

Balancing Giants: Philippines Foreign Policy under Structural Realist Pressure

Mehboob Ul Haq¹

¹ PhD Scholar, Visiting Lecturer, Department of Political Science, University of Sargodha. Email: Ch.mehboobulhaq007@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v4i2.2134>

Abstract

This research paper examines how successive Philippine administrations from 2010 to 2023 employed hedging strategies to navigate the systemic constraints of U.S.-China rivalry while safeguarding autonomy and national interests. In fact, guided by structural realism, this study highlights three distinct approaches: Benigno Aquino III's legalistic balancing via UNCLOS litigation and alliance reinforcement with the US; Rodrigo Duterte's hardheaded economic diplomacy with China coupled with selective rendezvous with both powers; and Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s recalibration toward renewed security collaboration while filling economic ties. Further, this research paper employs a qualitative single-case study based solely on secondary sources, including government announcements, legal documents such as the MDT, VFA, EDCA, and the 2016 arbitral ruling, public speeches, and peer-reviewed journals. The findings of this research will underscore that small powers are not passive actors but also strategic agents capable of managing systematic pressure with calculated ambiguity and purpose. Despite deviating policy narratives, Aquino trailed legal-institutional balancing against China, Duterte espoused strategic improbability with pecuniary commitment and economic engagement, and Marcos Jr. recalibrated alignment with the US while sustaining diplomatic outreach to China. These results affirm structural realist prerogatives that smaller states face systemic constraints yet adapt through leadership styles and domestic calculations, enabling nuanced survival strategies within the balance of power. The findings of my research will have important implications for practitioners, policymakers, and academics engaged in the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: Philippines, Hedging behavior, US-China rivalry, structural pressure, small-state diplomacy, Indo-Pacific.

Introduction:

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a critical arena of strategic conflict, with the US-China strategic rivalry shaping political, economic, and security alliances throughout the region, as republics try to keep their heads above water while grappling with shifting power dynamics. In these disputes, small and middle powers, particularly in Southeast Asia, are under considerable structural pressure to define their foreign policy in the context of competing expectations from Washington and Beijing, often forced to walk a tightrope while sorting out their national priorities. Among these countries, the Philippines represents its geostrategic position, treaty relationship with the United States, and expanding commercial ties with Beijing (Gantsho, 2021; Velasco, 2023). Therefore, the Philippines'

situation offers an exclusive chance to study how a medium power navigates great power rivalry in the era of systematic volatility and limited capacity, showing how states must weather the storm while working through constraints of limited resources and influence.

As the United States reinforces its Indo-Pacific strategy and China increases its regional dominance through Belt and Road initiative (BRI), countries such as Philippines experience increasing structural pressure for compliance. However, this study reveals that alignment is often binary. From 2010 to 2023, Philippine foreign policy reflects a nuanced hedging strategy, including both major countries while mitigating risks and preventing overwhelming. Despite the substantial differences in substance and tone of diplomacy throughout the administrations of Benigno Aquino III, Rodrigo Duterte, and Ferdinand Marcos Jr., a consistent pattern can be seen, like the quest for strategic adaptability within systemic limitations.

This study is shaped by theoretical framework based on structural realism, which argue that the anarchic nature of the global system and the distribution of power influence state behavior. However, realism fails to capture the uncertainty and adaptability shown by less developed countries. The approach includes hedging theory, which illustrates how states jointly exhibit cooperative and competitive actions towards opposing powers. The integration of these frameworks provides a more sophisticated understanding of the interplay between external pressures and internal factors, such as leadership styles, governance, and public opinion in shaping foreign policy decisions.

Recent studies on Southeast Asia foreign policy emphasize the rising trend of hedging measures (Zha, 2025; Song & Velasco, 2024), however several studies seems to be either excessively generalized or focused on specific incidents, lacking a complete longitudinal analysis. Furthermore, a significant portion of realist literature generally treats small countries as structurally predetermined actors, while neglecting the influence of agency and internal political structures. In contrast, this article provides a systematic, comprehensive analysis of how three Philippine administrations has responded to great power competition while maintaining independence through various hedging practices over the last decade.

