2025, Associated Press/Courthouse News Service.

[249] Renato Cruz de Castro, "21st century Japan-Philippines strategic partnership: Constraining China's expansion in the South China Sea," 2017, *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, Vol.44, No.2, 31–51; Trinidad, "Towards strategic partnership," 194; Basu and Gill, "Strategic Diplomacy," 7; Grønning, "Japan's security cooperation," 540.

[250] Basu and Gill, "Strategic Diplomacy," 7, 13.

[251] Yamazaki, "Japan's Defense Cooperation."

[252] Grønning, "Japan's security cooperation," 542; Yamazaki, "Japan's Defense Cooperation," 7.

[253] Ibid. 10.

[254] Grønning, "Japan's security cooperation," 543.

[255] Ibid. 546.

to China's military power.[256] It is therefore unlikely that Japan would shift too many capabilities to the South China Sea, as this could weaken its naval defence in the East China Sea. As a result, both countries remain dependent on their respective alliances with the United States, even if interoperability among US-allied partners is likely to strengthen in the coming years. Whether the relationship remains strategic under future administrations remains to be seen. The election of a new, China-friendly Philippine president is a realistic possibility, which could complicate Japan–Philippines cooperation. Even so, as this section shows, much points to continued strong relations between the two countries despite swings in foreign policy.

[256] Ibid. 545.

5 The Philippines' security-policy capabilities and priorities

The Philippines' security-policy approach is set out in several documents, including the National Security Policy (NSP), the National Security Strategy (NSS), and the National Defense Strategy (NDS). The documents are, however, incomplete and state ambitions rather than realistic objectives. The threats and challenges they describe largely reflect those that a country like the Philippines faces. This chapter therefore addresses security policy in three sections: the first provides an overview of how the Philippines frames its security policy; the second describes the country's defence capabilities; and the third analyses its ongoing defence modernisation, a central component of its grand strategy.

5.1 The formulation of Philippine security policy

According to scholars and members of the Philippine strategic community, the country's security policy is unclear, overambitious, and changeable, and has lacked strategic foresight.[257] The Philippines published its first five-year National Security Policy in 2011. Since then, each administration has issued its own version (2017 and 2023). A National Security Strategy to guide implementation of the NSP was published for the first time in 2018. President Marcos approved a new strategy in December 2024, but the document is not available in open sources.[258] The NSP documents, prepared by multiple agencies, set out in broad terms the Philippines' view of internal and external threats and challenges and provide direction for how the administration is to achieve its security-policy objectives.[259]

Because the president has significant influence over security-policy direction, priorities can shift markedly between leaders.[260] At the same time, incentives for evaluation and follow-up are weak, which can limit implementation. In the first NSP, published by the Aquino administration, the primary security-policy objective was to "ensure sociopolitical stability" internally.[261] The document also characterised threats to the Philippines as asymmetric and prioritised, for example, the country's challenges as a developing state in a rapidly changing, globalised world.[262] The document therefore failed to foresee the tensions in the South China Sea that flared up that same year, and the administration was forced to adopt a more reactive stance. This also plausibly explains why the administration never published a National Security Strategy, despite plans to do so.

By contrast, the Duterte administration's primary security-policy objective was to ensure public safety and achieve good governance.[263] Its security strategy set out nine priorities, the first of which was to protect freedom, public safety, and people's welfare, followed by ending all internal conflicts, that is, the communist rebellion, and violent extremism and terrorism. Preserving national sovereignty and the integrity of the national territory appeared

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[257] The "strategic community" includes academics and officials from defence agencies and nongovernmental organisations active in the area of security policy; Amador III, Baladjay, and Valenzuela, "Modernizing or equalizing?"; Herman Joseph S. Kraft, et al. "Defending the West Philippine Sea: Achieving Genuine National Security Against a Backdrop of Global Shifts in Power and Persistent Domestic Security Challenges," March 2024, Special Working Paper Series No. 2024–13, Ateneo de Manila University.

[258] Darryl John Esguerra, "Marcos OKs Nat'l Security Strategy to address challenges," 22 December 2024, Philippine News Agency, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1240426 [accessed 2 April 2025]; Interview 12.

