

The Ukraine-Russia War and Its Implications for Philippine Foreign Policy: Pushing Further to a Limited Hard Balancing Policy towards China

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of the Ukraine-Russia War on Philippine foreign policy. It observes that Russia's invasion of Ukraine created the widespread idea that China might emulate its strategic partner on how to deal with an irredentist claim by using force against Taiwan. This alarmed the Duterte Administration at the time it was shifting policy towards China from appeasement to limited hard balancing. This policy aims to constrain China's maritime expansion in the South China Sea by building up the Philippine military's external defence capabilities, maintaining its alliance with the United States, and making security arrangements with other middle powers like South Korea, Japan, and Australia. The outbreak of the Ukraine-Russian War further pushed the Duterte administration to this policy of limited hard balancing towards China. This was shown by President Duterte's decision to strengthen the country's security relations with the U.S. In conclusion, the article notes that the current Marcos Administration has

followed its predecessor's footsteps in applying a policy of limited hard balancing policy towards the revisionist powers in the 20th century.

Keywords: *Philippine foreign policy, appeasement, limited hard balancing, Philippine-Russia relations, Philippine-China relations, Philippine-U.S. relations*

1. Introduction

Wars, in the form of sustained interstate conflicts, were unthinkable in the European continent since the Cold War ended in 1991. It, however, became a reality on February 24, 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale and unprovoked armed invasion of Ukraine. Under President Vladimir Putin, Russia invested huge amounts of money to rebuild this great power's conventional military capabilities in the last few years. Russian ground forces reorganized their units to conduct large-scale maneuver warfare and conducted regular unannounced large-scale military exercises near the Russian-Ukrainian borders. At the onset of the invasion of Ukraine, it was immediately assumed that it will be a quick Russian victory because its armed forces enjoy an overwhelming advantage in terms of number, firepower, air superiority, command-and-control infrastructure, and big-ticket weapons platforms.

The invasion began with the massive bombardment of the country with artillery and missiles as columns of Russian tanks advanced towards Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. However, the expectation of a quick victory evaporated when Ukrainian forces fought back Russian armour and mechanized columns and regained control of lost territories despite a furious missile barrage. It is early to say that the issue has been finally settled on the battlefield. However, both Russian and Ukrainian military fatalities were estimated at around 1,500 during the first few

weeks of the conflict; while no major Ukrainian cities have fallen to the Russian onslaught so far. The Ukraine forces' surprising ability to keep the Russian forces at bay, at least temporarily, emboldened the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) to extend political support and to rush military assistance to Ukraine. Russian forces were confronted by unexpected Ukrainian resistance and growing NATO and EU political and materiel support to the Ukrainian armed forces. In desperation, President Vladimir Putin exasperatedly ordered the Russian defense minister to put the country's nuclear forces in a special regime of combat duty.

As a collection of middle and small powers, the Southeast Asian states are now confronted with a *fait accompli* that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has put on the table—the blatant violation of the respect for a sovereign state's sovereignty and territorial integrity as enshrined in the United Nations Charter. Russia's armed invasion of Ukraine also created a playbook that China, its strategic partner, could emulate *vis-à-vis* Taiwan (Blumenthal, 2022). Chinese President Xi Jinping might emulate Russia's approach in dealing with Ukraine given these parallels (Storey and Choong, 2022): (1) the use of fabricated history to support its irredentist territorial claims; (2) the use of grey zone tactics and hybrid warfare; (3) and total disregard for international law under the UN Charter.

The Philippines is the quintessential Southeast Asia state that was dazed and bewildered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. At the onset of the war, it announced that it was adopting a policy of neutrality. (*Manila Bulletin*, 25th February 2022) Then the Philippine delegation to the United Nations voted for the UNGA resolution condemning Russia's use of force against Ukraine. In early March, then-President Rodrigo Duterte said that he would seek the consensus of the military and police, cabinet members, and the private sector on how the Philippines should deal with

the crisis in Europe triggered by the Ukraine-Russia War (PNA, 2nd March 2022). In turn, the Philippine military and police gave assurances that government troops, as well as their material assets and equipment, are on standby, noting that they have their respective contingency plans prepared if the conflict extends to the region (*ibid.*).

The cabinet then issued a statement calling for the cessation of hostilities in Ukraine: “we appeal for an immediate end to the unnecessary loss of life and call for the states involved to forge an accord that can help prevent a conflagration that could engulf a world still struggling to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.” (*Malaya Business Insight*, 3rd March 2022) Cabinet Secretary Karlo Nograles then announced the government’s position on the Ukraine-Russia War: “War benefits no one, and it exacts a tragic, bloody toll on the lives of innocent men, women, and children in the areas of conflict.” (*Asia News Monitor*, 3rd March 2022)

The Duterte administration eventually condemned Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. He warned that if the conflict were to spill over to Asia, he would be offering the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP)’s military facilities to the country’s only formal treaty ally, the United States. He apprised his countrymen of President Putin’s suicidal tendencies and admonished the Russian leader for his handling of the war that led to the deaths of innocent civilians. In late March, the Philippines supported the 24 March 2022 UNGA resolution that acknowledged that Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine has caused a massive humanitarian disaster unseen in Europe for many decades. In April, the Philippines voted affirmative to another UNGA resolution that provided for Russia’s suspension from the United Nations Human Rights Council. An article observes the Philippines’ disconcerted response to the war:

The Philippines was initially focused on evacuating its nationals from Ukraine. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte...has remained silent on the conflict. His defence secretary, Delfin Lorenzana, stated that the Philippines would remain neutral because the conflict was none of our business...However, a few days after the Russian assault, the Philippines explicitly condemned the invasion of Ukraine.

