

**China's Landmass and Maritime Relations
on the Edges: The Implications of
Russia-Ukraine Conflict on the Cases of
Kazakhstan and the Philippines**

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Abstract

Among the persistent effects of the Cold War are the concerns that militarized conflicts are likely to occur at the frontiers of the former Cold War powers, and also that countries at these frontiers will inevitably sustain collateral damage regardless of their geostrategic alignment. On the western side of the Eurasian landmass, the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine is conjoined to disputes over the limits of Russian and European political and economic influence. On the eastern side, economic disputes between the People's Republic of China and the United States of America will, if militarized, have severe consequences for the US-aligned governments particularly at the Eastern periphery of China. Kazakhstan, which is at the geostrategic gap between Russia and China, continues to play a significant role in

Russian and Chinese engagements with Europe. The Philippines has not diminished in value as leveraging-point for the US, most recently against China because of South China Sea dispute. Notwithstanding the militarization on the western front with Russia, the possibility of a militarized conflict with China may yet be mitigated if its interests in the North-Western Eurasian landmass are distinguished from its geopolitical goals in its maritime Southern periphery. This paper revisits the “guns or butter” metaphor, which was developed during the Cold war to describe the opportunity cost calculations, particularly of peripheral states such as Kazakhstan and the Philippines, regarding “security” vs. “socio-economic development”. The recent Belt and Road Initiative of China has highlighted the provision of Chinese development “butter” to its periphery, in contrast to the post-Cold War security “guns” provided for Kazakhstan by Russia through CSTO military alliance, and for Philippines by Mutual Defense Treaty with the US. If Russia and the United States fail to assure Kazakhstan and the Philippines, respectively, that military security relations remain recognizable and reliable, then China, either by invitation or hegemonic expansion, may choose to become more prominent in security-related issues in these countries. Within their respective territories, does Kazakhstan and the Philippines have the skill and resources to balance or moderate the geopolitical interests of these great-power states? Or will Central Asians and Southeast Asians have no choice but to take sides if Chinese, American, and European military forces are deployed in their respective regions?

Keywords: *China, landmass, maritime, geopolitics, Kazakhstan, Philippines*

1. Introduction

The “guns or butter” metaphor is a common derivative of the basic opportunity cost concept in macroeconomics; presumably, opinions in a government are always split between whether defensive-military materials or productive-civilian goods are to be prioritized for budgetary planning and outlays. When extended to foreign policy, “guns or butter” can refer to whether military alliances or foreign trade determine the diplomatic efforts of a government, or to whether the relations built with the framing of one are preconditions or impediments to the possibility of building relations under the framework of the other. The case of the militarized conflict between Russia and Ukraine seems to indicate that the failure of both countries to sufficiently enmesh each other’s security and developmental sectors, as well as those of the countries at their European periphery, increases the likelihood of war. At the conference in Copenhagen on 11th August 2022, as British defense secretary Ben Wallace showed doubt about Russia being able “to succeed in occupying Ukraine”, twenty-six Western countries “agreed to give more financial and military aid to Ukraine” pledging “1.5bn euros (\$1.55bn) more to help boost the Ukrainian military” to continue fighting against Russian occupation (*Al Jazeera*, 11th August 2022).

The impact of war has already been felt in global agricultural production and trade of grain staples and fertilizers. McKinsey reported that armed conflict in one of the world’s six breadbasket regions and in the critical supply and transit hub of Black Sea area is “tilting global food security into a state of high risk” with the world hunger crisis imminent among the vulnerable populations of Global South and the next year’s crop production in Ukraine being estimated to “decline by 35 to 45 percent” (McKinsey & Company, 2022). With the wartime sanctions in place, Russia’s gas exports to Europe went down to 77% comparatively to last year with the Gazprom’s Portovaya plant located

near Nord Stream 1, a main gas pipeline from Russia to European Union, burning off estimated “\$10 million worth of natural gas a day near its border with Finland” approximated to about “9,000 tons of carbon dioxide” emissions a day (*CNN*, 26th August 2022). With about “50% of homes” in Germany utilizing natural gas for heating and “another 25%” needing heating oil while the German households are preparing for winter, searching for “brennholz”, the German word for firewood, reached an absolute peak in Google search in mid-August (*Quartz*, 26th August 2022).