This study aims to address this gap by addressing the following research questions: **How has Philippine foreign policy adapted to US-China rivalry, and how has hedging shaped its strategic behavior between 2010 and 2023?** To answer questions, this paper will be watching into the foreign policy of Benigno Aquino III, whose legalistic balancing via UNCLOS litigation and coalition shoring up with the US shows how Manila exasperated to play its cards right while drawing on international law and treaty commitments. Further, it can be said that Rodrigo Duterte's shrewd economic diplomacy with China, coupled with selective rendezvous with both powers, reflects an endeavor to cut a deal while picking up opportunities that suited his pragmatic approach. Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s recalibration toward re-introduced security collaboration while filling economic ties, which remains cloaked in procedures of indefiniteness, make evident how leaders must read between the lines while working out give and take in a volatile milieu. Further, this research paper hires a qualitative single-case study based solely on secondary sources, including government announcements, legal documents such as the MDT, VFA, EDCA, and the 2016 arbitral ruling, public speeches, and peer-reviewed journals, displaying how scholars must leave no stone unturned while scrutinizing through available evidence.

Evolving Philippine Foreign Policy: Legal Balancing, Strategic Hedging, and Recalibrated Alliances from Aquino to Marcos Jr.

The Philippine foreign policy is heavily influenced by its colonial past, geographic location to vital marine routes, and established security alliances with the United States. After attaining independence in 1946, the Philippine engaged in a number of defense agreements with the United States, mainly the 1947 Military Bases Agreement and the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT). These agreements

placed the Philippines as an essential part of America's postwar security framework in the Asia-Pacific region. The cold war era experienced a sustained US military presence in the bay of Subic and Clark Air Base, strengthening Manila's relationship with Washington in resistance to communist expansion.

While the final phase of the cold war resulted in major transformations. The nonrenewal of US base licenses in 1991, along with increasing nationalism and economic liberalization, resulted in a partial shift of Philippine foreign policy. While security connections with the US remained strong, the Philippines tried to increase its external relations, especially with its Asian neighbors. During this time, China developed as an important economic partner, despite the marine time tensions worsened in the South China.

The 1995 Mischief Reef incident, in which China built military residencies within the Philippine's exclusive economic zone, became a historic turning point. In response, the Philippines increased international legal participation and regional diplomatic efforts, besides reinforcing security collaboration with the United States. This resulted in the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), which facilitating for rotating US army presence on Philippine territory.

As China's maritime aggression increased in 2000s, the Philippine become more involved in formalizing and strengthens its strategic alliance. While in 2014, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), strengthened defense partnership with the US by providing for cyclical development and asset prepositioning. Likewise, China's economic influence in the Philippines increased through trade, investment, and infrastructural finance.

By 2010, Philippine has reached a crossroads in its foreign policy. On the other hand, its concerns regarding maritime security and alliance with US led to battle with China. While China's economic power and geographical impact compelled engagement. This duality created the framework for the hedging behavior that would establish the next three administration's foreign policy tactics, with each administration responding to external influences and local political realities in distinct but structurally restricted ways.

The Philippines' foreign policy, which is predicated upon its national security, has undergone significant transformation over the past decade, shaped by the ever-changing dynamics of great power rivalry between the United States and China. Further, one could argue that the administrations of Benigno Aquino III, Rodrigo Duterte, and Ferdinand Marcos Jr. each adopted divergent strategies in reply to the potential avenues of conflict and co-operation posed by this rivalry, reflecting a complex interplay of legal, economic, and strategic considerations. This is what which gives me motivation to understand Aquino trailed legal-institutional balancing against China, Duterte espoused strategic improbability with economic engagement, and Marcos Jr. recalibrated alignment with the US while sustaining diplomatic outreach to China, which remains shrouded in events of fluidity.

To contextualize this research, the remaining sections cover the historical trajectory of the Philippines foreign policy prior to 2010, setting the strategic groundwork for future administrations actions in response to power rivalry.