[259] Interview 12.

[260] Amador III, Baladjay, and Valenzuela, "Modernizing or equalizing?" 316.

[261] Ibid.; Republic of the Philippines, National Security Policy 2011–2016: Securing the Gains of Democracy (Manila: Government of the Philippines, 2011), 3.

[262] Herman Joseph S. Kraft, "Introduction: The strategic outlook of the Philippines: 'Situation normal still muddling through,'" in Arugay and Kraft, *Towards an Enhanced Strategic Policy*, 3.

[263] Amador III, Baladjay, and Valenzuela, "Modernizing or equalizing?" 316.

only as the third priority.[264] The document thus underscores the government's prioritisation of internal threats and challenges.

The succeeding Marcos administration's overarching objective was to "improve national security governance. . . while. . . providing the enabling environment for sustainable and inclusive economic and human development."[265] Given the current geopolitical turbulence, this objective appears more fitting. The NSP lists seven security-policy interests, which are broken down into several national security agendas. Media reporting states that the new security strategy identifies "53 strategic directions and 393 actionable steps," but the precise prioritisation remains unclear.[266]

As a complement to the NSP and NSS, which are compiled by the National Security Council, the Department of National Defense published a five-year National Defense Strategy (NDS) in 2018. At the time of writing, no follow-up edition could be identified. However, a new defence concept has been developed – the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept (see Section 5.3) – which some media describe as a defence strategy. The NDS defines six objectives for achieving national security. Once again, "public safety" and "good governance" are placed as the top two priorities, while the third and fifth priorities are to "preserve national sovereignty and territorial integrity" and "to ensure maritime and airspace security."[267] A sixth objective is "to strengthen international relations."

Each objective is paired with several so-called strategic measures. These include an ambition to carry out extensive reforms of the security apparatus. The objective concerning public safety calls for modernising, professionalising, and creating synergies between the armed forces and the national police, above all to combat terrorism and other armed groups. It also aims to expand the reserve force to 1 per cent of the population. The objective of preserving sovereignty likewise seeks to modernise the deterrence and defence capabilities of all services. The objective of ensuring maritime and airspace security aims to improve interoperability among the services in the sea and air domains, and to strengthen capabilities through procurement, with the ambition of achieving continuous situational awareness in these domains.[268]

Taken together, the security-policy documents reflect the Philippine defence establishment's substantial need for modernisation and reform, but they fail to set out a clearer strategic line. Focus groups of Philippine security experts argue, among other things, that the documents present a kind of "wish list" rather than defining realistic priorities.[269] The consequence is that achieving all the objectives is seldom accomplished, even if several advances can be noted, not least over the past decade.

5.2 The Philippines' defence capabilities

A number of analysts consider the Philippines today to be the weakest actor within the United States' alliance system in the Indo-Pacific region and to have lost many of its conventional warfighting capabilities.[270] The trend is increasingly worrying given rising geopolitical tensions with China, whose naval combat capabilities are clearly superior to those of the Philippines. Philippine weaknesses stem from decades of neglect of external defence and a necessary prioritisation of internal security threats (see Sections 2.3 and 3.2).[271] The

[264] Ibid. 317.

[265] National Security Council, "National Security Policy 2023–2028," 5.

[266] Esguerra, "Marcos OKs Nat'l Security Strategy."

[267] DND, "National Defense Strategy," 33.

[268] Ibid.

[269] Kraft, et al. "Defending the West Philippine Sea," 20.

[270] Wu, "The Philippines' Security," 415.

[271] Ibid. 55.

result is that the Army has taken on a dominant role, while the Navy and Air Force have been assigned supporting tasks.[272] In practice, this has left the Armed Forces ill-suited to defend an archipelago such as the Philippines, with more than 7,000 islands and one of the world's longest coastlines.

Table 3: Summary of selected countries' military capabilities in active service, 2025.