If the geostrategic borders of the former Cold War that overlap with the present territorial borders of great-power states such as Russia are likely sites for militarized conflicts that are linked to the “guns or butter” debate, then the conditions along similar borders must be assessed, if only to mitigate the outbreak of militarized conflict on these borders. The military and economic development of China comes into focus because it has neither helped to resolve the geostrategic conflicts carried from the Cold War nor displaced the United States as the provider of security technology or military assistance for countries at the Western Pacific Rim or Eastern Chinese periphery. However, China’s interests and involvement in North-Western Eurasian landmass differ significantly from the geopolitical goals that involve maritime Southern periphery. So, although military deployments may be done by the familiar great powers and may be justified by familiar ideologies, there are important differences in these confrontations apart from the geography on which the fighting might occur. More specifically, attempts by China to alter the “guns/butter” structures at its periphery could indicate an increasing likelihood for militarized conflict. On the one hand, security post-Cold War “guns” have been provided for Kazakhstan by Russia through CSTO military alliance, and for Philippines by Mutual Defense Treaty with the US. On the other hand,

development “butter” in both countries appears to have been created from China’s investments and trade. But, in both cases, China has not, until very recently, exerted much influence on the socio-political and governance structures of either Kazakhstan or the Philippines. Rather, historic great power influence was held by Imperial Russia and Soviet Union over Kazakhstan, and by colonial Spain and the Imperial US over the Philippines. Thus, any risk in the potential conflict at the borderlines of China appears likely to correlate with the increase of incidents wherein the Chinese have chosen to militarize the relations that had previously been mostly developmental. If Russia and the United States fail to assure Kazakhstan and the Philippines, respectively, that military security relations remain recognizable and reliable, then China, either by invitation or hegemonic expansion, may choose to become more prominent in security-related issues in these countries. Within their respective territories, does Kazakhstan and the Philippines have the skill and resources to balance or moderate the geopolitical interests and “influence” of these great-power states? Or will Central Asians and Southeast Asians have no choice but to take sides if Chinese, American, and European military forces are deployed in their respective regions?

2. China’s East and West

The Chinese, at present, seem to view their eastern and western borders from two perspectives. First, these frontier areas are not only inhospitable but are also under constant threat from numerous adversaries. Second, the inherent dangers in these maritime and continental spaces are, ultimately, no hindrance to for the Chinese to attempt power projection, particularly with regard to the control of trade routes and the deterrence of hostile intent. Harold John Mackinder noted in the early 20th century that China possesses very advantageous

geographical features and that, at the cost of strengthening both its maritime and continental defenses, such an “amphibious” power could prevail over all its adversaries (Mackinder, 1904). A prediction by Alfred Mahan originally published in 1900 that China would no longer have to hesitate between continental and maritime defense (Mahan, 2003), appears to have borne out in the early 21st century. Recent examples of the belief that “China is a nation of both land and sea [with] needs and opportunities in two directions, and also faces security challenges on two fronts” (Erickson and Goldstein, 2009) are the security measures against presumed terrorists in Xinjiang, the deployment of strategic economic assets in post-Soviet Central Asia with the New Silk Roads/Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Mattis, 2018), as well as a “pan-peripheral strategy” for heightened sense of security and room for maneuver (Wang, 2015), particularly against the United States and other great-power countries. Increased Chinese influence over the east and the west would facilitate access to Europe and the Indian Ocean through the Eurasian continental landmass, and to the deep and open waters across the Western Pacific (Zhang and Wang, 2006).