(Storey and Choong, 2022)

More significantly, the Ukraine-Russia War pushed the Duterte Administration to move further away from its policy of appeasement and gravitated closer to a limited hard policy towards China and even Russia. After five years of implementing a policy of rapprochement towards China, the Philippines began adopting a policy of “limited hard balancing” to constrain this potential regional hegemon’s revisionist agenda. (Paul, 2018) Specifically, this strategy requires building up the Philippine military’s external defence capabilities, maintaining its alliance with the U.S., and making security arrangements with other middle powers like South Korea, Japan, and Australia. The outbreak of the Ukraine-Russian War further pushed the Duterte administration to this policy of limited hard balancing towards China. This was shown by President Duterte’s decision to strengthen the country’s security relations with the U.S. This, in effect, was a drastic reversal of his early policy of downgrading relations with Washington by engaging both Beijing and Moscow in more multi-faceted interactions.

This article examines the domestic factors behind the Philippines’ decision to further pursue a policy of limited hard balancing as a reaction to the Ukraine-Russia War crisis. It addresses the following primary question: What internal dynamics influenced the Philippines’ policy of moving further to a policy of limited hard policy towards China as its response to the Ukraine-Russia War? It also tackles the following

corollary problems: What is the state of Russia-Philippine relations? How does the Philippine military as a domestic actor, view the war? And how was it able to influence the Philippines' position towards the Ukraine-Russia War in particular, and the Duterte Administration's decision to further pursue a policy of limited hard balancing policy towards China in general?

2. The Philippines' Limited Hard Balancing Policy and the Ukraine-Russia War

Before 24 February 2022, the Southeast Asian states saw Russia as a largely benign power that could serve as an alternative source of military hardware, COVID-19 vaccines, and energy. This view was a result of the sudden implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991 which left Russia as a marginal player in Southeast Asian affairs as the U.S., Japan, and later China filled up the power vacuum left by the demise of the Soviet military and diplomatic power in the region. Moreover, Russian companies aggressively marketed arms and energy in Southeast Asia before the war with Ukraine. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Asia, the ASEAN member-states saw Russia as a provider of public health goods as it offered its vaccine to Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines.

However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine unleashed a diplomatic and ideological stigma around Moscow as ASEAN is inherently opposed to great power military intervention against smaller powers and the use of force in international affairs. (Heydarian, 2022a) Furthermore, the war had a major, if indirect, impact on Southeast Asia as rising commodity prices and added disruptions in the global supply chain threatened to erase whatever economic gains the region accomplished after the ravages left by the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2021 (Dalpino,

2022).

Manila's dazed and confused reaction to the Ukraine-Russia War stemmed from the fact that it has nothing to lose, given that Manila has limited economic and political engagement with Moscow. As one Filipino analyst wrote: "The relations between Manila and Moscow are unlikely to "fall from great heights" since there is not much to lose in those relations, to begin with. Notwithstanding the ongoing crisis's adverse impacts on the Philippines in the short and long term." (Espeña, 2022) Furthermore, given its geographic distance from Europe, the war did not pose an immediate threat to the Philippines and Southeast Asia.

At the beginning of the war, the Philippines, despite being a U.S. treaty ally, declared itself neutral, then suddenly, it flip-flopped. Philippines Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said, "It's not our business to meddle in what they're doing in Europe." (*DW*, 3rd July 2022) However, his announcement of the Philippines' neutrality raised some eyebrows within the administration since this policy should have been announced either by the Office of the President or the Department of Foreign Affairs. However, on 28 February 2022, at the UN, the Philippines supported the U.S.- and Albanian-sponsored resolution passed during the Emergency Special Session of the UNGA on Ukraine.

The Philippine statement expressed its explicit condemnation of the invasion of Ukraine and urged for the cessation of hostilities in the conflict. (PNA, 28th February 2022) It also cited the UN Charter, which requires sovereign states to refrain from using force against political independence and territorial integrity. The Philippines backed the UNGA resolution on Ukraine. However, like Thailand, it did not join the other U.S. Indo-Pacific allies that imposed sanctions against Russia. This decision not to take part in any sanctions against Moscow reflected Manila's dilemma in supporting Washington's efforts to isolate Moscow versus its interest in keeping its ties to Russia open, especially in

defense. This was because Manila had just announced the purchase of Brahmos cruise missiles jointly developed by Indian and Russian arms manufacturers and signed an arms deal with Moscow to acquire Russian-made MIL Mi-17 heavy-lift helicopters. (Pitlo, 2022) Aside from trying to salvage its arms deal with Russia, the Philippines was also concerned about how it could remove a few hundred Filipino overseas workers in Ukraine from harm's way.

On 1 March 2022, then-President Duterte held a meeting to generate consensus from the military, police, Cabinet members, and the private sector on how the Philippines should deal with the war in Eastern Europe. (PNA, 2nd March 2022) According to Cabinet Secretary Karlo Nograles, the president also met with the top officials of the AFP, the Philippine National Police (PNP), and other high-ranking government officials to discuss possible scenarios and measures should the Russia-Ukraine conflict continue and escalate (*Asia News Monitor*, 3rd March 2022). The cabinet-level consultation was also held in light of the different voices from his administration. This created the widespread public impression that the chief executive was negligent in his duty of anticipating major international events and upheaval.