Country	Total	Army	Air Force	Navy
Australia	58,200	28,400	14,800	15,000
Philippines	146,250	103,200	17,600	25,450
China*	2,035,000	960,000	403,000	252,000
Indonesia*	404,500	300,400	30,100	74,000
Japan	247,150	150,250	47,000	45,400
Malaysia	113,000	80,000	15,000	18,000
South Korea	500,000	365,000	65,000	70,000

* Estimates based on IISS, *The Military Balance 2025*

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies – IISS, *The Military Balance 2025*

Today, the Armed Forces comprise just over 146,000 active-duty personnel: 103,200 in the Army, 25,450 in the naval forces, and 17,600 in the Air Force.[273] A further 131,000 serve in the reserves. In addition, the Coast Guard includes 30,700 active gendarmes and paramilitary personnel, together with 50,000 reservists from the same services. The land forces are organised into five area commands with different geographic responsibilities and one for the capital region, plus a mechanised division, 11 infantry divisions, and a Presidential Guard.[274] The naval forces consist of the Navy, the Marine Corps (8,300 on active duty), the naval air arm, and special forces. The fleet includes two South Korean Incheon-class frigates adapted to Philippine needs and 54 smaller patrol and combat vessels. The Air Force consists of one squadron of 12 FA-50 light attack aircraft, two squadrons of ground-attack aircraft (US OV-10 Bronco and Brazilian A-29 Super Tucano), and four squadrons of older transport aircraft. For comparison, neighbouring Malaysia, with a quarter of the Philippines' population and 113,000 active-duty personnel, has markedly stronger capabilities: its navy has two submarines, two frigates, and 62 patrol and combat vessels, while its air force has four squadrons of attack aircraft.[275]

The Army's dominance is also reflected in Philippine defence spending, which has amounted to 1–1.5 per cent of GDP per year since 2010.[276] In 2020, approximately 62 per cent of the defence budget went to the Army, compared with 19 per cent for the Navy and 17 per cent for the Air Force.[277] Some 82.5 per cent of Army expenditure was devoted to personnel costs, significantly higher than the Navy's 69 per cent and the Air Force's approximately 57.5 per cent.[278] As a result, there is very little room for maintenance, procurement, and capability development for the land forces.

The Philippines' limited capabilities have been demonstrated repeatedly in practice. After the 1992 non-renewal of the bases agreement with the United States, the Philippines lost much of its ability to monitor and prevent incursions on land and at sea. At the same time as revenue from base rentals disappeared, defence spending and modernisation were further strained by the 1997 economic crisis. Between 2005 and 2015, the Air Force lost all of its attack aircraft, and the Navy lacked missiles for several years until new frigates were

[272] Interview 6.

[273] International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), "Asia," Chapter Five, in *The Military Balance*, Vol. 125, No.1, 206–311.

[274] IISS, "Asia," 291.

[275] Ibid. 276.

[276] Amador III, Baladjay, and Valenzuela, "Modernizing or equalizing?" 313.

[277] Ibid. 309.

[278] Ibid.

procured.[279] This helps explain how China was able to seize Mischief Reef (1995) and Scarborough Shoal (2012) with relatively little difficulty. It may also help explain why jihadist groups such as Abu Sayyaf were able to operate with limited hindrance from the Philippine coast. The land forces' capabilities have also aged and weakened. Many shortcomings were exposed during the 2017 Marawi siege: among other things, ground units lacked direct-fire capabilities to breach buildings and reinforced structures, and instead relied on FA-50s and A-29s for close air support.[280] Precision-guided munitions were lacking, which led to Philippine soldiers being killed by friendly fire on at least two occasions.[281]

Governance of defence policy and the armed forces is also markedly outdated, rooted in national defence legislation adopted in 1935, when the Philippines was not yet independent. Several attempts at reform have failed, which helps to explain ongoing inefficiencies in the system.