From a classic geopolitical perspective, states such as Kazakhstan and the Philippines, which are at the Chinese periphery, appear vulnerable not only because these are in the trajectory of an expansionist China, but also because their political, socio-economic, and cultural differences are likely to frame all interactions involving China within a competitive “weaker-versus-stronger” explanatory framework (Lacoste, 1976). This power inequality appears to be the explanatory key because it indicates “a certain similarity between the facts observed and a certain dissimilarity between the environments in which they occurred” (Bloch, 1928: 20-23). More specifically, the classic geopolitical explanation appears compatible with the “China threat” thesis, wherein peripheral states inevitably “equate a state of preparedness with a state of war and

China's perception of a threat as antagonistic" (Broomfield, 2003: 266). However, such parsimonious theorizing overlooks key differences in the engagements with great-power states; namely, the Soviet Union/Russia for Kazakhstan, and the United States for the Philippines. The main consideration is not so much whether China is a hegemon-substitute to the previous Cold War powers, but rather that the engagements of Kazakhstan and the Philippines with China are not of sufficient breadth or depth to allow China to more than just a partial influence on the policies of these states.

3. The Eurasian Landmass Borderlands: Managing the "Influence" in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is the largest land-locked country in the World, sharing 7,500 kilometers of the land border with Russia, a former colonial power of the region. It is the only country in Central Asia that have formally resolved all of its border disputes with neighboring countries (Gorenburg, 2014: 3). That long border with Russia was much politicized after the independence because of large Russian ethnic population residing in North Kazakhstan (Diener, 2022: 126-127) and more recently after 2014 Crimean crisis (Laruelle, 2018). Diener's survey in 2017-2018 of the Northern Kazakhstan populations showed that Russian ethnics have similar attitudes to Kazakh ethnics who also reside there about the importance of speaking Russian, their identity as "Kazakhstani" and Kazakhstan being a "Eurasian" country (Diener, 2022: 132-136).

The recent US-Russia and US-China tensions have socially constructed the "new ecosystem of ideas" with thinktanks, mass media and wider academia to use the concepts of "Russia's influence" or "China's influence" with "funds dedicated to studying and "countering"

or “detering” that influence” (Laruelle, Royce and Beyssembayev, 2019: 1-2). As any conceptual entanglement, the care with which those concepts are used for geo/biopolitical analysis or deployed to analyze or promote the national interests of great powers are of particular importance to landlocked borderlands such as Kazakhstan. Moscow has neither “forced” nor “manipulated” the domestic politics of the country and its foreign policy choices, “Kazakhstan is far from a passive object of Russia’s actions”; it is a “fully-fledged actor” with its own national interests that might align or differ from Russia (*ibid.*: 23-24). The announcement of the Silk Road Economic Belt of the “One Belt and One Road” (OBOR) Initiative, later renamed as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in Kazakhstan in September 2013 was “not incidental” considering that the country shares over 1,780 km land border with China. The neighbors have “much complementarity” in the issues of economy and “political interests of government leaders” (Kembayev, 2020). After independence Kazakhstan has spent considerable efforts in delineating its disputed borders, the border treaty with China was signed in April 1994, and additional agreements was signed in September 1997 and July 1998. After resolving border disputes both countries have played important roles in the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001 with its Charter signed in 2002. Since then, SCO has become a major “vehicle for China cooperation with Central Asian member states and Russia”, where Chinese influence can be functionally exerted through multilateralism for both economic and strategic motives (Chao, 2022).

Kazakhstan pursues a multi-vector foreign policy balancing its relationships with major world powers such as Russia, China, US, and EU. Despite the geopolitical unease, Nur-Sultan and Moscow remain close military allies guaranteed by the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which also includes Armenia, Belarus,

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as well as continue the economic integration bound by the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) (Tynan, 2017). Overall regional integration and regime mechanisms such as CSTO and EEU “seek to insulate the region from becoming a zone of contestation between great powers”, what is sometimes characterized as Russia’s “cooperative hegemony” (Pedersen, 2002) in post-Soviet Central Asia. This approach relies on “co-opting of the smaller partners” into institutional cooperation to achieve a better reputation as a promoter of multilateral principles of diplomacy and “a softer form of domination over the region” with some safeguards provided to weaker members and decisions made based on consensus of all members. (Šćepanović, 2021: 236, 252).

