

# Theseus in the South China Sea: Stimulus, Orientations, and Momentum of the Paradigm-Shifting Philippines

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## Abstract

For a long time, ASEAN countries, including the Philippines, have embraced “economic reliance on China” while choosing to tolerate the Minotaur’s bullying behavior in the South China Sea. However, China’s grey zone operations in the South China Sea last year, which were clearly aimed at seizing islands from the Philippines, undoubtedly served as a significant catalyst for President Marcos’ pursuit of a paradigm shift by Manila. In this regard, the Philippines is comparable to the Greek hero Theseus who rose to confront the Minotaur in Greek mythology. This paper argues that the paradigm shift in Philippine-China diplomacy is an ongoing process: for the Marcos government, the modernization of the Philippine-U.S. alliance serves as the Ariadne’s Thread in the Philippines’ resistance against China in the South China Sea.

**Keywords:** Paradigm Shift, South China Sea, Grey Zone Tactics, Alliance Modernization, Philippines

At the end of 2023, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. stated that China has disregarded traditional diplomatic approaches, and that the Philippines had achieved little success through traditional diplomatic means over the years; therefore, he argued that a paradigm shift was inevitable. At the beginning of 2024, President Marcos’ congratulations to Taiwan’s president-elect, William Lai, can be regarded as a footnote to the paradigm shift initiated by the Philippines.

In Greek mythology, there is a half-human, half-bull monster living on the island



**Figure 1. The Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.**

Source: Bongbong Marcos, “Mas pinalawak at malakas na internet connectivity sa Pilipinas,” August 2, 2023, X, <<https://twitter.com/bongbongmarcos/status/1686629832078315520>>.

of Crete in the Mediterranean Sea, known as the “Minotaur.” His existence poses a common threat to the entire region. In order to break free from the cyclical tragedy of sacrificing to the Minotaur, the Athenian hero Theseus steps forward and defeats the Minotaur. However, Theseus’s eventual escape from the labyrinth where the Minotaur resided is largely thanks to the guiding thread provided by the Princess of Crete — Ariadne. This is commonly referred to as “Ariadne’s thread,” symbolizing a solution or strategy that leads to the resolution of significant problems.

In surveys conducted by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in 2023, the Philippines emerged as a primary representative of a paradigm-shifting state in various categories, including “concerns over the continued rise of Chinese influence,” “distrust of China,” and “My Country’s political culture and worldview are compatible with the U.S.” Additionally, the Philippines expresses confidence in the United States as a strategic partner and provider of regional security. Such results are sufficient to warrant the

Philippines' title of "Theseus" within ASEAN.<sup>1</sup>

To give general readers a more engaging and accurate understanding of the recent power play between the Philippines, China, and the United States in the South China Sea, this paper seeks to elucidate, using the myth of a successful challenge against maritime hegemony, a narrative relevant to regional actors thriving under appropriate assistance. Beginning with the Minotaur in the South China Sea, the focus initially rests on the China stimulus for the paradigm shift by the Philippines. Subsequently, three sections delve into the Theseus in the South China Sea, serving as a framework to delineate the contours of the Philippines' paradigm shift from political, economic, and military perspectives. Finally, attention will be directed towards the Ariadne's thread to the Philippines' China issues, emphasizing the United States as a crucial driving force for the Philippines' paradigm shift continuity.

## **I. The Minotaur in the South China Sea: China's Stimulus for Philippines' Paradigm Shift**

In April 2019, Xi Jinping proposed the construction of a "Maritime Community with a Shared Future," presenting it as a Chinese solution to safeguarding maritime peace, building maritime order, and promoting maritime prosperity. He emphasized that the construction of such a maritime community must break away from hegemonism and self-centered governance models to form a new governance system. China's comparison to the "Minotaur" lies in its high-profile declaration to construct a South China Sea order, but in reality, it deepened the collective threat perception of regional countries towards China. China's grey zone escalation in the South China Sea in 2023 constituted a significant stimulus for the Philippines' inclination towards a paradigm shift in its foreign policy.

Compared to previous focuses on the militarization of Chinese-occupied reefs or countering freedom of navigation operations of foreign military vehicles, Beijing's grey zone operations in the South China Sea last year escalated to island-

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1. Sharon Seah, et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2023 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023), p. 40, 43, 45, 53.



