

# The Philippine Marcos Jr. Administration's South China Sea Policy: An Analysis from a Neoclassical Realist Perspective

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*The complexity of the Philippines' South China Sea policy necessitates a multi-level analysis of the key tenets of the Marcos Jr. administration's approach. From the perspective of neoclassical realism, the structural factor, primarily shaped by the trilateral dynamics among China, the United States, and the Philippines, remains a key determinant influencing Manila's policy formulation. Nevertheless, the mediating function of intervening variables, including President Marcos Jr.'s personal perception and the stances of Manila's domestic actors, substantially shapes how the structural factor is transformed into concrete policy. As a result, the Marcos Jr. administration insists on not abandoning its maritime claims, strengthens its control over the occupied islands and reefs, employs diplomatic channels to maximize strategic gains, closely aligns with the US, and expands its network of security partnerships. To promote regional peace and stability, the relevant stakeholders ought to finalize the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea in the near future.*

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All the websites cited in this article were last visited on May 5, 2026.

**Keywords**

Marcos Jr. administration, Philippine South China Sea Policy, US-Philippine Alliance, Neoclassical Realism

**1. Introduction**

The South China Sea (SCS) issue has emerged as a key factor influencing relations between China and the Philippines since the 20th century. After Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos assumed the presidency in 2022, his administration’s South China Sea policy experienced notable shifts compared to the Duterte administration. These changes include closer alignment with the US, broader security partnerships, and a mix of assertive maritime action and diplomatic outreach. His new policy indicates the dynamic and multi-faceted nature of the Philippines’ SCS policy that balances structural and domestic considerations. Otherwise, Manila’s policy would exhibit greater stability and predictability.

To interpret the shifts in the Marcos Jr. Administration’s SCS policy, this paper adopts the analytical framework of neoclassical realism. Neoclassical realism has emerged as a theoretical framework to integrate an extensive array of explanatory variables to explain how a state constructs a certain foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> Within the causal chain of neoclassical realism, structural factors, including the distribution of power and the strategic environment, are conceptualized as the independent variable, while the state’s foreign policy and its international outcomes constitute the dependent variables.<sup>2</sup> Such policy responses may include diplomatic postures, alliance behaviors, and other actions. Unit- and individual-level factors are intervening variables that act as moderators, shaping how structural factors are translated into the actual foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> In other words, due to the moderation of intervening variables, a state’s foreign policy may deviate from what structural factors alone would suggest.

Applying neoclassical realism allows this paper to link structural factors with intervening domestic variables, illustrating how leadership and internal politics convert external pressures into Manila’s SCS policy. This paper first

1 Randall Schweller, *The Progressiveness of Neoclassical Realism*, in *PROGRESS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY: APPRAISING THE FIELD* 311-48 (Colin Elman & Miriam Elman eds., 2003).

2 NORRIN RIPSMAN ET AL., *NEOCLASSICAL REALIST THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS* 81 (2016).

3 Elias Götz, *Neoclassical Realist Theories, Intervening Variables, and Paradigmatic Boundaries*, 17(2) *FOREIGN POL’Y ANALYSIS* 1-13 (2021).

discusses the structural factors at play in the SCS issue. It subsequently turns to an examination of the intervening variables in the Philippine domestic context. Lastly, it synthesizes the findings to illustrate how these factors have produced the dependent variables—the Marcos Jr. Administration's SCS policy.

## 2. Structural Factors and the South China Sea Issue

The structural factor is the primary determinant of state behavior within the neoclassical realist framework. This study centers on two core structural factors that shape the trilateral system comprising China, the Philippines, and the US, which are the distribution of power and the strategic environment.

The China-Philippines relationship constitutes the most critical bilateral relationship within this trilateral system because they are both direct parties to the SCS issue. The China-US and the US-Philippines relationships also play influential roles in Manila's policy formation. On the one hand, the US-China strategic competition shapes the broader strategic environment, affecting the external pressure and uncertainty that Manila faces. On the other hand, US-Philippines alliance commitments alter Manila's assessment of its own bargaining power and, consequently, its policy choices.