Kazakhstan despite inheriting Soviet nuclear weapons arsenal in 1992 signed the Lisbon Protocol to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) and gave up nuclear ambitions to become “non-nuclear weapons state” as a key member of the Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty under Russia’s military protection as a key member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). In the event of a conventional attack by another state or non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, extremism, transnational crime and others, “Russia would rescue it through CSTO mechanisms such as the Collective Rapid Reaction Force” (Laruelle, Royce and Beyssembayev, 2019: 6). As part of CSTO framework as well as on the bilateral arrangements, Russia also continues to be the main external institutional actor for the training of military officers and soldiers of Kazakhstan. “Military dependence” of a smaller state has its consequences hindering Kazakhstan’s multi-vectoral policy, however operations and maintenance of complex industrial platforms necessary for functioning modern military requires these costs for the lack of feasible alternatives “to avoid the possible consequences of a more isolationist policy” (*ibid.*: 24). Kazakhstan

replaced a dated 2011 military doctrine with a new 2017 document under the Presidential Order 554 adopted on 29th September 2017. The doctrine continues to be defensive in nature stating that there is “no state considered as enemy” with focus on the internal stability that emphasises the diplomatic and non-military ways to resolve conflicts in the international system (Presidential Order 554, Military Doctrine of Kazakhstan, 2017). Despite having no enemies, the doctrine highlights the need to balance the major world and regional powers in their desire to change the existing world order with goals to extend their influence, particularly at the time of decrease of effectiveness in the international rule of law, obviously addressing geopolitical changes occurred in the Ukraine since 2014. This year during the celebrations of the Defender of the Fatherland Day, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev re-instated that “amid the unprecedented geostrategic tension in the world strengthening the defense capacity of the country is of particular importance” despite the fact that military doctrine of Kazakhstan is “exclusively defensive” relying on diplomacy to defend the national interests. (Kazinform, 6th May 2022)

Kazakhstan inherited from Soviet Union one of the most developed defense industries in the Central Asian region, which included “hundred plants and facilities” as well as “wide range of armaments, primarily for the navy” such as “missiles, mines, control systems, navigational equipment, and radars”. Among the non-naval equipment were “tanks, infantry weapons, air defence system components, radio-electronic equipment and howitzers”. In the Post-Soviet structural economic crisis of 1990s, many of the facilities closed due to disruptions in the government orders and overall supply chain issues, but “at least 50 factories and research centres” work to this day. The key production facilities have been integrated into the state-owned holding company, Kazakhstan Engineering (KE): (1) the Kirov plant in Petropavlovsk,

which makes communications equipment; (2) the Zenit plant in Uralsk, which builds ships, including minesweepers and patrol boats; (3) the Ziksto plant in Petropavlovsk, which makes anti-ship missiles; (4) the Metalist plant in Petropavlovsk, which manufactures high caliber machine-guns; (5) the Petropavlovsk heavy machine-building plant, which makes targeting systems and parts for ballistic missiles; (6) the Granit plant in Almaty, which builds air defense systems; and (7) the Kirov machine-building plant in Petropavlovsk, which makes torpedoes. (Gorenburg, 2014: 6-8)

Since independence of Kazakhstan and more after September 11th 2001, Western countries have shown interest in military cooperation to enhance defense capabilities of Kazakhstan in fighting Global War on Terrorism, particularly to secure the strategically important oil and gas industry in the Caspian area of the Western Kazakhstan. The United States, Türkiye, United Kingdom and France have developed security assistance programs with Kazakhstan. Since the development and growth of oil and gas infrastructure in the Caspian Sea area, particularly for Kashagan oil field, there was a need for a “comprehensive security system” to enhance regional stability (McDermott, 2008: 616). The unresolved status of the Caspian Sea demarcation at the time with the five littoral states such as Kazakhstan, Russia, Azerbaijan, Iran and Turkmenistan have made legal governance of the region limited. In 2003 Kazakhstan signed a five-year military cooperation plan with the US and deployed “a small number of engineers to Iraq” from the Peace Support Operations battalion (KAZBAT). A main target for the U.S.-Kazakhstan-NATO cooperation was to achieve “interoperability to fight the Global War on Terrorism” and with assistance from the U.S. Türkiye, U.K. and NATO “to foster the creation of a Special Forces Training Centre” in Aktau that helped to transform the peacekeeping battalion KAZBAT into “a peace support brigade (KAZBRIG)”

(*ibid.*: 617-618). KAZBRIG is dedicated to peacekeeping missions and served in the international coalition operations in Iraq and Afghanistan (Gorenburg, 2014: 5).