After the meeting, the cabinet released a bland statement stating that the Philippines is appealing for “an immediate end to the unnecessary loss of life and call on the states involved to forge an accord that can help prevent a conflagration that could engulf a world still struggling to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.” (*Malaya Business Insight*, 3rd March 2022) The cabinet observed that many Filipinos were interested in the involvement of the U.S. and NATO in the Ukraine-Russia War. This was because they examined Washington's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a litmus test of how the Americans might react to the Philippines' security problems in its maritime territories west of Palawan and Zambales. (*ibid.*)

The outbreak of the Ukraine-Russia War happened at the time that the Philippine foreign policy was undergoing a transition. Since mid-2016, President Duterte had unravelled former President Benigno Aquino III's legacy of balancing China's expansive claim in the South China Sea. He downgraded his country's security relations with its long-standing treaty ally and gravitated towards China which is determined to reconfigure the global commons in East Asia. He also set aside the 2016 UNCLOS decision on the South China Sea dispute. His diplomatic gambit was to appease China, in contrast to then President Aquino's balancing strategy. He assumed that an appeasement policy on China was worth pursuing because it would make the country a beneficiary of the latter's emergence as a global economic power. He considered China's launching of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). He was afraid that if the Philippines continues to pursue a balancing policy on China, the country would not be able to avail of the economic benefits from the BRI, China's 21st-century version of the Marshall Plan.

In late July 2018, the Philippine government informed China about the increase in offensive Chinese radio warnings against Philippine aircraft and ships flying and sailing respectively near Chinese reclaimed and fortified islands in the South China Sea. An internal AFP report leaked to the Associated Press revealed that PAF planes patrolling the South China Sea received at least 46 warnings from Chinese naval outposts in the artificial islands where more powerful pieces of communication and surveillance equipment have been installed along with weapons such as anti-aircraft guns and surface-to-air missiles.

On 15 August 2018, President Duterte criticized China for its island-building activities and called on it to moderate its actions in the disputed waters. (CMFR, 24th August 2018) Several analysts agreed that his statement was the strongest one he made on China since his dramatic 2016 shift towards Beijing and away from Washington, Manila's long-

time, and traditional formal treaty ally (*VOA*, 14th August 2018). In April 2019, on a diplomatic note, the DFA noted the presence of a large number of Chinese fishing vessels around Philippine-occupied islands and accused Beijing of applying a swarming tactic to support its coercive objectives against the country (*Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 18th April 2019).

Duterte extended two key diplomatic concessions to China. He, however, has not aligned or subordinated Philippine foreign policy to China's revisionist goal of maritime expansion. Chinese coercive behaviour in the South China Sea and China's slow infusion of public investment to his massive Build, Build, Build program, drove President Duterte to adopt a policy of limited hard balancing. Its goal is to constrain China's expansion to the South China Sea by developing a credible defence capability for the armed forces, while at the same time, promoting and strengthening comprehensive and strategic alliances the Philippines has forged with its ally and security partners.

This was evident in three important decisions: (a) he continued to fund the AFP modernization program to develop the Philippine military's territorial defence capabilities against China; (b) he downgraded his country's security relations with the U.S., but he has kept the alliance intact, allowed the holding of several Philippine-U.S. joint military exercises in the South China Sea, and even asked for a clearer U.S. security guarantee as provided by the Philippine-U.S. 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty (MDT); and (c) he bolstered the Philippines' security partnerships with Japan (China's traditional rival in East Asia) and Australia.

The Duterte Administration's adoption of a limited hard balancing policy towards China was reflected by its efforts to revitalize the Philippines' security relations with the U.S. In July 2021, President Duterte reversed his decision to terminate the 1999 Philippine-U.S.

Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA). It must be recalled that a year ago, on February 11, 2020, he ordered the termination of the 1999 VFA. Earlier, during the February 7, 2020, Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, Secretary Teodoro Locsin cautioned that the VFA's abrogation would render the 1951 MDT into a mere piece of paper. President Duterte did exactly that when the Philippines served the notice of the VFA termination to the U.S. government on February 12.

At first, President Duterte suspended the VFA's termination process three times—June 2020, November 2020, and June 2021. Shortly after the last suspension, Secretary Locsin announced the resumption of the VFA with a complementary technical side agreement. It is not clear if the talks on resuming the VFA tackled the contentious provision of the U.S. assisting the Philippine armed forces in defending the outlying land features within the country's EEZ which China will most likely claim and seize. (*Asia News Monitor*, 4th May 2021) On July 30, 2021, President Duterte withdrew the letter for the VFA termination after he met Secretary Austin during the latter's official visit to the Philippines. The following day, Secretary Lorenzana announced that the VFA was "now in full force" after President Duterte's decision revoked the VFA's letter of termination. (*ABC News*, 30th July 2021)

Thanking President Duterte and calling the Philippines a "vital treaty ally", Secretary Austin commented: "Our countries face a range of challenges, and as we do, a strong resilient U.S.-Philippine alliance will remain vital to the security, stability, and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific. A fully restored VFA will help us achieve this goal together." (*ibid.*) Though he approved the keeping of the VFA, President Duterte remains cynical about the Philippine-U.S. alliance. It should be remembered that President Duterte dragged the renegotiations for the VFA for more than a year. He only decided to withdraw the VFA's termination notice because of the following (Dalpino, 2021): (a) Secretaries Lorenzana and