As Kenneth Waltz argued, the distribution of power among units is a central variable within the international system, which is the disparities in national power among states.<sup>4</sup> For Manila, its material capabilities are not comparable to those of Beijing. China's preponderance in comprehensive national power implies that, under strategic prudence, Manila would be rationally dissuaded from undertaking assertive actions in the SCS before narrowing the gap between the two states.

The strategic environment likewise represents a pivotal variable within this trilateral system.<sup>5</sup> When a state confronts an immediate and tangible pressure, it operates within a tightly constrained strategic environment that drastically curtails its available policy alternatives. In contrast, the absence of such acute pressures engenders a more flexible strategic context, enabling a wider array of foreign policy options.<sup>6</sup> Within the specific context of the China-Philippines strategic environment, the disagreements remain far within manageable bounds.

4 KENNETH WALTZ, *THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS* 97 (2009).

5 RIPSAN ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 52-6.

6 *Id.*

The Meeting of the Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on the South China Sea remains active to date. Such an environment diminishes the impetus for the Marcos Jr. administration to pursue high-risk measures regarding the SCS issue.

Meanwhile, the impact of the US-China bilateral dynamic operates primarily through its effects on the strategic environment between Beijing and Manila. NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY promulgated in 2022 by the Biden administration unequivocally designates China as the US's principal "rival,"<sup>7</sup> positing that bilateral contestation is salient in the Indo-Pacific region. This document underscores that competition with China is the primary orientation of American foreign policy.<sup>8</sup> As the second term of the Trump administration started in 2025, there is no indication that the US will deescalate strategic competition with Beijing.

In this context, the US has leveraged the maritime issue as a strategic instrument in its broader competition with Beijing. Washington has persistently refused to acknowledge Beijing's maritime interests. Washington also manipulates the SCS issue to court Manila and other relevant Southeast Asian nations to drive a wedge between these countries and Beijing. Therefore, Washington's engagement has the capacity to influence the strategic environment between Beijing and Manila by raising the intensity of the SCS issue.

The US-Philippines alliance shapes Manila's assessment of its relative leverage in the SCS issue. Washington has grown increasingly proactively in endorsing Manila's claims in the SCS, persistently leveraging alliance ties to cultivate closer relations with the Philippines to amplify pressure on China.<sup>9</sup> Washington has also extended its defense commitments by affirming that any armed attack on the Philippines in the SCS would invoke the defense commitments under the 1951 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty.<sup>10</sup> Michael Beckley argued that alliance relationships possess an "entanglement" effect, whereby a nation is highly likely to be drawn into a military conflict by its ally.<sup>11</sup> This stems from the fact that

7 The White House, National Security Strategy (Oct. 12, 2022), at 8, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

8 *Id.* at 23.

9 US Department of State, Sixth Anniversary of the Philippines-China South China Sea Arbitral Tribunal Ruling, Press Statement by Anthony J. Blinken, Secretary of State (July 11, 2022), <https://2021-2025.state.gov/sixth-anniversary-of-the-philippines-china-south-china-sea-arbitral-tribunal-ruling>.

10 Todd Lopez, Hegseth, Philippine President Meet to Advance Deterrence in Indo-Pacific, US Department of War (July 21, 2025), <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/article/4250755/hegseth-philippine-president-meet-to-advance-deterrence-in-indo-pacific>.

11 Michael Beckley, *The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of U.S. Defense Pacts*, 39(4) INT'L SEC. 7-48 (2015).

robust defensive commitments to the ally may embolden it to adopt a more assertive posture than it would otherwise take.<sup>12</sup> The US has repeatedly issued defense commitments to Manila concerning the SCS issue, which may encourage the Marcos Jr. administration to undertake more provocative measures.

Washington has also supported Manila in strengthening its military capabilities. Under the framework of the US military sales system, Washington has provided Manila with various military equipment, including C-130 transport aircraft and Sea Giraffe radars.<sup>13</sup> These arms provisions may, to some extent, narrow the military capability disparity between Beijing and Manila, strengthening Manila's confidence in handling the SCS issue.