**Figure 2. Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Meets U.S. President Joe Biden in Washington, D.C.**

Source: Bongbong Marcos, “We are honored to have been invited by President Joe Biden to visit Washington, D.C.,” May 2, 2023, *Facebook*, <<https://www.facebook.com/BongbongMarcos/posts/pfbid0uCxBwYMFsQ9rkxPJ1SUxH4EhKa68UvikVJWZR9iBjnXmtPo5ykEHgbtp4HCwNizPI>>.

seizing intentions. In early February 2023, Chinese coast guard vessels irradiated Philippine vessels near the Second Thomas Shoal twice with military-grade lasers; at the end of February, Chinese online media released information on the intention to recover the Sabina Shoal; in March, Chinese missile frigates, coast guard vessels, and related fishing boats surrounded the Thitu Island (occupied by the Philippines), entered its territorial waters, and Chinese online media threatened to reclaim Filipino-occupied islands and reefs; in June, Chinese online media claimed June 15 as the “day of recovery of the Second Thomas Shoal;” in July, Chinese coast guard vessels intercepted two Philippine vessels in the water near the Second Thomas Shoal; in August, Chinese coast guard vessels attacked Philippine ships near the Second Thomas Shoal with water cannons, claiming that the Philippine side had repeatedly promised to tow away the grounded LST BRP Sierra Madre at the Second Thomas

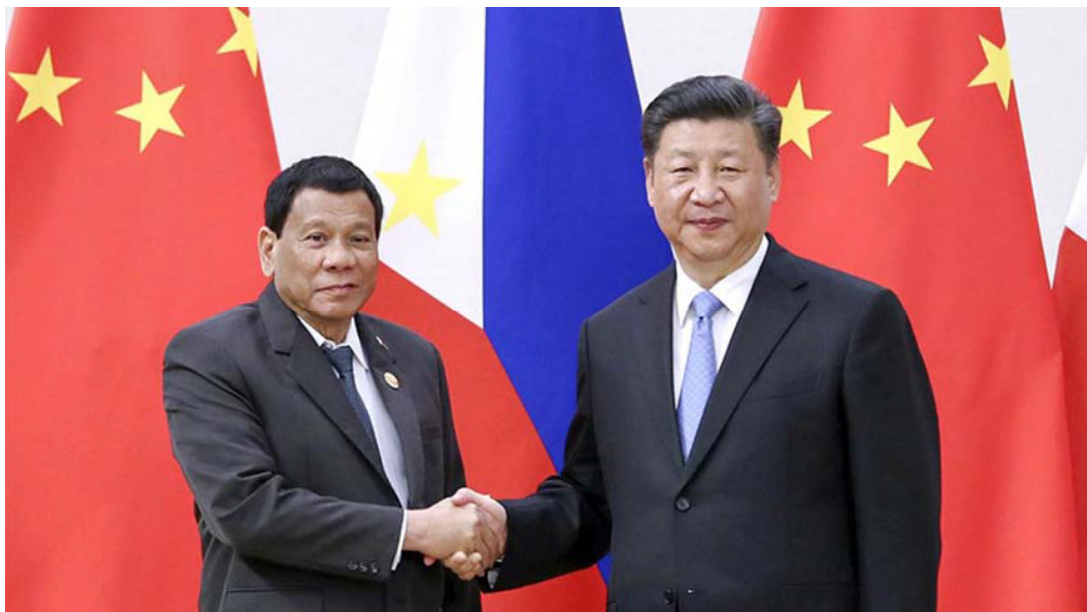
Shoal; on October 13, a Philippine warship was obstructed by a Chinese warship near the Thitu Island; on October 22, a Philippine supply boat collided with a China Coast Guard vessel attempting to block it during an operation to resupply the grounded warship; on November 10, the Chinese Coast Guard fired a water cannon at one of its ships in the South China Sea heading to the Second Thomas Shoal; on December 10, China Coast Guard and Chinese maritime militia vessels again used water cannons against Philippine boats and their escorts while on regular rotation and resupply mission to the Second Thomas Shoal. This series of incidents continues to this day. All of this indicates that the second round of China's grey zone operations has "island seizure" as its objective.