Austin's negotiations for a side agreement to the VFA that would govern the conduct of U.S. forces deployed in the Philippines in the long run; (b) Washington's commitment to providing Manila a steady supply of COVID-19 vaccines—three million doses of Johnson and Johnson and Moderna vaccines; and (c) growing public disapproval of the Duterte administration's handling of the South China Sea dispute. Nevertheless, his action restored the stability of the two countries' security ties with the U.S. stepping up its naval presence in Southeast Asia. Notwithstanding President Duterte's scepticism of the U.S. treaty commitment to the Philippines, the Biden Administration is determined to reinvigorate its longest-standing mutual defence agreement with its long-time Southeast Asian ally.

President Duterte's decision to bring back the VFA on track is his long over-due reaffirmation of the importance of the Philippine-U.S. to his country's security. This effectively debunked the Chinese narrative that the U.S. is losing both the willingness and staying power to maintain its power projection capability in Southeast Asia. (*ibid.*) From November 15 to 16, 2021, Philippine and U.S. defence and foreign affairs officials met in Washington D.C. to reinvigorate the alliance three months after President Duterte's decision to withdraw the VFA's notice of termination. During their bilateral consultations, the two countries agreed to resume the construction of U.S. facilities inside five Philippine Air Force (PAF) airbases that were committed by the Aquino Administration in 2016 as EDCA sites. This would effectively lead to the implementation of the long-delayed enhanced cooperation agreement that provides for the development of military infrastructure projects at designated locations and the exploration of additional sites for further development. The two countries' defence departments also agreed to promote their respective armed forces' interoperability through the establishment of a coordination centre, the development of joint

command and control for operations, and the formulation of a maritime framework to enable Filipino and American troops to conduct joint operations more effectively. (*BusinessMirror*, 18th November 2021)

Finally, the two countries formulated a new bilateral defence guideline that came in the form of the November 16, 2021 “Joint Vision for a 21st Century United States-Philippines Partnership”. This document states the two sides’ intention to ensure the MDT’s relevance in addressing current and emerging threats. (US DOS, 16th November 2021) It also mentions their common efforts to support a mutual understanding of the two allies’ roles, missions, and capabilities within the alliance (*ibid.*). These developments indicate both countries’ consensus on the need to transform the MDT from a mere consultative mechanism to an anchor that will provide stability to their alliance as they address common security challenges they would face way into the 21st century.

3. Moving Further to Limited Hard Balancing

On 10 March 2022, the Philippine Ambassador to Washington, Jose Manuel Romualdez, announced that then-President Duterte is ready to open the country’s military facilities to American forces if Russia’s war against Ukraine turns for the worse and embroils the U.S. in the war (*Al Arabiya*, 10th March 2022). In an online briefing with Manila-based journalists, Ambassador Romualdez revealed that the “President stated that if they’re (the U.S.) asking for the support of the Philippines, it’s obvious that, of course, if push comes to shove, the Philippines will be ready to be part of the effort, especially if this Ukrainian crisis spills over into the Asian region.” (*ibid.*) He added that the president instructed him to give assurances to the U.S. “that if ever needed, the Philippines is ready to offer whatever facilities or whatever things that the United

States will need being a major—our number one ally.” (*ibid.*) He specifically stated that the president indicated that in the event of an emergency, “the Philippines would allow U.S. forces to return to the former naval station at Subic Bay and the nearby Clark Air Base.” (Strangio, 2022) Both were substantial American military facilities that closed at the end of the Cold War.

The Duterte administration’s sudden gesture of offering the former U.S. military facilities to Washington was seen as unprecedented, given that this administration had been ambivalent, if not cynical, about the Philippines’ alliance with the U.S. In 2016, Duterte had criticized the U.S. for voicing its concerns over the government’s bloody war on drugs and announced his intention to wean the Philippines away from the alliance and to pivot to China. Indeed, his announcement of opening Philippine military facilities to U.S. forces marked a departure from his usual anti-American tirades. However, this raised the question of any possibility that the Ukraine-Russia War might spread from Eastern Europe to East Asia. Exactly how the war in Europe might affect East Asia is unclear. What was revealing was that the Duterte administration’s pledge of support to the U.S. in any conflict in Asia appeared to extend beyond the text of the 1951 MDT.¹

The proposal was seen as an attempt to recalibrate the alliance since the Duterte Administration’s term was about to end in June 2022. More significantly, it also revealed an underlying fear among many Southeast Asian states that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine would encourage China to follow suit in the Taiwan Straits, in the South and East China Seas, with the potential of causing collateral damage throughout the region. (Dalpino, 2022) It dawned on some Southeast Asian states, including the Philippines, that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has a specific implication for Southeast Asia, given converging Sino-Russian views of challenging the U.S.-led rules-based international order and the

possibility that Beijing might take a page out of Russia's playbook on applying grey zone operations, conducting hybrid warfare, and the use of force to acquire and eventually annex disputed territories (Storey and Choong, 2022).