Türkiye as a regional power and a NATO member continues to provide the necessary balancing for Kazakhstan at the time of geopolitical adjustments with Russia and China. Türkiye shares “Turkic” culture, language and history with Kazakhstan that made possible for the establishment and activities of TURKSOY, International Organization of Turkic Culture. More recent Strategic Partnership Agreement between Kazakhstan and Türkiye was signed in October 2009, which paved way for the establishment of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSCC) during the visit of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Kazakhstan. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Türkiye, 2022) On November 12th 2021 during the Eighth Summit of the Turkic Council, President Erdogan announced that the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (Turkic Council) would be changed to the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) that would “upgrade the organization from a lethargic alliance to a formidable political union.” During the recent summit on November 11, 2022 in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan became a full member of the OTS, which concluded the participation of all Turkic neighboring states of Kazakhstan. Furthermore, the Turkic Investment Fund (TIF) was established “to accelerate the economic growth of member states” as geostrategic adjustments occur in the region. Even though, the OTS currently has no intentions to contest the hegemony of China and Russia in Central Asia, “the integration of Turkic states poses a crucial threat to Beijing and Moscow.” (Akçay, 2022)

One of the recent examples of the balancing actions was the agreement with Turkish Aselan company “to modernize armoured vehicles and helicopters and to jointly produce communications systems for Central Asian militaries.” In May 2022 there was agreement with the

Turkish Aerospace Industries for joint manufacturing of Anka, an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) in Kazakhstan, the production center is expected “to open in late 2022 or early 2023” (*Defense News*, 8th August 2022). On 13th May 2022, a statement by Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI) announced the signing of a memorandum of understanding with state-owned Kazakhstan Engineering (KE) on “the transfer of technology, including maintenance and repairs” with the deal being “the first Anka production base outside of Turkey” (*Defense News*, 14th May 2022).

One of the justifications for denuclearization of the country in early 1990s was “nukes for oil” hypothesis. The first government deals with the US Chevron corporation to develop the Tengiz oil field in May 1992 were made in the context of nuclear disarmament deals made at the same time of April and May 1992, which were innately linked to the questions of sovereignty, international recognition and economic security of Kazakhstan at the time. (Peleo, 2017: 290) The oil sector continues to be the basis for Kazakhstan’s economic and industrial development, which makes price fluctuations in the oil market affect country’s budget and GDP dynamics (Azretbergenova and Syzdykova, 2020). China’s involvement in oil industry has come in the end of 1990s and has also shaped the landscape of oil infrastructure in Kazakhstan. The Sino-Kazakh intergovernmental agreement on cooperation in the oil and gas industry was signed in 1997 that paved the way for the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) to acquire first 60% stake in Aktobemunaigas company, which was later entirely taken over and renamed as “CNPC Aktobemunaigas” in Aktobe Oblast. At that time China also promised to build a 2,200-kilometer pipeline from Western Kazakhstan to its borderland of Xinjiang, which resulted in 150 million tons of oil going eastward. (*Eurasianet*, 24th August 2022) CNPC together with KazMunayGaz, Eni, Shell, ExxonMobil, TotalEnergies,