5.3 Extensive defence-policy change

The Philippines is now carrying out its most far-reaching defence modernisation in many years. Given decades of eroded capabilities, however, the main aim is to catch up with neighbouring countries rather than to balance their forces.[282] The process, initially planned in three five-year phases (Horizon I, II, and III), began in 2013 under Aquino III and was to run until 2028.[283] In January 2024, a revised third phase (Re-Horizon 3) was approved, under which a total of PHP 2 trillion (about SEK 350 billion) is to be spent on procuring new defence materiel over a ten-year period. Funding for Horizon and Re-Horizon also sits outside the Department of National Defense's annual budget.[284] Because the Philippines has a very limited domestic defence industry and virtually no capacity to manufacture advanced weapons systems beyond small arms and ammunition, procurement is carried out through external suppliers. Compared with other ASEAN countries with domestic defence industries, the Philippines invests very little in research and development.[285] Data on annual R&D spending are sparse, but for the years available the Philippines has spent 0.2–0.3 per cent of GDP on R&D since 2015.[286] This can be compared with Japan and South Korea, at 4.9 and 3.3 per cent of GDP, respectively.[287] There is, however, a clear ambition to strengthen the Philippine defence sector, including domestic capacities to produce small arms and ammunition and to revive the country's shipbuilding industry.[288] This was confirmed by the Self-Reliant Defense Posture Revitalization Act, an executive measure aimed at strengthening the Philippines' materiel supply and resilience by protecting and developing a domestic defence industry for advanced weapons systems.[289] The measure, for example, establishes a new undersecretary at the Department of National Defense – the Under-Secretary for

[279] Shang-Su Wu, "The Philippines," Chapter 5, in *Military Modernisation in Southeast Asia after the Cold War*, 2024, 98.

[280] Spencer, Geroux, and Collins, "Case Study #8"; Garceron, "Urban warfare."

[281] Nikko Dizon, "It was FA-50 jet in 2nd friendly fire incident in Marawi – Military source," 12 July 2017, *Inquirer*.

[282] Wu, "The Philippines," 103; Stach, "The Philippines maritime forces and its maritime military power projection capabilities," 425.

[283] Amador III, Baladjay, and Valenzuela, "Modernizing or equalizing?"

[284] Joe Saballa, "Philippines OKs $35B 'Re-Horizon 3' Military Modernization Plan," 30 January 2024, *The Defense Post*.

[285] Byron M. Bicenio, et al. "Enhancing the Philippines' defense policy ecosystem: The role of Congress in national security," 2025, Congressional Policy and Budget Research Department, House of Representatives, Discussion Paper No. 3.

[286] Bicenio, et al. "Enhancing the Philippines'," 16.

[287] Ibid.

[288] National Security Strategy 2018, 36; Alexis Romero, "Marcos bullish on new era of shipbuilding in Philippines," 15 May 2024, PhilStar; Sebastian Strangio, "Philippine President Signs Bill to Stimulate Domestic Defence Industry," 9 October 2024, *The Diplomat*.

[289] Supreme Court E-Library, "Republic Act No. 12024, October 0, 2024: An act revitalizing and strengthening the self-reliant defense. posture programme and promoting the development of a national defense industry pursuant thereto and providing funds therefor," Manila Bulletin.

Defense Technology Research and Industry Development – responsible for streamlining technology transfer, establishing public–private partnerships, and fostering cooperation between Philippine and foreign actors.[290] Several obstacles must be overcome to develop the industry, however, including simplifying legislation and bureaucratic processes. In recent years, a number of reforms have been adopted to facilitate the establishment, ownership, and taxation of foreign firms and capital, with further reforms on the way.[291] The Senate, for example, has proposed creating a Special Defense Economic Zone to attract foreign capital through tax breaks and other incentives.[292]

Alongside building a domestic defence industry that can strengthen resilience over the longer term, several procurements are being pursued that can bolster defence in the nearer term. Current priorities are in the maritime domain, focusing on the Navy and Air Force, together with plans to improve interoperability among the services and their units. This is also reflected in Japanese security assistance, which prioritises non-combat capability development in the maritime domain (see Section 4.3). Procurement is also planned for the Army, which must be reoriented towards an external-defence posture after decades of focusing on internal threat actors.