Beijing's escalation of grey zone operations against the islands and reefs occupied by the Philippines is primarily aimed at constraining the scope of the *U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty*. Firstly, in early 2023, the Philippines agreed, within the framework of the *Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement*, to provide the U.S. military with four additional bases, in addition to the existing five bases, including the Camilo Osias Naval Base in Cagayan Province and Lal-lo Airport, all located in northern Luzon Island, connecting the Balintang Channel. Furthermore, in April 2023, the United States and the Philippines conducted their annual "Balikatan" exercises, including large-scale casualty evacuation drills in the military port of Camilo Osias. This undoubtedly led Beijing to perceive Washington's continuous expansion of the "contingency scope" of U.S.-Philippine security cooperation, extending it from the South China Sea to the Taiwan Strait. In other words, the confrontation between the United States and China in the southern segment of the first island chain has also given rise to a tactical landscape where the security situation in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea are interlinked.

## **II. Theseus in the South China Sea I: The Political Aspects of the Philippines' Paradigm Shift**

Although President Marcos recently stated that the Philippine "independent foreign policy compels us to cooperate with China on matters where our interests align," he also underscored the fact that Manila will push back "when our sworn principles, such as our sovereignty, sovereign rights, and our jurisdiction in the

West Philippine Sea — are questioned or ignored.” Facing China’s criticism of the Philippines for allegedly “inviting a wolf into the house” and forming exclusive cliques in the South China Sea dispute, President Marcos also retaliated, warning against attempts to frame the situation as a geopolitical conflict between China and the United States in order to “distracts us from calling out aggressive, unilateral, illegal, and unlawful actions for what they are: attacks against the rule of international law and the principles of the Charter of the United States—United Nations.”<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 3. The Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and Chinese Leader Xi Jinping Held a Joint Press Conference**

Source: “Live: President Xi, Duterte hold joint press conference,” *CGTN*, November 20, 2018, <[https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d49544d794d545a326c4754/share\\_p.html](https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d49544d794d545a326c4754/share_p.html)>.

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2. Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. “Keynote Speech by President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. at the Lowy Institute Peace and Resilience Amidst great Power Rivalries: The Philippine Perspective,” March 4, 2024, *Republic of The Philippines*, <<https://pco.gov.ph/presidential-speech/keynote-speech-by-president-ferdinand-r-marcos-jr-at-the-loyy-institute-peace-and-resilience-amidst-great-power-rivalries-the-philippine-perspective/>>.

The Philippines' shift to a significant extent stems from the repercussions of the Duterte administration's vigorous engagement with Beijing. In 2018, the Philippines and China seemingly reached a milestone with a joint development agreement in the South China Sea. However, the Philippines ultimately realized that shelving disputes with Beijing did not yield genuine substantive cooperation. Instead, it resulted in an erosion of sovereignty, leading to the Philippine side of the South China Sea becoming a hotspot threatened by China's grey zone tactics.

Tensions in the South China Sea have "increased rather than diminished" in the past few months, President Marcos said in December 2023, warning that a "more assertive China" poses a "real challenge" to its Asian neighbors. Despite the eighth bilateral consultation mechanism meeting on the South China Sea between the Philippines and China held in Shanghai on January 17, 2024, reaffirming that the South China Sea dispute is not the entirety of the bilateral relationship, the Marcos government can no longer tolerate the facade of false friendship. On February 28, 2024, Jose Manuel Romualdez, the Philippine Ambassador to the United States, stated that while the United States sees both the South China Sea issue and a potential Taiwan conflict as "serious concerns," he believes the "real flashpoint is the West Philippine Sea," given "all of these skirmishes happening there."<sup>3</sup>

Manila's concerns and ambitions are reflected in the recent political actions of the Philippines. In terms of external security cooperation, apart from pushing for the modernization of the Philippine-U.S. alliance, the Philippines have actively sought regional assistance to counter China in the South China Sea, including the acquisition of vessels from Japan and South Korea to help modernize the Philippine armed forces; promoting the *Reciprocal Access Agreement between the Philippines and Japan* to maintain peace in the South China Sea; and utilizing the newly established strategic partnership between the Philippines and Australia to deepen security cooperation concerning the South China Sea. Of particular note is the consensus reached between

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3. Dempsey Reyes, "China: Stop projecting Beijing as 'threat' to PH," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 4, 2024, <<https://globalnation.inquirer.net/226779/china-stop-projecting-beijing-as-threat-to-ph>>.

the Philippines and Vietnam to enhance cooperation in their Coast Guard Departments at the beginning of 2024. Malacañang also released a statement concerning a call from President Marcos to Vietnamese Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính, mentioning the longstanding disputes and condemning the increasingly aggressive actions of the Chinese Coast Guard.