Across the Taiwan Straits, China could pursue an intensified campaign of coercion threats and pressure similar to what President Putin did before the invasion of Ukraine. This could cause the U.S. to be caught unprepared and force Taiwan to make extended diplomatic and military concessions to China because of the threat of a full-scale armed conflict. China could also mount an armed invasion of the island republic to retake what it deems as a renegade province of China. In the South China Sea, borrowing from Russia's playbook, China might use the pretext of the need to conduct defensive operations against the other claimant states to secure the Spratly Islands and the rest of the South China Sea in the face of apparent U.S. naval aggression and external intervention in the maritime dispute.

The Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei have lingering unresolved territorial and maritime disputes with China over the South China Sea. This makes Manila wary that China might emulate Russia's approach to Ukraine—escalating the grey zone/hybrid conflict to full-scale armed warfare. This involves the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) relying on civilian maritime agencies, such as the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) and Chinese Maritime Militia (CMM), in taking the leading role in handling China's maritime disputes with the littoral Southeast Asian countries. (Huang, 2015)

This underlying fear of China taking a page from Russia's playbook in Ukraine, in using force to change the status quo in the Taiwan Straits, and the South China Sea, drove the Duterte administration to adopt a policy of critical neutrality. A conflict between the U.S. and China over Taiwan will drag the Philippines into conflict because the Philippines is

geographically close to Taiwan. Furthermore, Manila is bound to extend assistance to the U.S. in case of a conflict with China because of the 1951 MDT. This policy entailed doing away with the administration's rhetoric and actions expressing anti-American sentiments, reaffirming the Philippine-U.S. alliance, and occasional condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine without imposing any sanctions against Moscow. (PNA, 12th April 2022; *Manila Bulletin*, 24th May 2022)

Defence planners in Manila are also aware that China's invasion and occupation of Taiwan would be a substantial boost to its strategic position as it would enable the People's Liberation Army's Navy (PLAN) to impede the U.S. 7th Fleet's ability to conduct naval and air operations in the Philippine Sea and thereby limit the U.S. to honour its treaty obligations to its Asian allies like the Philippines (Green and Talmadge, 2022). They are also cognizant that China's control of Taiwan will enable it to base its grouping fleet of attack and ballistic missile submarines in the island republic will enable it to threaten Northeast and Southeast Asian shipping lanes as it strengthens Chinese naval presence in the first island chain with its sea-based nuclear forces.

Before the end of the term of the Duterte Administration, Secretary Lorenzana and President Duterte canceled the Russian helicopter deal before President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.' inauguration on 30 June 2022. The cancellation of the Mi-17 helicopter deal was unexpected as the Duterte Administration reiterated in March that it was planning to proceed with the procurement. This decision was made despite the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia and the Philippines' support of the March UNGA resolution condemning Russia's attack on Ukraine that had resulted in a major humanitarian crisis. The Philippines reasoned that it had already made the first down payment for the helicopters in January 2022. Interestingly, American security officials were aware of Manila's decision to cancel the Russian helicopter deal.

Accordingly, U.S. officials have offered Manila the prospect of procuring similar American-made platforms to meet Manila's long-standing requirements for heavy-lift helicopters. (*The Japan Times*, 29th July 2022)

4. Opposing the Pivot to the Revisionist Powers: The Role of the AFP

The Duterte administration's sudden announcement that it is open to providing logistic support to the U.S. by opening the former American military bases to U.S. forces should the Russia-Ukraine war spill over into the region reflects the influence of the Philippine military on the president's strategic and diplomatic calculations. In the early months of his term, President Duterte was predisposed to downgrade U.S. relations and engage in more multi-faceted interactions with Russia and China. Upon his arrival in Manila from Laos after the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in September 2016, President Duterte informed Washington that he intended to visit Beijing and Moscow and was pondering on crossing the Rubicon by ending the 1951 MDT. This would give him the lee-way to forge alliances with Russia and China. (Chang, 2017) In October 2016, President Duterte vowed to expel U.S. Special Forces supporting AFP's anti-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations in the Philippines and chart an independent foreign policy. He instructed the Defence Secretary, Delfin Lorenzana, not to make any preparations because he was canceling next year's *Balikatan* exercises. The joint Philippine-U.S. naval patrols in the South China Sea were likewise suspended. Buttressing President Duterte's anti-U.S. rants, Secretary Lorenzana commented that the AFP could exist without U.S. support despite the defence establishment receiving a total of US\$441 million in American assistance from 2001 to 2013. (*ibid.*)

On 8 November 2016, however, President Duterte withdrew his earlier decision to abrogate the Mutual Defence Treaty and the 2014 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) (*Asia News Monitor*, 11th November 2016). Secretary Lorenzana disclosed that the President decided, after all, to keep the Philippine-U.S. alliance intact and to implement the EDCA. Though the joint military training would continue, they would be scaled down into small unit exercises on Special Forces, counter-terrorism, and anti-narcotics operations. The annual *Balikatan* exercise involving thousands of American and Filipino troops would change its warfighting scenario to humanitarian, engineering, and civil activities. (*ibid.*) However, the yearly U.S. Navy-Philippine Navy's Cooperation Afloat Readiness Training (CARAT), and PHIBLEX, the U.S.-Philippine Marines' amphibious landing exercise, would be terminated. Secretary Lorenzana states, "President Duterte practically approved all the military recommendations except those joint military exercises that involve amphibious/landing exercises." (*ibid.*)

President Duterte reconsidered his earlier decision upon realizing that his statements in Beijing alienated the Philippine military, which still considers its links with the U.S. armed forces as vital for its operations (*Janes*, 27th October 2016). Obviously, American troops have provided technical assistance in combatting Muslim militants in the southern Philippines; many of the AFP officers were trained in the U.S., and the two militaries have been staging joint military exercises for seven decades. In his study of Philippine-U.S. security relations, a ranking Philippine military official noted: "...there is a deep appreciation among AFP personnel involved in bilateral exercises and in the implementation of various U.S. security assistance programs on the relationship, shared values, and fellowship that was gained through bilateral (security) relations with the U.S. (armed service)." (Angeles, 2017) The quality and considerable amount of U.S. military assistance

since the Obama Administration have fostered support for U.S. military presence in the country and the alliance within the AFP and the general population.