Several advances can be noted. Under the Aquino administration, 36 modernisation projects were completed, with a record value of PHP 41.2 billion, amounting to more than half of planned spending.[293] Exactly which projects were implemented is not known from open sources, but a compilation by Amador III, Baladjay, and Valenzuela shows that spending in the first five-year period was divided fairly evenly across all services.[294] The same compilation shows substantially higher investment for the air force and navy in the second modernisation phase (Horizon 2), with outlays up 618 and 297 per cent, respectively. The revised third phase, Re-Horizon 3, plans to strengthen maritime capabilities further, including by procuring a new squadron of 12 FA-50 aircraft, multirole fighters such as the F-16 or JAS 39 Gripen, and possibly two diesel-electric Scorpène-class submarines.[295]

In parallel with the modernisation programme, the armed forces are reworking their doctrines from an inward-looking posture focused on counterterrorism and humanitarian operations to one that focuses on external threats and aims to control the country's territorial waters and EEZ. Apparently, this is set out in the new strategic defence concept, the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept (CADC), adopted in 2024, but the strategy and its prospects are difficult to assess, as the document has not been published in open sources.[296] Through the CADC, the Philippines reportedly seeks to build interoperability among the services in order to control and project power within its EEZ.[297] Some analysts argue that it builds on concepts developed by the individual services in recent years.[298]

Despite clear signs of progress, the modernisation faces major challenges and will likely remain a priority for decades.[299] There are two main reasons for this. The first is the large gap between the Philippines' defence capabilities and those of other actors in the region,

[290] Supreme Court E-Library, "Republic Act No. 12024."

[291] U.S. Department of State, "2024 Investment Climate Statements: Philippines."

[292] Senate of the Philippines, "Senate approves establishment of Special Defense Economic Zone in Bataan," 28 januari 2025.

[293] Amador III, Baladjay, and Valenzuela, "Modernizing or equalizing?" 306, 314.

[294] Ibid. 312.

[295] Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, "A Look at Naval Group's Philippine Navy Submarine Offer," 26 June 2023, *Naval News*; Sebastian Strangio, "Philippines Confirms Purchase of BrahMos Supersonic Missile System," 14 January 2022, The Diplomat.

[296] Simpson, Racicot, and Benjamin, "Below-the-threshold."

[297] Office of the President of the Philippines, "PBBM admin's adoption of Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept is a move in the right direction, says expert," 9 March 2024.

[298] Rej Cortez Torrecampo, "A paradigm Shift in the Philippines' Defense Strategy," 3 April 2024, *The Diplomat*.

[299] Wu, "The Philippines," 106–107.

above all China.[300] For modernisation to proceed as planned, economic and geopolitical stability is required. An earlier modernisation process launched in 1995 under Ramos delivered very few of its planned projects. Three key reasons stand out.[301] First, the 1997 and 2008 economic crises forced the government to reprioritise spending away from defence. Second, internal security challenges grew, which likewise required a shift in defence outlays. Third, bureaucratic obstacles and the absence of multi-year funding and procurement plans limited implementation, according to Philippine analysts.[302] Although the current process suffers from some of the constraints identified during the first period, observers judge that it has made greater headway, not least in procurement. Even so, it has also faced delays.[303] For example, analysts estimate that only PHP 133 billion was budgeted between 2012 and 2020, while identified needs amounted to PHP 375 billion.[304]

The second major challenge is that the Philippines' long-standing focus on internal defence has institutionalised the political influence of the land forces.[305] This is visible not only in budget allocations, as noted above, but also at leadership level. Of the 38 Chiefs of Staff who have served since 1987, almost all have come from the Army.[306] Three have come from the Air Force, but none from the Navy. The current Chief of Staff, also from the Army, has served for nearly two years, which has provided somewhat greater stability. A further problem is that Chiefs of Staff must retire at 56, which has led presidents to appoint officers who are already close to retirement. In turn, this has produced high turnover, with some Chiefs serving only a few months.[307] Congress has several times tried to raise the retirement age for Armed Forces personnel to 65, in line with other civil servants, and to fix the Chief of Staff's term at three years, but no bill has yet been passed.

By all appearances, the Marcos administration takes defence modernisation seriously, although the process also faces several risks. A trade war between the United States and China would very likely affect the Philippine economy and, by extension, financing. The Mindanao peace process is ongoing, and the aftermath of the 2025 regional elections will be an important factor to watch. Further splits within MILF and MNLF in the coming years cannot be ruled out. If internal threats flare up again, there is a non-trivial risk that the modernisation process will be reprioritised.