and Inpex have also shares in the Kashagan oil field operated by the North Caspian Operating Company is expected to have “lower than planned output” this year (*Upsteam*, 6th September 2022). However proportionally Western companies have still bigger share, since 2010 the China’s share in oil production has decreased “from 31% to 16%” (*Eurasianet*, 24th August 2022). According to the conference proceedings published by the Kazakh-German University in November 2021, for the past 25 years CNPC has invested more than US\$45 billion into Kazakhstan’s oil and gas sector (*Kazakhstan-China Cooperation in Oil and Gas Sector* conference proceedings, 2021). Still, out of total “61.2 million tons of oil drilled in 2020, only around 10.5 million tons came from companies controlled by CNPC”, furthermore out of the “65.7 million tons of oil products exported in 2021, 3.6 million tons went to China” while European “buyers in Italy, the Netherlands and France received more” (*Eurasianet*, 24th August 2022). About 80% of Kazakh crude oil exported to the West via the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) and Russian Black Sea terminal “Yuzhnaya Ozereyevka” near the port of Novorossiysk (*Upsteam*, 6th September 2022). This logistical detail of the major economic interest of Kazakhstan exposed its risks and complexity during Russian invasion of Ukraine and Western sanctions imposed on Russia (Putz, 2022). Now with major logistical obstacles due to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the alternative destinations are sought to the existing pipeline to China, as well as Azerbaijan-Türkiye (*TRT World*, 16th August 2022); this is despite the fact that all three major Kazakh oilfields such as Tengiz, Kashagan and Karachaganak as well as CPC pipeline were not targeted by the Western sanctions on Russia (*Upsteam*, 6th September 2022).

4. Maritime Relations on the Edge: The “Balancing” of the Philippines

If Kazakhstan has a burden of long Eurasian borderlands to secure, the Philippines in comparison being the Western Pacific archipelagic state has a large maritime territory and border to safeguard. As of 2017 the Philippine archipelago consists of 7,641 islands that was updated from the previous official count of 7,107 in 1945. The 2017 update on 534 more islands was announced by the National Mapping and Resource Information Authority (NAMRIA), Department of Environment and Natural Resources as part of the Philippine Islands Project by “using the latest technology” was able to generate the detailed maps of all its sovereign domain (NAMRIA, 10th January 2017). The total length of the coastline is 36,289 km, the total area of bays and coastal waters is 266,000 km², while the oceanic waters area is 1,934,000 km² (WEPA, 2022). On the West there is the South China Sea; in the East there is the Pacific Ocean; in the South there are the Sulu and Celebes Seas; and in the North there is the Bashi Channel.

The Philippines in its stand to external security issues has “tended to be legalistic rather than confrontational” (Peleo, 2015). There is a list of legislative acts and revisions that were passed in the history of the Philippines to define and revise with amendments the baselines and territorial sea of the Philippines: Republic Act No. 3046 of June 17, 1961; Republic Act No. 5446 of 1968; and by Republic Act No. 9522 of 2009. There was also the Presidential Proclamation No. 370 of March 20, 1968 that claimed jurisdiction and control over the natural resources of the continental shelf adjacent to the Philippines. And there was the Presidential Decree No. 1599 of June 11, 1978, which established a 200-nautical mile (nm) exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The Philippines also ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (LOS Convention) on May 8, 1984. Article 1 of the current 1987 Philippine Constitution states

that the “waters around, between, and connecting the islands of the archipelago, regardless of their breadth and dimensions, form part of the internal waters of the Philippines” (*The Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines*, 1987). When the Law of the Sea Convention was signed in 1982 and ratified in 1984, the Philippines stated: “The concept of archipelagic waters [under the LOS Convention] is similar to the concept of internal waters under the Constitution of the Philippines.” To which the United States, a former colonial power and an ally have protested against this reading and interpretation of the LOS Convention in the Philippines. With Republic Act No. 9522 passed in 2009 however there were no clarifications “whether the waters within the baselines are archipelagic waters (rather than internal waters)” (Limits in the Seas, No. 142, Philippines: Archipelagic and other Maritime Claims and Boundaries, 2014: 4). This is significant, as the Philippines being a close postcolonial ally of the United States has a Mutual Defense Treaty with the United States signed in 1951. (Mutual Defense Treaty between the Republic of the Philippines and the United States of America, 1951)