In brief, the power disparity and relatively stable strategic environment between Beijing and Manila are unlikely to cause armed conflicts in the South China Sea. However, against the backdrop of US-China competition, Washington has deepened its involvement in the maritime issue, extending defense commitments and providing significant military equipment to Manila. These US actions may intensify tensions between China and the Philippines, or embolden the Marcos Jr. administration to pursue more adventurous measures.

### **3. Intervening Variables and the South China Sea Issue**

Following the comment of Zhiying Fan that the Philippine leader needs to strike a balance among all relevant parties when formulating the South China Sea policy,<sup>14</sup> this article incorporates President Marcos Jr.'s own perception and the preferences of domestic political actors in the Philippines as intervening variables. Structural factors are filtered through these intervening variables when translating into foreign policy outcomes. Crucially, Marcos Jr.'s personal perception serves as the principal intervening variable that channels structural factors and domestic actors, ultimately producing the specific SCS policy.

#### **A. Marcos Jr.'s Perception of the South China Sea Issue**

Marcos Jr. may perceive the SCS issue in two distinct dimensions. First, recognizing

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> US Department of State, Fact Sheet: U.S. Security Cooperation with the Philippines (Jan. 20, 2025), <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-the-philippines>.

<sup>14</sup> Zhiying Fan, *The logic of the Marcos Jr. Government's South China Sea Policy*, 167 MARINE POL'Y 1-12 (2024).

the disparate capabilities between China and the Philippines, he sees resorting to military force to resolve the SCS issue as an imprudent option.<sup>15</sup> This perception helps explain why the administration has avoided framing the dispute in terms of war, even while maintaining a firm posture on maritime claims. In August 2025, Marcos Jr. told the media that the Philippines is not “girding up for war.”<sup>16</sup>

Second, Marcos Jr. embraces the enhancement of the US-Philippines alliance, which would endow the Philippines with more alternatives for geopolitical stance in this region. According to Article IV of the 1951 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty, the United States is obliged to act in accordance with its constitutional processes in the event of an armed attack on the Philippines. However, the treaty never clearly stipulates that such action should be of a military nature. Consequently, the US has no legal obligation to dispatch troops to assist the Philippines in combat, allowing the US to circumvent the risk of being dragged into a war. This strategic ambiguity enables the US to enjoy greater freedom of action, while Marcos Jr. appears not bothered by it. He paid a visit to the US to meet US President Joe Biden in May 2023. During the meeting, Marcos Jr. stated that it is natural for Manila to strengthen its relationship with its sole treaty ally.<sup>17</sup> During his visit to the US in July 2025, Marcos Jr. reiterated his call for American support in handling the SCS issues. He asserted that Washington and Manila “had formed a great part in terms of preserving the peace, in terms of preserving the stability of the South China Sea.”<sup>18</sup>

## B. Domestic Actors in the Philippines

Marcos Jr.’s South China Sea policy is further influenced by the necessity to accommodate diverse views from domestic actors. In this context, domestic balancing affects how Manila translates structural pressures into concrete policy. The need to accommodate domestic views may cause Manila’s actual SCS policy to diverge from the policy that structural factors — specifically the trilateral system

15 Daphne Galvez, *Marcos Jr. says will not ask US for help in PH’s territorial dispute with China*, INQUIRER.NET (Jan. 25, 2022), <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1545118/marcos-jr-says-will-not-ask-us-for-help-in-phs-territorial-dispute-with-china>.

16 Jean Mangaluz, *No war prep, but China tensions push Philippines to ready defenses—Marcos*, PHILSTAR (Aug. 7, 2025), <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2025/08/07/2463805/no-war-prep-china-tensions-push-philippines-ready-defenses-marcos>.

17 Joseph Velasco & Weiqing Song, *Nexus of Strong Presidentialism and Philippine Foreign Policy: The Case of the Duterte Presidency’s Hedging toward China*, 38(3) PAC. FOCUS 349-77 (2023).