[300] Ibid. 103–104.

[301] Victor Andres Manhit and Angelica Manghas, "EDCA Refocus: Eyes on the AFP's Modernization Program," 5 February 2016, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative: Center for Strategic and International Studies.

[302] Julio Amador III, et al. "National Security Priorities and Agenda of the Philippines: Perceptions from the Filipino Strategic Community," 2020, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and Amador Research Services.

[303] Amador III and Baladjay, "Course Correction from Over-Militarization," 104.

[304] Amador III, et al. "National Security Priorities," 22.

[305] Interview 6.

[306] Amador III, Baladjay, and Valenzuela, "Modernizing or equalizing?" 318.

[307] Ibid. 315.

6 Concluding remarks

This report provides an overview of the Philippines' security policy and strategic outlook and priorities, and analyses how different factors shape the country's behaviour. As noted in the report, the Philippines' geopolitical landscape is undergoing major change, and the country faces significant internal and external challenges.

Domestically, the Philippines struggles with persistently weak institutions combined with widespread corruption, clientelism, and nepotism. This raises the risk not only of influence operations and infiltration by external actors such as China, but also of capricious policy and significant political swings. Documented shortcomings in respect for human rights create an elevated risk of continued abuses and violations by both civilian and military actors. Endemic criminality and the remnants of several insurgent groups highlight state weakness and increase general insecurity. Finally, the country's economic challenges, not least a limited domestic industrial base and future electricity-supply constraints, pose further risks that could affect political outcomes in the years ahead.

Externally, the Philippines faces growing threats and challenges on several fronts. First is an increasingly assertive China and territorial encroachments in the South China Sea. Second are rising geopolitical tensions between the US's alliance system in the Indo-Pacific region and NATO on the one hand, and China and Russia on the other. A conflict between the US and China over Taiwan would almost certainly draw in the Philippines in some form.

It is therefore crucial to follow developments in the Philippines, as they can affect the global balance of power. The Philippines remains critical to the US's power projection in the Indo-Pacific region. Yet, as the weakest link in the US alliance system, it will continue to be an attractive target for Chinese influence campaigns and grey-zone tactics. The risk of further escalation is high because the Philippines' room for manoeuvre is shrinking as polarisation between China and the US grows. This means the Philippines will, inevitably, need to strengthen its cooperation with the US and its allies. European actors, including Sweden, can play important roles in maintaining the status quo in the region by deepening their security-policy ties with the Philippines and contributing to its rearmament and defence modernisation, and also through investment and trade that can build resilience.

One possible consequence is a reduction in the Philippines' dependence on the US and, by extension, less need to move closer to Washington, which could in turn ease concerns in China. Such a scenario, however, should be treated with caution. A marginal reduction in the Philippines' defence-policy dependence on the US does not in itself guarantee that China will feel less threatened, since the Philippines remains a US ally and is also strengthening ties with other US-allied countries. At the same time, greater European presence and stronger relations with countries in the region, such as Japan, could increase polarisation between the West and China and thereby heighten anxiety in Beijing.

Beyond such possibilities, it is clear that the Philippines must strengthen its own defence capabilities if it is to be a reliable alliance and security partner for the collective West. The continuation of defence modernisation, notwithstanding some delays and regardless of who has held the presidency, should be seen as a positive signal. Even so, the historical pendulum swings in security policy mean that the prospects for sustained improvement remain uncertain.

6.1 Prospects for Sweden–Philippines security-policy cooperation

The prospects for security-policy cooperation between Sweden and the Philippines are mixed and entail both risks and opportunities for both sides. For Sweden, such cooperation could strengthen its security-policy interests in the region, not least in a swing state like the Philippines. This aligns with the Swedish government's 2024 directive for cooperation with

countries in the Indo-Pacific region.[308] Sweden could also play a positive role in the Armed Forces of the Philippines' reworking of its doctrines, where lessons from the Baltic Sea and the Swedish archipelago could be highly useful during future joint exercises. Stronger bilateral ties with a swing state such as the Philippines could likewise enhance Sweden's influence within the EU and NATO, especially as several other European countries are also seeking a greater presence in the region. Another opportunity is that any bilateral defence-materiel cooperation could improve the outlook for Sweden's defence industry while also strengthening Sweden's influence in the country. Defence-industrial cooperation could indirectly reinforce Swedish–US relations as well, by helping to ease the burden on the United States in rearming allies within NATO and the hub-and-spokes system. Defence cooperation could also serve as a springboard for further collaboration in other sectors, such as trade, manufacturing, and democracy support.