This study uses a qualitative, theory-based research design to investigate how Philippine foreign policy changed between 2010 and 2023 as a result of structural pressures from US-China rivalry. Instead of testing hypothesis within a positivist framework, this study used an interpretive approach based on structural realism and hedging theory. The goal is to investigate how systematic constraints impact foreign policy decisions, while also understanding the mediating role of local diplomacy, leadership, and institutional issues. The Philippines was chosen as the only case study as theory-testing design allows for a complete contextualized knowledge of how structural realism appears in a Southeast Asian middle power. While multiple cases may provide comparative depth, the Philippines provide distinct analytic leverage due to its treaty alliance with the United States. 2. It has direct maritime disputes with China. 3. Its evolving leadership styles indicate diverse strategic

preferences.

The data is sourced from secondary sources including official government documents, such as presidential addresses, press announcements, and communications from the Department of Foreign Affairs and the President's Office. International legal materials encompass the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling regarding the South China Sea, in addition to treaties such as Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT), Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), and Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. Journal articles and policy research papers Concerning structural realism, the US-China rivalry, and Philippine foreign affairs were evaluated using Jstor, Google Scholar, and prominent think tanks such as CSIS, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute.

The analysis proceeds with a methodical, concentrated comparison of Aquino III, Duterte, and Marcos Jr. administrations. The study uses theory-driven conceptualization to identify key indicators of hedging behavior, the prevention of binary alignment, and linguistic or legal ambiguity. Foreign policy activities were evaluated in terms of structural realist expectations, particularly the restrictions imposed by great power competition, and hedging theory was employed to allow for behavioral flexibility and variance among administrations.

By combining structural analysis with novel insights, this research depicts both continuity as well as shifts in Philippines foreign policy. While the qualitative design restricts generalizability, the Philippine provides a strategically important and theoretically rich case. Furthermore, by triangulating various secondary sources, the research ensures analytical robustness even in the absence.

Aquino Administration: Legal-Institutional Balancing and Alignment with the US

Under President Benigno Aquino III (2010–2016), the Philippines confronted cumulative assertiveness from China, for the most part in the South China Sea (SCS). Further, a strong case can be made that Aquino's administration responded by embracing a hard-balancing approach. In fact, it has further emphasized legal-institutional apparatuses and strengthened alliances with the United States of America and beyond the region. The maximum extraordinary move was the pronouncement to file a case against the Communist Republic of China at the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in 2013. Indeed, the premier threw down the gauntlet to China's expansive maritime claims. This legal stratagem was rounded out by efforts to modernize the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). Indeed, it has marked a significant shift of military focus from internal security to territorial defense, and deepened security cooperation with the US and other partners like Japan (Castro, 2024).

Further, it can be argued that Aquino's tactic was motivated by the recognition that China's maritime spreading out posed a direct intimidation to Philippine sovereignty and national security. Further, his government sought obvious security assurances under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) with the United States of America and endorsed a strategic partnership with Japan. This era marked a clear incline toward the US, with the Philippines predominantly trusting on American ambassadorial and soldierly support to counterbalance China's growing influence in the region of Indo-pacific (Castro, 2024).

President Benigno Aquino III's administration represented a significant return to traditional cooperation politics, based on legalism and normative resistance to China's growing territorial disputes. According to Gantsho (2021), Aquino followed a "legalistic-balancing" policy that closely aligned with US interests while pursuing legitimacy through international institutions, which ended in the 2016 South China Sea judicial ruling in favor of the Philippines.

Aquino's policy is ideal for a defensive realist framework: his administration sought to strengthen the Philippines' security by reviving the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) and increasing joint military exercises with the US. Although this strategy acknowledge the structural limitations of the Philippine power in the region. This type of hedging through institutionalism

enabled the Philippines to maintain a normative position against China's expansion while reaping from US military and diplomatic backing (Roy, 2020).

Duterte Administration: Strategic Improbability, Economic Engagement, and Policy Reversal:

Rodrigo Duterte's presidency (2016–2022) discernable and a melodramatic shift in Philippine foreign policy. Rodrigo Duterte's presidency in the beginning distanced the Philippines from its old-fashioned ally, the US, and pursued faster ties with Communist Republic of China, assuming a policy of appeasement and economic engagement with Communist China. Therefore, one could argue that this method was encouraged by the promise of Chinese investments and infrastructure schemes under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as a desire to pursue a more "independent" foreign policy onward, and come out of economic dependency.