18 The Presidential Communications Office of the Philippines (PCO), *President Marcos highlights importance of PH-U.S. alliance in preserving peace in South China Sea* (July 21, 2025), [https://pco.gov.ph/news\\_releases/president-marcos-highlights-importance-of-ph-u-s-alliance-in-preserving-peace-in-south-china-sea](https://pco.gov.ph/news_releases/president-marcos-highlights-importance-of-ph-u-s-alliance-in-preserving-peace-in-south-china-sea).

mentioned above— would otherwise dictate. Nowadays, the primary divergence among domestic actors pertains to the degree of dependence on Washington.

Some Philippine Congressmen remain cautious about substantially strengthening the US-Philippine alliance. For instance, President Marcos Jr.'s sister, Senator Imee Marcos, has questioned the necessity to open more military bases for US access, arguing that the Philippines should curtail the involvement of external powers like the US when addressing the maritime issue.<sup>19</sup> However, legislators wield limited influence over Marcos Jr., since foreign policy decisions do not require congressional approval.

Another faction in Philippine domestic politics that is less pro-American yet significant is the Duterte family. They attempt to advocate a more balanced approach when interacting with the US. The vice-president, Sara Duterte, in June 2025, warned that the Philippines is leaning on a foreign power and permitting foreign weapons deployment to criticize Marcos Jr.'s increasing dependence on Washington.<sup>20</sup> As the daughter of the former president Rodrigo Duterte, Sara Duterte somehow inherited her father's anti-Americanist doctrine. However, her family has been marginalized since Marcos Jr. came to power. Her father was arrested and sent to Hague for a potential International Criminal Court trial by the Marcos Jr. administration in early 2025, which reveals the rift between the Marcos family and the Duterte family. The falling of their power indicates that the Duterte family is not able to possess sufficient influence over the SCS policy.

In comparison, the pro-American faction within the Philippines is gaining greater influence in domestic politics. Among them, the Philippine ambassador to the US, Jose Manuel Romualdez, is an important figure. He maintains intimate connections with Marcos Jr., and plays a significant role in the Philippine foreign policy formulation process. Jose Romualdez firmly believes that the Philippines should facilitate greater US involvement in the SCS issue. During a speech at the Institute of World Politics, Romualdez emphasized the necessity for enhanced security and economic engagement between Manila and Washington in response to the current geopolitical situation.<sup>21</sup> He asserted that a robust Philippines-US relationship would make significant contributions to regional stability.<sup>22</sup>

19 Maria Tana, *Role Expectations and Realities: The Philippines' Foreign Policy under Marcos Jr. Amid Shifting Regional Dynamics*, 12(2) BANDUNG 248-78 (2025).

20 Raissa Robles, *Philippines' Sara Duterte warns against Marcos' US pivot, 'leaning' on foreign powers*, S. CHINA MORNING POST (June 23, 2025), <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3315534/sara-duterte-warns-against-marcos-us-pivot-leaning-foreign-power>.

21 Raymund Antonio, *PH-US bilateral ties boost peace, stability in Indo-Pacific region—envoy*, MANILA BULL. (Mar. 11, 2023), <https://mb.com.ph/2023/3/11/ph-us-bilateral-boost-peace-stability-in-indo-pacific-region-envoy>.

22 *Id.*

His stance reflects the persistent pro-American sentiment in the Philippine government.

The Philippine military generally adheres to a pro-American stance in its comprehensive cooperation with the United States. The military acts as a catalyst, pushing the Philippines to enhance military ties with the US. Even Trump's tariffs war has a limited effect on the close military tie between Washington and Manila, as substantial US resources continue to flow to the Philippines for defense purposes.<sup>23</sup> In May 2025, the Philippine defense secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr. met with his US counterpart, Pete Hegseth. Teodoro Jr. acknowledged the leadership of Washington among its allies and the bipartisan support from the US Congress to maintain a balanced distribution of power in the region.<sup>24</sup> In practice, the Philippine military conducted several joint patrol operations around the South China Sea with the American counterpart.<sup>25</sup>

To secure the military benefits offered by Washington, the Philippine military is prone to adopting an assertive posture on the SCS issue. In July 2022, several senior Philippine military officials voiced their dissatisfaction with Marcos Jr. regarding then National Security Advisor Clarita Carlos, whom they viewed as excessively accommodating toward China.<sup>26</sup> Subsequently, Carlos was replaced by Eduardo Año, a man seen as more capable of aligning national security policy with the armed forces' preferences.