For the Philippines, the benefits are also significant. First, such cooperation would diversify the country's foreign relations, potentially reducing dependence on the United States and increasing Manila's political options. Over time, this could ease tensions with China. That assumption, however, needs to be weighed against other indicators in US–Philippine security relations, such as future Balikatan exercises and the upgrading of EDCA bases, as well as how relations with China develop under future administrations. Any defence-materiel cooperation with Sweden could clearly strengthen Philippine capabilities, especially at sea, and support defence modernisation.

Alongside the advantages for Sweden, security-policy cooperation with the Philippines also carries risks, both general and specific to possible defence-industrial collaboration. The first concerns the sweeping foreign-policy shifts between Philippine presidents over the past 15–20 years. Although the current government has clearly placed itself within the US alliance system, it is far from certain that the next administration will pursue the same policy. If the next transfer of power resembles previous transitions, a political swing after 2028 is a realistic possibility.

Another source of concern is the domestic political situation, including both democratic development and respect for human rights, as well as the presence of internal armed groups. The Philippines continues to rank low in international indices on democracy and corruption. Given that the Armed Forces of the Philippines have at times signalled an intention to influence politics, and in light of democratic backsliding in many parts of the world, one cannot rule out future attempts by the military to intervene by unconstitutional means. At the same time, internal armed groups continue to pose a latent security and stability risk in the country, even if they are widely seen as much weakened today.

Potential defence-industrial cooperation also entails several specific risks. The first is that political swings or necessary reprioritisations, for example, after natural disasters, could delay or halt ongoing projects. That could directly affect Sweden's defence industry and industrial base if contracts are broken and revenue is lost, with longer-term implications for total defence. Although the Philippines has sought to reduce the risk of maintenance and procurement shortfalls caused by reprioritisation by placing funding outside the annual budget, this risk cannot be excluded entirely. The consequences for Sweden could be extensive and long-lasting, since important income and future financing might be lost, and Sweden could miss out on valuable contributions to sustaining its innovation capacity and resilience. Despite political swings, it is important to underline that defence modernisation has remained a high priority for all Philippine presidents over the past fifteen years, even though their security-policy focus has shifted.

A second risk is that procured defence materiel might be used in ways incompatible with Sweden's values and requirements regarding democracy, respect for human rights, and international humanitarian law. Although many indicators suggest that the internal security situation is stabilising, there is no guarantee this will continue over the next 10–20 years.

[308] Government of Sweden, *Försvarspolitisk inriktning*.