Further, Duterte's government give a lower profile to the PCA ruling in favor of bilateral negotiations with Beijing and sought to tie together Chinese economic opportunities. However, this strategy faced momentous encounters. One could argue that China's unrelenting decisiveness and aggressions in the SCS, delays in undertaken investments, and domestic opposition led to a partial reversal of Duterte's policy. By 2018, the government began to re-engage with the United States of America, re-establishing military collaboration, settlements and adopting a limited hard-balancing approach to coerce China's heterodox, pragmatic and revisionist memo. This marked a significant shift in Duterte's policy, which was based on its national interest and predicated upon its national security. President Rodrigo Duterte made a sharp rhetorical shift in Philippine foreign policy, announcing a "separation" from the United States in favor of closer ties with China. The Philippine administration adopted different approaches that reflect changing in institutional quality and alignment, particularly under external pressures (Table 1).

While initially interpreted as a wholesale realignment, Duterte's approach is well-suited to the hedging paradigm, which is defined by strategic ambiguity and tactical flexibility.

According to Velasco and Song (2023), Duterte followed a pragmatic hedging strategy by involving China through the Belt and Road initiative, downplaying the judicial ruling, and occasionally suspending military cooperation agreements with the United States, such as the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA). In spite of this change, the US-Philippine alliance infrastructure remained unchanged.

This behavior is consistent with the offensive realist view that smaller powers can optimistically use competing powers to their substantial advantage when the structure of the system allows. However, Duterte's foreign policy can't be considered as Bandwagoning. As Lrimia (2023) points out, the approach of Duterte was multifaceted: as engagement with China increased, the Philippines focused on sovereignty and supported a regional code of conduct.

Furthermore, Winston (2020) argues, Duterte's administration has responded differently to US-China conflict, sometimes distancing itself from the US during trade wars, while maintaining military ties in the face of assertive Chinese behavior in the South China Sea.

Marcos Jr. Administration: Recalibrated Alignment and Diplomatic Outreach

Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s presidency (2022–present) has been seen and perceived as a recalibration of Philippine foreign policy. Further, he has sought to balance relations with both the US and China. At the outset, Marcos Jr. gesticulated continuity with Duterte's approach, maintaining economic cooperation with China. However, tenacious Chinese assertiveness in the SCS and the lack of substantial economic gains impelled a shift toward a more emphatic stance.

Further, a strong case can be made that Marcos Jr. has listed the modernization of the AFP, strengthened defense ties with the United States of America. Further, it can be said that he tried to foster security conglomerates and a strong partnership with other like-minded countries. At the same

time, his government has sustained diplomatic and economic engagement with China, reflecting a nuanced approach of dynamic balancing. Further, this tactic acknowledges the reality of great power competition in the Indo-Pacific and the need to defend Philippine national interests through a mish-mash of deterrence and engagement.

Further, internal and external factors, including role anticipations from regional partners and domestic political actors. That being said, it continues to shape the Marcos administration's foreign policy. The experiment lies in reconciling national interests with alliance obligations and upholding a neutral standpoint amid intensifying US-China rivalry

Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s administration marks a shift in Duterte's inconsistency, indicating a renewed strategic embrace of the United States in response to China's confidence and the global change caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Under Marcos Jr., the EDCA was enlarged to include four more important sites, many of which were near Taiwan, suggesting a stronger alignment with Washington. In words of Velasco and Bacay (2024), Marcos Jr. has decided to "reinvest in alliance ability" while maintaining economic ties with China, a strategic shift consistent with defensive hedging.

Furthermore, the newfound commitment to alliance politics has not been stated in ideological or anti-China terms. Instead, Wu and Velasco (2022) demonstrate that the administration has attempted to gain strategic advantages by emphasizing national sovereignty, multilateral cooperation, and compliance with international law, all within a balancing framework.