Last but not least, the public is an indispensable domestic actor in policy-making. Currently, the public has become increasingly attentive to the SCS issue. According to a survey conducted by Pulse Asia in June 2022, 89% of the Philippine respondents supported the government's continuous assertion of the maritime claims, while only 1% opposed maintaining such claims.<sup>27</sup> This hardline public sentiment has persisted to the present. A poll by the Philippine pollster Social Weather Stations, right before the 2025 Philippine mid-term election, showed that 78% of Philippine respondents preferred a candidate who would

23 US Embassy Manila, Joint Statement on the Philippines-United States Bilateral Strategic Dialogue (Feb. 17, 2026), <https://ph.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-on-the-philippines-united-states-bilateral-strategic-dialogue-2>.

24 PH, *US reaffirm alliance in 'pursuit of peace' of Indo-Pacific region*, GMA NEWS (May 31, 2025), <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/947945/ph-us-reaffirm-alliance-in-pursuit-of-peace-of-indo-pacific-region/story>.

25 John Mendoza, PH, *US hold first joint 2026 patrol off Scarborough; China ship spotted*, INQUIRER.NET (Jan. 27, 2026), <https://www.inquirer.net/466002/ph-us-hold-first-joint-2026-patrol-at-scarborough-shoal>.

26 Glenda Gloria, 100 days with Marcos: all smoke and mirrors?, Rappler+ (Oct. 7, 2022), <https://www.rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/analysis-100-days-marcos-jr-all-smoke-and-mirrors>.

27 Michaela Callar, *89% of Pinoy say Marcos must assert rights in South China Sea—Pulse Asia*, GMA NEWS (July 12, 2022), <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/837850/89-of-pinoy-say-marcos-must-assert-rights-in-south-china-sea-pulse-asia/story>.

confront Beijing's activities in the SCS. In the meantime, the survey found that about 77% of the respondents agreed with the idea of strengthening alliances to defend Manila's interests in the SCS.<sup>28</sup> Such overwhelming public consensus leaves the Marcos Jr. administration with limited space to soften its stance in the face of China.

## 4. The Components of Marcos Jr. Administration's South China Sea Policy

### A. Upholding Territorial Claims and Military Actions

Marcos Jr. administration steadfastly adheres to the territorial claims in the South China Sea and seeks to tighten control over the occupied features. This approach reflects a combination of structural factors and domestic pressure. Manila lacks the capability to settle the dispute by force, yet faces strong incentives to avoid appearing passive or retreating from its claims.

Hence, the administration has opted for controlled assertion rather than direct military conflicts. After winning the presidential election, Marcos Jr. has been emphatic in his refusal to make any concessions on the SCS issues and the implementation of the arbitration ruling. In January 2023, during his speech at the Davos Forum, Marcos Jr. articulated that the SCS issue profoundly disturbs his repose, keeping him up at night.<sup>29</sup> In order to reiterate the territorial claims, Marcos Jr. signed the Philippine Maritime Zones Act and the Philippine Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act in 2024.<sup>30</sup> The Marcos Jr. administration has demonstrated its determination by persistently articulating concerns over the issue. This stance exemplifies how domestic political constraints leave the administration with no room to compromise.

To assert control over the occupied islands and reefs, Marcos Jr. has been frequently conducting patrols, island landings, and analogous activities in the surrounding waters. The most intense and well-known case is the repeated

28 Jason Gutierrez, *Survey: Most Filipinos prefer candidates who will defend Philippines over disputed waters*, BENAR NEWS (Mar. 7, 2025), <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/west-philippine-sea-candidates-elections-03072025143820.html>.