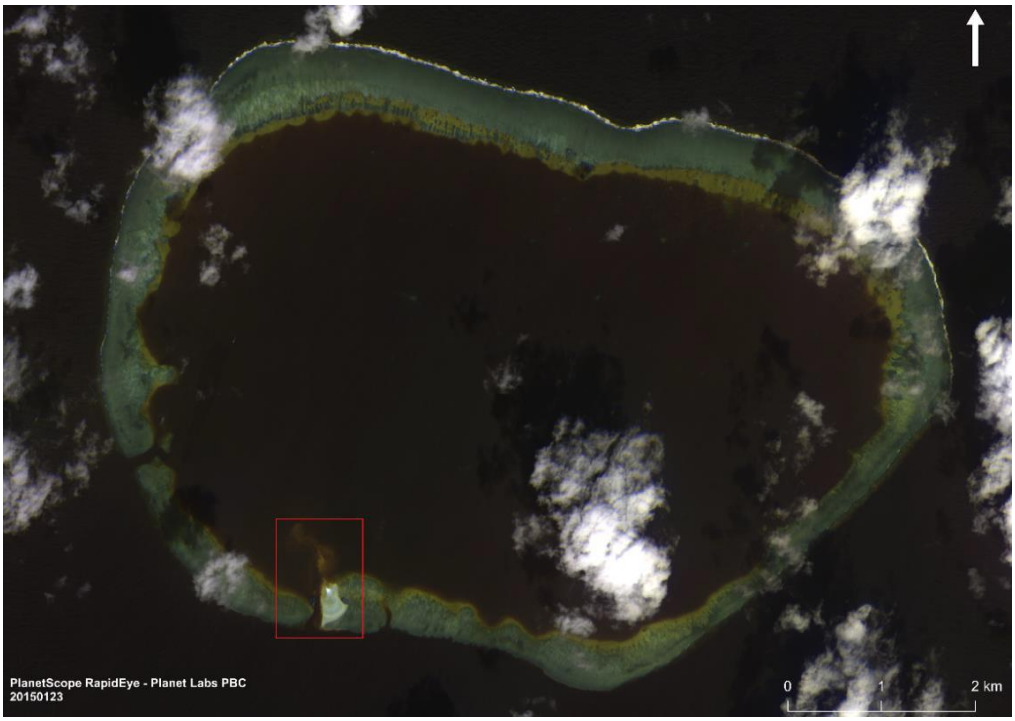
The Philippines' problems with weak institutions, widespread corruption, political dynasties, and powerful local actors who challenge Manila's authority create vulnerabilities that external actors can exploit. It is therefore not possible to rule out a recurrence of scenarios such as the Marawi crisis, in which fighter aircraft like the FA-50 were used in asymmetric warfare. A key indicator that could clarify whether such capabilities are likely to be employed is the modernisation of the Army's capabilities. Procurement of Swedish defence materiel must therefore be viewed in a broader context.

All forms of cooperation involve risks and opportunities. It is therefore important to continue building and maintaining robust processes for horizon scanning and analysis, so that, at each stage, possible risks and threats can be identified and their implications for Sweden's interests and total defence can be understood. Further research and analysis on the Philippines specifically, and the Indo-Pacific region more generally, are therefore of great importance. This report is a step in that process, but additional studies are needed to better understand the relationships among different actors, as well as their motivations, objectives, and threat perceptions.

7 Annex 1 – Interviews

	Description of role	Time period
Interview 1	Professor of International Relations and International Security	November 2024
Interview 2	Senior officials within a Philippine security agency	November 2024
Interview 3	Diplomatic representatives	November 2024
Interview 4	Researcher and consultant on Philippine security and foreign policy	November 2024
Interview 5	Diplomatic representatives	November 2024
Interview 6	Retired major general from the Philippine Navy	November 2024
Interview 7	Peace and conflict researcher	November 2024
Interview 8	Security consultant and former Chief of Staff of the Philippine Army	November 2024
Interview 8	University lecturer in International Relations	November 2024
Interview 9	Representatives from a government defence agency	November 2024
Interview 10	Professor of International Relations and consultant to the Armed Forces of the Philippines	February 2025
Interview 11	Diplomatic representatives	February 2025
Interview 12	Diplomatic representatives	August 2025

Annex 2 – Expansion of Chinese and Philippine installations in the South China Sea



China's development of Mischief Reef, 23 January 2015. Source: Planet

China's development of Mischief Reef, 1 January 2025. Source: Planet

Philippine development of Thitu Island between April 2016 and March 2025. The images show multiple upgrades over this period. The first clear change is the runway: the western edge, which had collapsed in the 2016 image, has been repaired, paved, and widened in the 2025 image. The total runway length is 1,300 m. In addition, the surrounding infrastructure has been expanded to accommodate various types of military aircraft, likely up to C-130 Hercules. The second clear change is the addition of harbour facilities where medium-sized vessels can berth. Areas of the surrounding reef have been dredged, and a quay and a pier (or possibly a breakwater) have been built. The third clear change is a marked increase in the number of buildings, not least on the island's western side.

Source: Pléiades satellite data with material from CNES and Astrium Services.

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Unless otherwise specified, all government organisations are Philippine authorities.

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