Both the armed services and the foreign policy establishment were wary of the administration's economic and diplomatic overtures to China and Russia since this would result in two-fold actions that would have adverse consequences on Philippine foreign policy—abandoning its traditional ally and security partners; closer economic-diplomatic ties with China could deal a severe blow to ASEAN solidarity, which might even cast doubt over the association's future (Saighal, 2017). This is because Manila gravitating closer to Beijing would upset the delicate balance between the continental Southeast Asian states that are economically and diplomatically aligned with China versus the maritime countries that are suspicious of China because of its expansion into the South China Sea.

The AFP is suspicious of Chinese funding of Philippine infrastructure projects and is sceptical of closer Philippine-China security relations. This stems from its mandate to protect the country's territory in the face of Chinese occupation of several lands features deep in the country's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). It is still pro-U.S. and it believes that the territorial dispute with China in the South China Sea is a major roadblock to regional peace and long-term cooperation between the Philippines and China. Consequently, during the six-year term of President Duterte, Beijing-backed infrastructure projects often faced stringent reviews, public backlash, and cancellations, posing a challenge to him as he tried to use Chinese funds to build infrastructure, create jobs and cement his legacy. (*NIKKEI Asia*, 9th October 2019) It was observed that the national government moves slowly to secure rights of way, while local politicians meddled to extract concessions, such as train stations in their home districts—all these slowed down the progress

of Chinese-funded railway projects in Southern Luzon and Mindanao. Some Filipino government officials are also sceptical about the viability of these long-term undertakings given the geopolitical risks involved in the competing territorial claims in the South China Sea. Explaining the reason behind the slow implementation of BRI-funded infrastructure projects in the Philippines, a Taiwanese academic insightfully observes:

...Although joining the BRI will benefit Philippine infrastructure development, the respondents were concerned that China would use its growing economic and military power to threaten Filipino security and interests. However, ... this criticism from the public does challenge the Philippine government's promotion of cooperation with the Chinese government.

(Chao, 2021)

The opposition to Chinese-funded infrastructure projects, in particular, and the Duterte administration's pivot to Beijing, in general, originated from the public perception of China as a security threat. This public apprehension of China outweighs the economic benefits of Chinese public investments. The ASEAN Studies Centre's 2020 ASEAN-wide survey revealed that 82.1 % of Filipinos are worried about China becoming the most influential economic power in Southeast Asia (Tang *et al.*, 2020). Interestingly, the centre observes that among the 1,300 ASEAN respondents, the Filipinos are most worried about China's growing economic clout in the region.

The Philippine military was caught off-balance by the Duterte Administration's unexpected shift towards China and, to a certain degree, Russia since it viewed both countries as traditional threats to national security. The Philippine military was unprepared for the Duterte Administration's sudden shift towards China since it has long viewed it

as a historical enemy. (*South China Morning Post*, 5th October / 12th December 2019) The AFP finds little need to expand security relations with Russia and acquire Russian-made weapons since they follow Eastern bloc standards that could not be integrated with its NATO-certified weapons system (Balatbat, 2018). Before Russian weapons can be incorporated into the AFP, they must be tested and evaluated in terms of capability. There are also doctrine, training, and integration issues, which must be considered before the Philippine military purchases and acquires Russian-made armaments. (*ibid.*) Closer Philippine-Russia defence relations are also hampered by the lack of mutual awareness about each other's interests and the AFP and DND's concern that closer ties between the countries could adversely affect the Philippine-U.S. alliance (Romanillos, 2018).

President Duterte's choice to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine and willingness to offer the use of military facilities for the U.S. armed forces if the war spills over to Asia shows the AFP's influence on his administration. The Philippine military sees China and Russia as revisionist powers threatening and corrupting the rules-based international order.² The author observed and noted this standpoint during interviews with a group of senior AFP officers who took a course on International Security Studies at the National Defense College of the Philippines (NDCP).³

For these officers, Russia and China's actions are directed not just towards the U.S. but several countries; thus, their efforts constitute an existential threat to the global order.⁴ They see China and Russia unraveling the existing U.S.-led rules-based system by bringing back the old notion of "might makes right" as they challenge the current global order. They see Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's aggression in the South China Sea as pieces of evidence of the two great powers' plan to undermine the rules-based international order. They foresee the

Russia-Ukraine war going beyond East Europe. This is because China is closely learning the lessons from this war as it prepares for the forceful unification of Taiwan to the mainland and implementing its nine-dash-line claim in the South China Sea.⁵ They assume the Russia-Ukraine conflict was a litmus test case for the international community, as the China-Taiwan War would soon follow.⁶

There is sympathy for Ukraine, given its capability to wage an effective asymmetric military campaign against vastly numerically superior Russian forces. AFP officers observed the battlefield successes of Ukrainian forces in the face of massive Russian armor columns supported by excellent air cover with robotics weapons, unmanned bomb-carrying aerial systems, laser-guided weapons, and artificial intelligence. They observed the effectiveness of drones and intelligent anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons against the massive tank and mechanized forces and how defensive tactics have become dominant against offensive battlefield operations. They examined how the use of robotic weapons and cyberwarfare has provided Ukraine with asymmetric capabilities that have been proven effective in stopping Russia's armor thrust dead in its tracks.