29 Jim Gomez, *Marcos says sea feud involving China keeps him up at night*, AP NEWS (Jan. 19, 2023), <https://apnews.com/article/philippines-government-ferdinand-marcos-jr-china-asia-f438cb484929d671f596122ae40b38c3>.

30 Jim Gomez, *Philippine president angers China with new laws to demarcate South China Sea territories*, AP NEWS (Nov. 8, 2024), <https://apnews.com/article/philippine-maritime-zones-act-archipelagic-sea-lanes-act-south-china-sea-4eccc3f00ab9367d948e5af3959aea21>.

resupply attempts to the dilapidated BRP Sierra Madre grounded on Ren'ai Jiao (Second Thomas Shoal).

This ruined vessel, currently a symbol of the Philippines' efforts to assert control over the occupied islands and reefs, represents the nation's unwavering stance on the matter. Manila and Beijing reached an agreement in July 2024 regarding the resupply mission to BRP Sierra Madre, and China agreed to allow the Philippines to resupply the ship with advance notice.<sup>31</sup> However, this informal agreement hardly mitigated the confrontation between Manila and Beijing in Ren'ai Jiao. Manila's insistence on leaving the grounded ship in place is a reflection of Marcos Jr.'s determination on the maritime issue,<sup>32</sup> which can be seen as fulfilling the pro-American faction's expectations.

## B. Diplomatic Toolbox

The Marcos Jr. administration is using diplomacy to widen Manila's strategic room for maneuver. Given that the strategic environment with Beijing has not yet reached the threshold of armed confrontation, Manila retains comparatively flexible policy options. Moreover, even with US involvement, Marcos Jr. is aware of the power imbalance between China and the Philippines, so his administration prefers diplomatic solutions to avoid crossing the threshold into conflict.

First, the Philippines employs public diplomacy resources to cultivate the image of a "bullied" nation to garner international sympathy. In April 2023, Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) Commodore Jay Tristan Tarriela disclosed that the PCG was implementing a new strategy, which is inviting journalists from world-renowned news media outlets to accompany the PCG on its maritime patrols. This initiative endeavors to present a comprehensive view of Chinese activities in the waters to the public through the journalists' reporting, signifying a departure from the previous practice of reporting exclusively on major incidents.<sup>33</sup>

Second, the Philippines looks for "internationalizing" the SCS issue, since additional actors in the negotiations could potentially counterbalance China. Marcos Jr. has repeatedly raised the maritime issue during his attendance at ASEAN-related events, urging all relevant parties to expedite the consultation

31 Kathleen Magramo, *Beijing and Manila made a deal in the South China Sea. But they're already at odds over what was agreed*, CNN (July 23, 2024), <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/07/23/asia/south-china-sea-deal-explainer-intl-hnk>.

32 Anna Bajo, *Marcos: No agreement to remove BRP Sierra Madre from Ayungin Shoal*, GMA NEWS (Aug. 9, 2023), <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/878389/marcos-no-agreement-to-remove-brp-sierra-madre-from-ayungin-shoal/story>.

33 Jay Tarriela, *Why the Philippines Is Exposing China's Aggressive Actions in the South China Sea*, DIPLOMAT (Apr. 19, 2023), <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/why-the-philippines-is-exposing-chinas-aggressive-actions-in-the-south-china-sea>.

process for the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. During an EU-ASEAN summit, Marcos Jr. even stated that the Philippines had secured strategic support from the European Union, which he believed would place the Philippines in a highly advantageous position for future negotiations.<sup>34</sup>

### C. Closer Ties with Washington

The Marcos Jr. administration has been actively advancing US-Philippines relations. Although Manila accepts the ambiguity inherent in the US defense commitment, it perceives that deepening the alliance could eventually mitigate this ambiguity and enable the Philippines to narrow the power gap with China. Additionally, the alliance is a favorable outcome for pro-American groups, such as the military, whose influence inevitably shapes the administration's policies. Moreover, given that a large segment of the Filipino public favors US-Philippines cooperation, this policy choice helps Marcos Jr. secure greater domestic legitimacy.<sup>35</sup>