Thus, the Marcos Jr. administration represents an amalgamation of the two previous governments as it recognizes the core value of US alignment while preserving parts of Duterte's economic diplomacy with China. This convergence points out a sophisticated kind of long-term hedging that is consistent with regional behavior in Southeast Asia.

Comparative Analysis: Drivers and Implications:

This section of my research will also look into Aquino's trailed legal-institutional balancing against China, where his administration had to come to terms with institutional constraints while treating the South China Sea as throne in the side of Philippine sovereignty. Further, Duterte espoused strategic improbability with pecuniary commitment and economic engagement, often trying to play down tensions even as his pivot to China became a double-edged sword in regional diplomacy. Marcos Jr. recalibrated alignment with the US while sustaining diplomatic outreach to China, seeking to work out a middle ground in a relationship that remains a tightrope walk for Philippine foreign policy. From these scholarly debates, I will conclude by comparing these three administrations (Aquino, Duterte, and Marcos Jr) and how they hope to change the discourse of Philippine relations with the United States of America and China in the Indo-Pacific, endeavoring to sort out the competing narratives in what has long been a hot potato in regional politics.

The development of Philippine foreign policy from Aquino to Marcos Jr. exemplifies the interplay of internal politics, geo-political considerations, and geo-economic realities. It can be said that each government has sought to distinguish itself from its forerunners, often drawing back or modifying previous policies in response to changing environments and public sentiment, and also in the long term for the betterment of the Philippines.

Further, a strong case can be made that Aquino's legal-institutional balancing was entrenched in a guarantee to international law and cooperation with the United states of America, while Duterte's calculated improbability reflected a pragmatic, albeit dangerous, pursuit of economic benefits from China. Further, it can be said that Marcos Jr.'s recalibrated orientation signifies a challenge to synthesize these approaches, balancing security imperatives with economic opportunities.

Further, the tenacious experiment for the Philippines is to circumnavigate the strategic triangle formed by the US and China, leveraging its intervention as a middle power while safeguarding sovereignty and national development. Further, it can be said that the republic's dynamic balancing

strategy underlines the complication of small power politics in an era of great power competition. Moreover, the flight of Philippine foreign policy over the past decade validates adaptive resilience in the facade of external pressures and internal constraints. In fact, from Aquino’s legal-institutional balancing, through Duterte’s trade and industry engagement and strategic prevarication, to Marcos Jr.’s recalibrated alliances, the Philippines has continually adjusted its approaches to protect national interests amid ever-changing regional dynamics. The fragmentary experiment will be to sustain this subtle balance, ensuring both security and prosperity in an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific region.

Administration	Characteristics of Policy Features	US Alignment	China Engagement	Evidence of Hedging	Structural Response
Aquino III (2010–2016)	Legalism, arbitration, and alliance deepening	High	Low	Defensive/legal hedging	Equilibrium through legal institutions
Duterte (2016–2022)	Strategic ambiguity, and populist diplomacy	Fluctuating	High (economic focus)	Pragmatic hedging	Accommodation with restricted resistance
Marcos Jr. (2022–present)	Strategic recalibration, and EDCA expansion	High	Moderate	Hedging with clarity	Realignment using structural realism

Table 1 Comparative Foreign Policy Strategies of the Aquino, Duterte, and Marcos Jr. Administration; Source: made by Author.

Structural limitations and regional calculations

While the international frameworks impose restrictions, neoclassical realist opinion provides an understanding of how local politics mediate structural responses. According to Song and Velasco (2024), populist nationalism and electoral dynamics had a significant effect on Duterte's strategy, particularly in the early years, when "independent foreign policy" argumentation bound with his political base.

In contrast, the Aquinos used legal institutions and public opinion to defend balancing behavior. In Marcos Jr.'s example, technocratic foreign policy, along with public support for defense cooperation with the United States, has facilitated a more uniform strategic alignment.

Marston’s (2024) neoclassical realist interpretation of Southeast Asian strategic behavior is a reflection of the combination of structure and domestic choice. Hedging is taken as a rational decision that is influenced by both internal and external pressures, rather than indecision. However, these trends visually reflect the Philippines fluctuating alignment across administrations (Fig 1).