They are thrilled that a minor power, like Ukraine, defends itself against an attack by a major power like Russia with a click of the fingers. Based on the initial successes of Ukrainian territorial units against the superior Russian conventional forces, they see an emerging type of warfare called "thinking battlefield", where arms and brawn are brought to bear by unseen hands and minds.

They believe that these technologies should be incorporated into the ongoing AFP modernization program to narrow the strategic gap between the Philippines and China, which is perceived to be taking an aggressive stance in the South China Sea. This reflects a recognition within the AFP that it can learn some lessons from the Ukraine-Russia

War. These lessons are helpful for the Philippines as it confronts Chinese maritime expansion in the South China Sea. For these officers, these lessons are about Ukraine being a “... testing ground for new weapons and technologies and the defensive strategy formulated around these capabilities and the resilience of the Ukrainian people. Resilience is the ability of ordinary people to defend their country against aggressors without relying on a state’s military. Resilience describes people’s skills to help themselves in times of crisis and not expect the intervention of some great power to save them. ...Resilience would therefore be a significant factor in future wars.”⁷

5. Following in the Duterte Administration’s Footsteps?

The Ukraine-Russia War made the Philippines aware of the possibility that China could mount a similar approach to retake Taiwan. The Russian invasion of Ukraine raised concerns in Washington, Tokyo, Canberra, and even Manila that China could mount a military operation to retake the self-ruling island republic. This pushed the Duterte administration to inform Washington that in the event of an emergency, the Philippines would allow U.S. forces to return to the former naval station at Subic Bay and Clark Air Base. (Strangio, 2022) On March 31, 2022, the Philippines and the U.S. held an unusually large joint military exercise in light of the perceived growing threat from China and both countries’ wariness that China is Russia’s security partner (*ibid.*). The military exercise included conventional war-fighting scenarios such as amphibious landings, airstrikes, and ship movements aimed at enhancing the two allies’ crisis planning and crisis response capability (*ibid.*).

Whether or not the administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. would subscribe to this policy, however, became a matter of speculation a few weeks after President Marcos assumed office on 30 June 2022. One

thing, however, became apparent—he showed little interest in fostering close ties with Russia. Immediately after the 12 May presidential election, he expressed his intention to stay neutral in face of the Ukraine-Russia War and interest in agricultural deals to arrest rising food prices. However, after assuming the presidency in late June, he ignored Moscow. (Heydarian, 2022b) He showed limited interest in any high-level diplomatic or economic engagement with Russia (*ibid.*). The new administration upheld the decision to cancel the helicopter deal in the face of Washington’s sanction based on a U.S. federal law, the Countering America’s Adversaries Sanction Act (CAATSA) (*The EurAsian Times*, 29th July 2022). In mid-June, his incoming National Security Adviser (NSA) Clarita Carlos announced that the Philippines would adopt a neutral position on the Russia-Ukraine War (*Asia News Monitor*, 13th June 2022). She also declared that she would advise the incoming president not to support any sanctions imposed by the U.S. and other countries against Russia (*ibid.*).

Despite the Marcos Administration’s declaration of neutrality in the Ukraine-Russia War, he is following his predecessor’s footsteps of pursuing a policy of limited hard balancing towards China. This strategy requires Manila to foster closer ties with Beijing to manage the dispute; while at the same time, making attempts to counter Chinese aggressive efforts by applying lawfare and leveraging on its alliance and security partnerships with the U.S. and other American allies such as Japan and Australia, and limited arms build.

In early July 2022, the Marcos administration laid down the red carpet for Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi when he visited the Philippines as his third stop on his five-nation tour of Southeast Asia. On July 6, 2022, after meeting with newly installed Secretary of Foreign Affairs Enrique Manalo, Yi went to Malacañang Place to pay a courtesy call to the new Philippine president. Before meeting China’s top

diplomat, President Marcos said that the Philippines should not only be discussing the West Philippine Sea (dispute). He said that the Philippines and China should do other things to normalize their bilateral relations. He added that the Philippines is offering initiatives to increase the scope of Philippine-China relations with the possible expansion of cultural, education, and even military exchanges if necessary. (Associated Press, 2022)

During his meeting with Foreign Minister Yi in July 2022, President Marcos was quoted as saying that China is the Philippines' most vital partner and hopes to fortify the relationship (*Benar News*, 6th July 2022). This, however, did not prevent his administration from repairing the Philippine-U.S. alliance after President Duterte's early efforts to distance Manila from Washington. On 29 September 2022, Philippine DND Undersecretary and Officer-in-Charge Jose Faustino and U.S. Secretary of Department of Defence (DOD) Lloyd J. Austin formally announced their countries' commitment to the 1951 MDT. (US DOD, 29th September 2022) Accordingly, this will be accomplished by enhancing maritime cooperation and improving their respective armed forces' interoperability and information sharing. Both defence secretaries also admitted the necessity of improving and modernizing their alliances to help secure the Philippines' future, address regional security challenges, and promote peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region.