In April 2023, the Marcos Jr. administration designated four additional military bases in Cagayan, Isabela, and Palawan for the US forces to access under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA).<sup>36</sup> Although Manila asserted that these bases are not designed to target any specific nation, their placement has undeniably increased the regional presence of the US forces. In particular, the locations of these bases indicate their intention to counter China. Later, Washington and Manila resumed the Cope Thunder exercise, which previously focused on bilateral air force cooperation, as an indication of closer collaboration. In April 2024, the Philippines, in cooperation with the US, Japan, and Australia, conducted its inaugural quadrilateral joint military exercises in the South China Sea. The operation signaled a coordinated effort to bolster strategic alignment between the Philippines and the US on the SCS issue.<sup>37</sup>

Facing Trump's dissatisfaction with the US trade deficit with its allies, Marcos Jr. is willing to trade off Philippine economic benefits for a closer alliance with Washington. On July 22, 2025, Marcos Jr. reached a trade deal with Trump, stipulating that the Philippines would pay a 19% tariff instead of 20%, and Marcos

34 Patrick Ziegenhain, *Perceptions of the EU's Indo-Pacific Policy in the Philippine*, 14(1) ANDALAS J. INT'L STUD. 32-43 (2025).

35 Callar, *supra* note 27.

36 US Department of War, Philippines, U.S. Announce Locations of Four New EDCA Sites (Apr. 3, 2023), <https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/article/3349257/philippines-us-announce-locations-of-four-new-edca-sites>.

37 Japan, U.S., Australia, Philippines hold drill in South China Sea, KYODO NEWS (Apr. 8, 2024), <https://english.kyodonews.net/articles/-/47497>.

Jr. appeared content with the result, as he replied that the bilateral relations “evolved into as important a relationship as is possible to have.”<sup>38</sup> This indicates that the Marcos Jr. administration wants to compromise on trade to ensure that the US will not abandon the Philippines. The Marcos Jr. administration also welcomes the Trump administration’s move to expand the US military presence in the Philippines. Disregarding the opposition from Beijing, Manila commits to the additional deployment of missile systems in the Philippines, given their deterrence effects.<sup>39</sup>

## D. Security Partnership Expansion and Military Modernization

The Marcos Jr. administration is accelerating the modernization process of the Philippine military forces and expanding its security partnership network. The military power disparity between the Philippines and China drives Manila to pursue military enhancements. Meanwhile, expanding the cooperative networks partially reduces the Philippines’ security dependence on the US and tempers criticism from those wary of US-Philippines collaboration. The expansion also facilitates military modernization, which aligns with the interests of the armed forces. High-quality equipment would bolster their assertiveness in addressing the SCS issue. Furthermore, military modernization represents the Marcos Jr. Administration’s response to public sentiment, since enhanced defense capabilities can boost public satisfaction by demonstrating the government’s determination.

Marcos Jr. has underscored that his administration is committed to modernizing the armed forces on several occasions and is determined to build a “a strong, credible, world-class armed force.”<sup>40</sup> Likewise, the Philippine Secretary of Defense said that military modernization is the pillar of the Philippines’ independent foreign policy.<sup>41</sup> To this end, the Marcos Jr. administration has eyed several partners in the Asia-Pacific region, including Japan, Australia, and India.

Marcos Jr. remarked that bilateral relations with Japan are entering a golden

38 Didi Tang & Michelle Price, *Trump says US will impose 19% tariff on imports from Philippines in deal struck with leader Marcos*, AP News (July 23, 2025), <https://apnews.com/article/marcos-trump-philippines-china-tariffs-3138d1d7f8368c022ab9242bebb4a2e2>.

39 Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, *U.S., Philippines Commit to Increased Missile, Drone Deployments in First Island Chain*, USNI News (Feb. 20, 2026), <https://news.usni.org/2026/02/20/u-s-philippines-commit-to-increased-missile-drone-deployments-in-first-island-chain>.

40 Renato Castro, *Exploring the Philippines’ Evolving Grand Strategy in the Face of China’s Maritime Expansion: From the Aquino Administration to the Marcos Administration*, 43(1) J. CURRENT SE. ASIAN AFF. 94-119 (2024).