The Philippines has resolved its maritime borders with Indonesia. In 2014 Philippines has signed the bilateral agreement establishing the boundary between their overlapping exclusive economic zones (EEZs) with Indonesia and jointly submitted the document to the United Nations in 2019. (Department of Foreign Affairs, Philippines, 1st October 2019) The Philippine and Indonesian governments in 2021 held a preparatory meeting for further “delimitation of their continental shelf boundaries” after the “Agreement Concerning the Delimitation of the Exclusive Economic Zone Boundary” entered into force in 2019. This diplomatic work to legally settle the maritime border issues with Indonesia is ongoing as part of Philippines-Indonesia Joint Permanent Working Group on Maritime and Ocean Concerns (JPWG-MOC) (PNA, 2nd November 2021). The Philippines had not yet concluded the maritime

boundaries negotiations with Japan, China, Malaysia, Palau, and Taiwan; however, Malaysia unilaterally consider that it has already “established a maritime boundary with the Philippines” (Limits in the Seas, No. 142, Philippines: Archipelagic and other Maritime Claims and Boundaries, 2014: 8)

The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) for decades has focused on Army fighting various internal wars with insurgent groups in the country while paying little attention to the development of Navy and Coastguards to secure maritime territories. However, in 2009 during Gloria Macapagal Arroyo’s presidency, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) was “suddenly jolted by Chinese naval presence in Philippine territorial waters” in the context of China’s rise and increased assertiveness in the South China Sea. As a result, President Arroyo signed Republic Act No. 9522, or the Philippine Baselines Act in March 2009 and unprecedentedly deployed “six more patrol vessels allegedly to curb illegal fishing” in the contested South China Sea. The AFP’s “shift from internal to maritime security” occurred in earnest during Benigno Simeon Aquino III’s presidency where he promised to pursue AFP modernization program for Navy and Air Force in particular to reform the military “from an army-centered, counter-insurgency-oriented organization in to a modern armed force capable of overseeing maritime security.” Thus, in 2013 President Aquino announced the Philippine Navy Strategic Sail Plan 2020, the objective of which was “to upgrade the Philippine Navy’s (PN) capabilities for maritime security” (De Castro, 2016). Furthermore, in April 2014, the Philippines signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the United States with aim to “to constrain China” by providing US military “a strategic footprint through rotational presence in Philippine territory” that includes the access to Clark Air Base and Subic Naval Base that American military left in 1992 (De Castro, 2018: 7).

On July 12, 2016 the Permanent Court of Arbitration's (PCA) made a milestone decision favoring the Philippine claims in the South China Sea (Press Release of the South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines vs. The People's Republic of China), 2016). However, just elected President Rodrigo Duterte made "a 180-degree turn as he untangled the Aquino Administration's geopolitical agenda" by pursuing a diplomatic policy "to earn China's goodwill and confidence." He modulated and softened the discourses on maritime disagreements in the South China Sea during the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Laos. Moreover, he announced that the Philippine Navy (PN) would not join the U.S. Navy to patrol in the South China Sea in order "not to upset Beijing" (De Castro, 2018). This appeasement policy has allowed Duterte administration to join China's Belt and Road Initiative, to obtain investments from China for the Philippines' infrastructure as part of his Build, Build, Build initiative. This brought much public criticism of the administration and "cautious attitudes toward China" whose economic and military power becoming a growing threat to the security and national interests of the Philippines, particularly in the South China Sea (Chao, 2021). Duterte's foreign policy has brought widespread discussions and described as "a calibrated foreign policy by gravitating toward China" while still being a close military ally of the United States (De Castro, 2018: 14).

Ironically, the chief strategic concern of China with the Philippines might not be about the control of land but rather about access to the ocean. To the north of the Philippines, unimpeded use of the Bashi Channel would grant the PLA naval units coming from Hainan and Guangdong a much easier access to the eastern waters of the Pacific Ocean. Topographically, this waterway is a deep underwater canyon, crossed from the southwest to the northeast by a very strong and warm Kuroshio current, the hydrological properties of which are very suitable

for submarine operations. On the surface, the weather is windy and the sea is rough; these can hamper anti-submarine activities (Yu, 2007). The current increase in Chinese air and sea activity around the Bashi Channel can partially be explained by the desire to know more about the conditions of its seabed (Central News Agency of Taiwan, 1st November 2020). Hence, the neutralization of the Luzon Strait would facilitate China's force projection towards the Pacific Ocean in a west-east manner, could threaten U.S. forward bases such as Guam, and cut U.S. deployments into northeast and southeast halves. It would also endanger the U.S. Navy access to the South China Sea, securing the PLA deployments there and allowing it to direct its focus towards Malacca (Central News Agency of Taiwan, 8th April 2020). In the opposite direction, control of the Bashi Channel would allow China to project forces to the Pacific Ocean and separate U.S. military deployments between Northeast and Southeast Asia.