Trend in Philippine Foreign Policy Alignment (2010–2024)

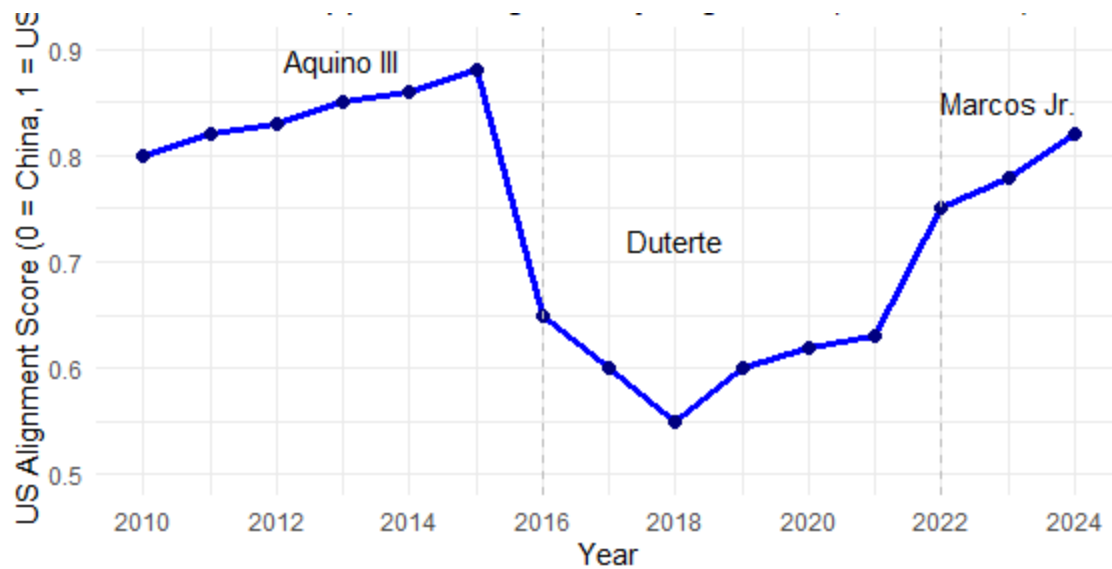


Figure 1, Source: Created by author based on secondary data.

Impact on regional stability

The Philippines' changing foreign trajectory has greater implications for the regional balance of powers. As Zha (2025) states, Manila's approach represents a type of "Hedging without strategy" that is common among smaller states in fluid regional situations. Nevertheless, if viewed through structure realism, these behaviors reveal logical responses to great power competition.

The development of EDCA under Marcos Jr. has caused Chinese anxiety, perhaps raising the possibility of direct conflict in the South China Sea or Taiwan Strait.

In this situation, continuous hedging behavior reveals intended ambiguity rather than policy incoherence. The foreign policy of Philippine is not passive; instead, it is a strategic reaction to structural stress, influenced by changing leadership styles, institutional qualities, and geopolitical revision.

Conclusion, Findings & Recommendations:

From 2010 to 2023, the Philippine foreign policy shows a compelling instance of a minor power navigating between two competing giants: the United States and China. This study, guided by the structural realism framework, demonstrates how the Philippines responds to the pressures of a shifting Indo-Pacific by adopting a hedging strategy that was designed differently under the leadership of President Benigno Aquino III, Rodrigo Duterte, and Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Aquino administration marked a phase of legalistic balancing, using legal frameworks and alliance reinforcement against China's robust movements in the South China Sea. His administration's decision to seek litigation under the UNCLOS framework while also reviving security ties with the US reflected a cautious yet robust approach within the limits of Philippine capacity. This approach follows defensive realism logic, stressing alliance-building and multilateral procedures to mitigate structural vulnerabilities. Conversely, Duterte's presidency marked an abrupt shift in discourse. He aimed to renew the Philippines' foreign policy identity as independent and pragmatic by reducing the focus on hostility and pursuing economic diplomacy with China. However, this transformation did not bring full compliance with China. Instead, it showed a delicate balancing act, strategic uncertainty caused by selective engagement with both powers. Duterte's strategy expands the scope of Philippine hedging behavior, aiming to maximize the benefits from both the US and China, without