41 PCO, AFP pushes for modernization, eyes more military hardware and bases (July 31, 2025), [https://pco.gov.ph/news\\_releases/afp-pushes-for-modernization-eyes-more-military-hardware-and-bases](https://pco.gov.ph/news_releases/afp-pushes-for-modernization-eyes-more-military-hardware-and-bases).

age, and Manila is looking forward to deepening security cooperation with Tokyo.<sup>42</sup> A milestone in this process is the Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement going into effect in 2025. This agreement bears a resemblance to the visiting force agreement that was previously signed between the US and the Philippines.<sup>43</sup> Regarding Australia, the Philippines began their first joint sea and air patrols in the South China Sea with Australia in November 2023.<sup>44</sup> Both sides are drafting a new defense pact for more frequent military drills and development of the Philippine military infrastructure.<sup>45</sup> The Philippines is seeking security cooperation with India as well. In 2022, the Marcos Jr. administration entered into a contractual agreement with India for the procurement of the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile. In 2025, Manila and New Delhi upgraded their relations to a strategic partnership and agreed to facilitate maritime security cooperation.<sup>46</sup> In addition, the Marcos Jr. administration turned to some other South China Sea claimant states for security cooperation, including Indonesia and Malaysia.<sup>47</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Neoclassical realism offers a comprehensive analytical framework for examining the Marcos Jr. administration's South China Sea policy. This theoretical approach posits that while structural factors constitute the primary drivers of Manila's SCS policy, the mediating roles of domestic and individual-level variables must not be overlooked. The intensifying tension remains manageable because these intervening variables provide counterbalancing moderation. Although there is notable domestic divergence within the Philippines regarding its military alignment with the US, the pro-American faction continues to view Washington

42 Richard Heydarian, *Middle-power diplomacy in the age of great-power competition: Japan, the Philippines, and the South China Sea disputes*, 8(2) J. INDO-PAC. AFF. 34-52 (2025).

43 Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, *New Philippine-Japanese Defense Pact to go into Effect Next Month*, USNI NEWS (Aug. 12, 2025), <https://news.usni.org/2025/08/12/new-philippine-japanese-defense-pact-to-go-into-effect-next-month>.

44 Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, *Philippines Holds Joint Patrols with Australia in the South China Sea*, USNI NEWS (Nov. 28, 2023), <https://news.usni.org/2023/11/28/philippines-holds-joint-patrols-with-australia-in-the-south-china-sea>.

45 Mikhail Flores, *Philippines, Australia to seal new defence pact as China tensions rise*, REUTERS (Aug. 22, 2025), <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/philippines-australia-seal-new-defence-pact-china-tensions-rise-2025-08-22>.

46 Sachin Parashar, *Eye on Beijing, Delhi & Manila unite in strategic partnership*, TIMES INDIA (Aug. 7, 2025), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/eye-on-beijing-delhi-manila-unite-in-strategic-partnership/articleshow/123126821.cms>.

47 Gusty Costa, *Southeast Asian nations deepen cooperation to counter evolving maritime threats*, Indo-Pacific Defense Forum (Feb. 5, 2026), <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2026/02/southeast-asian-nations-deepen-cooperation-to-counter-evolving-maritime-threats>.

as a crucial actor in the region and advocate for strengthened bilateral security cooperation. More importantly, Marcos Jr. maintains a clear perception of the situation and is highly unlikely to engage in radical decision-making. As a result, the Marcos Jr. administration has opted to consolidate its control over the occupied islands and reefs in the South China Sea to hold its claims. Meanwhile, it employs diplomatic measures to achieve strategic advantages, deepen the US-Philippine alliance, and expand its security partnership networks.

Whether the Philippines can sustain its current policy trajectory depends on the potential changes of both structural and intervening variables. At present, both China and the Philippines are reluctant to the use of force. Of greater importance is that relevant stakeholders should prioritize the expedited finalization of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

Received: Mar. 1, 2026  
Modified: April 20, 2026  
Accepted: May 1, 2026