5. Conclusion

If Chinese relations with Kazakhstan and with the Philippines are emblematic of China's prospects at its northwestern-terrestrial and southeastern-maritime borders, respectively, then, from the perspective of geostrategic border management, an outbreak of militarized violence in the maritime southeast would accrue fewer losses to China than a conflict on the continental northwest. BRI-related data showed that, in 2017, Kazakhstan was more closely tied to China than the Philippines, as Kazakhstan allocated 12.1% of its GDP (approx. US\$ 20.2 billion) for servicing its debt to China compared to only 0.2% (approx. US\$657 million) for the Philippines. Moreover, 5.8% of FDI to Kazakhstan came from China compared to only 0.1% to the Philippines in the same period (Greenberg Center for Geoeconomic Studies, 2022). More recent

updates show that China has invested around US\$35 billion in Kazakhstan under the BRI (Khan, 2022), compared to US\$4.6 billion in the Philippines, of which only US\$620 million has been disbursed (Hart, 2021). It would seem counter-intuitive, therefore, for China to strain security relations with Kazakhstan by, for instance, detaining possibly thousands of ethnic Kazakhs under an anti-separatism campaign in Xinjiang (Putz, 2018) and offering but not sending security aid to Kazakhstan during January 2022 mass riots in Kazakhstan (Associated Press, 14th January 2022) despite its anti-terrorism commitments under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (Kaleji, 2022). Arguably, the deference of China to the deployment of Russian paratroopers during the January 2022 riots could be explained by the utility of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to the security of Chinese interests in Kazakhstan (Schulz, 2022) as well as of a 'non-interference' foreign policy outlook when the riots became defined as rooted in the problems caused by local corruption (International Crisis Group, 14th January 2022).

This circumspective approach – non-interference and hegemonic non-confrontation – does not seem to have been taken by the Chinese in their security-related dealings with the Philippine government. In 2016, China pledged to grant US\$14 million worth of small arms and other minor security-related equipment to the Philippines (Reuters, 20th December 2016), and in 2017 delivered around military-grade rifles and their associated ammunition, valued at around US\$ 7.3 million, for use by the Philippine National Police (PNP) and the Philippine Army (Parameswaran, 2017). Although the Philippine government continues to solicit and receive military equipment from other governments (PNA, 25th October 2017), the Chinese grant is conspicuous because it was given in direct response to the block by the US government of a sale of 26,000 rifles to the Philippines (Reuters, 5th October 2017) on account

of the violent vigilantism that was inherent to the ‘war on drugs’ promoted by Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte (*The Guardian*, 1st November 2016). The Philippine government has since received other grants of military-grade equipment from China, but none of these could be used directly against the Chinese naval and paramilitary forces deployed in the disputed territories of the South China Sea (Embassy of PRC in Philippines, 10th February 2022). Although clearly not a match for the billions of dollars’ worth of military-related aid given by the US to the Philippines since its independence in 1946, the Chinese grants and the diplomatic subversion it implied were sufficient to cause the US government to pressure the Philippine government to re-align with American security priorities in the Western Pacific rim. The proposal by Duterte to cancel the US-Philippine Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) was itself cancelled, and the associated Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) was revitalized prior to the “full scale” resumption of the Balikatan US-Philippine joint military exercises in March-April 2022 (Grossman, 2021). The US-Philippine security links appear to have returned to full inter-operability, not in the least because granting US military forces access to bases in the Philippines “if China-Taiwan tensions escalate” (*NIKKEI Asia*, 5th September 2022) also assures the Filipinos of American support if China escalates tensions in the South China Sea (Patton, 2022). But, ironically, this attempt by the US to return the area to a stable and non-confrontational status quo between all claimants to the South China Sea territories appears to be incompatible with a “new status quo” in which China is at the center of all developmental and security discussions in and about the region.

Notes

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