This goal requires the two allies to accelerate the implementation of the 2014 EDCA by concluding infrastructure enhancements and repair projects at existing EDCA-agreed locations inside five Philippine Air Force (PAF) bases all over the country. (*ibid.*) And finally, the two defence secretaries revealed the signing of the U.S-Philippine Maritime Framework that will jump-start the two countries' maritime cooperative activities in the South China Sea, which might include the resumption of

joint naval patrols by the U.S. and Philippine navies. In October 2022, a senior U.S. defence official announced that Manila and Washington are planning to increase the number of sites that U.S. forces can access and use under the 2014 EDCA. (*One News*, 2nd December 2022) In the aftermath of U.S. Vice-President Kamala Harris's visit to Manila in late November 2022, President Marcos admitted that his conversations with Vice-President Harris were about mutual concerns on security cooperation between the two nations such as proposals for joint exercises, and the use of Philippine bases by American forces under the EDCA (PNA, 1st December 2022). Interestingly, the revitalization of the Philippine-U.S. alliance is taking place amid mounting tension between China on the one hand, and Taiwan, and the U.S. and its Asian allies on the other hand. As the closest country to Taiwan and a U.S. treaty ally, the Philippines is expected to play a significant strategic role in providing its territory as a staging ground for U.S. forces responding against any Chinese invasion of the island republic. (*Benar News*, 30th September 2022)

The Philippines is also fostering closer security partnerships with Japan and South Korea. In early October 2022, the Philippines hosted a 10-day live fire training exercise involving Filipino and American marines, South Korean marines, and Japanese Ground Self-Defence Forces (JSDF). About 3,000 ground troops from Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and the U.S. participated in the live-fire exercises north of the Philippine capital and showed to the world that the U.S. and its allies are prepared to rapidly respond to crises throughout the Indo-Pacific. (Heydarian, 2022c)

The Marcos Administration took over from the Duterte Administration the responsibility to fund and implement the revised AFP modernization program, which will enter its third horizon from 2023-2028. Once he assumed office on June 30, 2022. President Marcos was

then confronted with a guns-versus-butter dilemma as he would decide on whether or not his administration will fund the program, as it will cost the Philippine government US\$103.38 billion, with the lion-share of the US\$56 billion modernization budget going to the PN and the PAF.

On July 1, 2022, President Marcos, during the 75th founding of the PAF, announced that he will continue the ongoing defence initiatives as it would complement his administration's vision for "a stronger, bigger, and effective air force capable of defending and maintaining our sovereign state and of assisting our people in times of dire consequences and today's reality." (PNA, 19th July 2022) On July 13, 2022, DND O-I-C Undersecretary Faustino announced that the Marcos administration pledged to continue the implementation of the Philippine military's modernization program as the president, through a directive, and mentioned his top priorities such as defending the nation's territorial integrity, protecting the Filipino people, and ensuring state sovereignty (*Asia News Monitor*, 13th July 2022). Then on December 21, 2022, President Marcos assured the AFP of his administration's commitment to its modernization program aimed at acquiring more equipment for external defence. He announced that: "We will be partners towards your vision of a strong, credible, world-class armed force that is a source of national pride or a source of national security." (*Asia News Monitor*, 21st December 2022)

6. Conclusion

Like all Southeast Asian states, the Philippines was caught off-guard by the Ukraine-Russia War. The initial reaction was marked by the knee-jerk response of evacuating Filipino overseas workers in Ukraine and then declaring a policy of neutrality to save Manila's arms deal with Russia. However, the Philippines later condemned the Russian invasion,

supporting the UNGA's resolution on Ukraine. Eventually, the Duterte administration adopted a policy of critical neutrality to the raging Ukraine-Russia War. It also pushed the Duterte Administration further in pursuing a policy of limited hard balancing policy towards China.

This first policy is characterized by a stated policy of neutrality in the face of the armed conflict; occasional criticism of Russia's handling of the war that caused massive civilian casualties in Ukraine; and the willingness to host American military forces in case the armed conflict spills over to Asia through a potential replication by China of Russia's use of hybrid warfare against Ukraine in the Taiwan Straits and the South China Sea. The second policy's goal is to constrain China's expansion to the South China Sea by developing a credible defence capability for the armed forces, while at the same time, promoting and strengthening comprehensive and strategic alliances the Philippines has forged with its ally and security partners. The Marcos administration has pursued the same policy adopted by its predecessor, strengthening the country's alliance with the U.S., fostering security partnerships with Japan, and building up the Philippine military's territorial defence capabilities.

Notes

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1. The 1951 Philippine-U.S. Mutual Defence Treaty provides the two allies to consult each other in case of an armed attack against them. President Duterte committed to the U.S. access to five Philippine Air Force (PAF) bases in case of an armed attack against U.S. forces in the region by Russia or China.
2. Group Interview with ranking Armed Forces of the Philippines in the National Defense College of the Philippines (NDCP) on the Philippine Military's view on the Ukraine-Russia War, February to June 2022.
3. See note 2.
4. See note 2.
5. See note 2.
6. See note 2.
7. See note 2.

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