collaborating with either. This dual-track diplomacy revealed that, even under democratic leadership, Philippine foreign policy remained grounded in a realist understanding of the international system. Throughout these administrations, there is a pattern of consistency within variations. Despite ideological adjustments and changing leadership styles, the core foreign policy strategy has remained focused on flexibility, managing risks, and autonomy protection. Structural realism remains an effective framework for evaluating these phenomena. Anarchy is the essence of the international system; combined with the bipolar conflict between China and the US, it creates external restrictions on Philippine foreign policy behavior. However, agency is still important through which leaders respond to foreign stimuli within a domestic lens, balancing strategic imperatives against political realities. In brief, the Philippines has not passively responded to great rivalry, but has actively constructed a foreign policy that attempts to maintain national interests through calculated ambiguity. This strengthens the context that small and middle powers are more than just subjects of international politics; they are also strategic actors capable of handling structural pressures with pragmatism and purpose. The trajectory of the Philippines from 2010 to 2023 illustrates how small and middle powers respond to structural pressure in a bipolar strategic context. Under the perspective of structural realism, each administration of Aquino III, Duterte, and Marcos Jr has found various forms of hedging in response to the increasing competition between the US and China. This section interprets the policy shifts within existing theoretical debates and empirical findings.

Findings:

- From 2010-2023, the three administrations (Aquino, Duterte, and Marcos Jr) of the Philippines unwaveringly employed a hedging strategy to circumnavigate the strategic competition between the United States of America (US) and the People's Republic of China in the Indo-Pacific. Further, it has also demonstrated that a minor power's active navigation of great power rivalry.
- Further, Aquino III administration from 2010 to 2016 has pursued a strategy of legalistic balancing. Moreover, it has been discovered that this intricate uses international law (UNCLOS arbitration) and underpins the coalition with the United States of America to challenge the People's Republic of China's actions in the South China Sea and Indo-Pacific, making parallels with defensive realism principles
- Further, the Duterte administration from 2016 to 2022 has also executed an unforeseen oratorical and pre-emptive shift toward "independent" and pragmatic foreign policy. Further, it has been discovered that Duterte's administration toned down maritime disputes and followed economic engagement with China. However, it can be said that at the same time, he also maintained the US alliance in practice, engaging in a dual-track diplomacy to extract benefits from both powers.
- The incumbent Marcos Jr. and his administration endures the hedging tradition but with its own design, suggesting a recalibration (likely back toward stronger US security cooperation while maintaining economic ties with China).
- Further, it has been discovered structural realism an in-effect framework for explaining Philippine behavior. The anarchical international system and US-China bipolar competition generate the primary structural limitations that shape the Philippines' options.

Recommendations:

A). For the Philippines and Similar Middle/Small Powers:

- Further, it can be recommended that there is a dire need for Institutionalized Strategic Flexibility. They must develop a bipartisan, long-term "National Hedging Doctrine" that outdoes individual presidencies. This agenda would codify the core goals (autonomy, risk

management, economic development) while allowing tactical flexibility. This stops disruptive pendulum swings and make available continuity, reassuring both allies and adversaries during the heydays and time of crisis.

- There should be a strong investment in Asymmetric Capabilities. While alliances are decisive, accompany them with targeted investments in home-grown defense capabilities (e.g., coastal defense systems, maritime domain awareness, cyber). It shrinks over-dependence on any single spouse and strengthens the credibility of a nation's stance, making a nation more valuable ally and a costlier target.
- Further, it can be recommended that there is a strong need for diversifying economic and strategic partnership. Enthusiastically deepen associations with other middle powers and regional groupings (e.g., Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, ASEAN, EU). This constructs a wider network of sustenance, be responsible for alternative marketplaces and stock sources, and water down the overwhelming stimulus of the two competing giants.

B). For the United States and China (The Competing Giants):

- It can be strongly recommended that the super competing giants like the United States of America and the People's Republic of China (PRC) had better recognized and respected strategic agency. They would acknowledge that smaller powers are not passive hostages but active calculated actors. Dogmas that demand exclusive fidelity or force binary choices are in the cards to backfire, prompting anger and deeper equivocation. Further, it would be beneficial to provide smaller partners with maneuvering room.
- These competing giants would be offering consistent, predictable and non-transactional engagement. For the US, moving beyond occasional, threat-centric rendezvous offers unswerving economic and strategic goods (investment, technology sharing, reliable security guarantees) to vie with the PRC's economic statecraft. For China, it states the core security apprehensions that drive smaller states towards the US (e.g., coercive actions in disputed territories). Encouragement is as significant as economic stimuli.
- The super competing giants like the United States of America and the People's Republic of China (PRC) must avoid forcing Zero-Sum Scenarios. Their activities that overtly force regional states to "choose a side" will be counter-attacked and can undermine the region. A more operational tactic is to participate absolutely by establishing which big super giants is a more trustworthy, respectful, and beneficial partner.

References

- Callahan, W. A. (2016). China's "Asia Dream" the belt road initiative and the new regional order. *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 1(3), 226-243.
- Gantsho, F. K. From Aquino to Duterte: Philippines foreign policy and the South China Sea dispute (Doctoral dissertation).
- Irimia, R. M. (2022). Philippine strategic behavior from 2011 to 2021 in light of developments in the South China Sea.
- Kuik, C. C. (2021). The twin chessboards of US-China rivalry: Impact on the geostrategic supply and demand in post-pandemic Asia. *Asian Perspective*, 45(1), 157-176.
- Marston, H. S. (2024). Navigating great power competition: a neoclassical realist view of hedging. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 24(1), 29-63.
- Medcalf, R. (2020). *INDO-PACIFIC EMPIRE: china, america and the contest for the world's pivotal region*. Manchester University Press.
- Murtaza, J. IR theory, structuralism realism & Chinese nationalism: understanding the 2022 Taiwan Strait crisis (Doctoral dissertation, Macquarie University).

- Rehman, I. (2017). Rise of the Reactionaries: The American Far Right and US Foreign Policy. *The Washington Quarterly*, 40(4), 29-48.
- Song, W., & Velasco, J. C. (2024). Selling "independent foreign policy" amid the US–China rivalry: populism and Philippine foreign policy under the Duterte government. *The Pacific Review*, 37(1), 118-146.
- Velasco, J. C., & Bacay, P. (2024). The Philippines and the Complex Indo-Pacific: Unpacking the South China Sea Policies of the Duterte and Marcos Jr. Administrations. *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Global Studies*, 19(2), 63.
- Velasco, J. C., & Song, W. (2023). Nexus of Strong Presidentialism and Philippine Foreign Policy: The Case of the Duterte Presidency's Hedging toward China. *Pacific Focus*, 38(3), 349-377.
- Winston, R. (2020). Philippine hedging strategy in the South China Sea: An analysis of approaches by President Benigno Aquino III and President Rodrigo Duterte. Harvard University.
- Winston, R. (2020). Philippine hedging strategy in the South China Sea: An analysis of approaches by President Benigno Aquino III and President Rodrigo Duterte. Harvard University.
- Wu, X., & Velasco, J. C. (2022). Examining the Philippines' China policy: great powers and domestic politics. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 76(6), 672-693.
- Zha, W. (2025). Hedging Without Strategy. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 47(1), 33-66.
- Zhang, B. (2022). From defensive toward offensive realism: Strategic competition and continuities in the United States' China policy. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 31(137), 793-809.
- Tana, M. T. C. (2025). Role Expectations and Realities: The Philippines' Foreign Policy Under Marcos Jr. Amid Shifting Regional Dynamics. *Bandung*, 12(2), 248-278.
- Cook, R. J., Ohle, M., & Han, Z. (2024). Geopolitical Kingmakers: South Korea and the Philippines as Linchpins amid the China–US Competition. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 17(4), 379-403.