On the domestic front, the Philippines is also waging a legal battle. In late 2023, the newly created Senate Committee on Maritime and Admiralty Zones kicked off its marathon hearings to craft a new Philippine map in response to China's contested 10-dash-line map. On February 26, 2024, the Senate passed the final reading of the "*Maritime Zones Bill*." If enacted into law, it sets the country's archipelagic boundaries, and internal waters and exclusive economic zones over which the Philippine government exercises sovereignty and jurisdiction.<sup>4</sup>

The key is that the Philippines' perceptions of the Chinese threat stem not only from the South China Sea but also from the Taiwan Strait. On September 5, 2022, Ambassador Romualdez revealed that in the event of a conflict in the Taiwan Strait that directly affects Philippine security, the U.S. military would be allowed to use Philippine military bases. This demonstrates that Manila's commitment to the *Philippines-United States Mutual Defense Treaty* extends beyond the narrow scope of self-defense.

Strategic circles in the Philippines are also aware that China's control of Taiwan would have disastrous consequences for Manila's interests in the South China Sea.<sup>5</sup> For the Philippines, the *Mutual Defense Treaty* involves both parties' armed forces

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4. "Senate panel begins crafting new Philippine map to counter China's '10-dash' map," *Philstar*, September 14, 2023, <<https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2023/09/14/2296258/senate-panel-begins-crafting-new-philippine-map-counter-chinas-10-dash-map>> ; Kevin Lagunda, "Maritime Zones Bill passed," *Sun Star*, February 29, 2024, <<https://www.sunstar.com.ph/cebu/maritime-zones-bill-passed>>.

5. Susannah Patton, "What the Philippines has at stake in Taiwan," *Interpreter*, August 16, 2022, <<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/what-philippines-has-stake-taiwan>>.





**Figure 4. The USS Benfold Transits the Taiwan Strait Following Freedom of Navigation Operations in the South China Sea**

Source: Heather Mongilio, “USS Benfold Transits Taiwan Strait Following South China Sea Freedom of Navigation Ops,” *USNI News*, July 19, 2022, <<https://news.usni.org/2022/07/19/uss-benfold-transits-taiwan-strait-following-south-china-sea-freedom-of-navigation-ops>>.

and government ships, making it difficult to remain outside any conflict. Once Manila allows the U.S. military to establish tactical bridges based on the Vietnam War model, the use of Clark Air Base in Luzon for tasks such as air transport and strategic bombing would potentially have an impact on the Clark Freeport Zone and its external maritime and air transportation. Additionally, People’s Liberation Army warships may pass through the Philippine Sea via the Philippine straits to engage in naval encounters with the U.S. military, akin to those during World War II. There are also concerns about the evacuation of Philippine workers in Taiwan and the possibility of a refugee crisis from Taiwan, all of which have been foreseen by the Philippines.

### III. Theseus in the South China Sea II: The Economic Aspects of the Philippines' Paradigm Shift

On February 28, 2024, Ambassador Romualdez stated that the P1.7 trillion the U.S. will invest in Manila would “counter any economic coercion from China at the sidelines of the general membership meeting of the Consular Corps of the Philippines.”<sup>6</sup> He said that Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia are “very aggressive” in wooing U.S. investors. “We will be left behind if we don’t move quickly,” Romualdez said.<sup>7</sup> It is clear that this sense of urgency is primarily caused by China’s economic coercion.

In spite of last year’s South China Sea tensions, China remains the Philippines’ largest trading partner, the primary foreign investor in sectors such as logistics, agriculture, and telecommunications, and the third-largest market for Philippine agricultural products such as bananas, pineapples, coconuts, and avocados.<sup>8</sup>

Given China’s past imposition of restrictions on Philippine banana imports amid the South China Sea dispute, the Philippines’ long-term strategic interests, and the delayed fulfillment of investment commitments from China, the Marcos government began to seriously consider the necessity of a decoupling policy as early as the beginning of last year. In April 2023, Arsenio Balisacan, Secretary of the Philippine National Economic and Development Authority, stated that “if we see those projects, those China-funded or projects that are promised by China to be funded, [not pushing through] then we should open it up to other parties because we can’t wait.” In November 2023, the Philippines declared the termination of loans from China and

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6. Agence France-Presse & Bernadette E. Tamayo, “PH envoy to China: Stop harassing us,” *The Manila Times*, March 4, 2024, <<https://www.manilatimes.net/2024/03/04/news/ph-envoy-to-china-stop-harassing-us/1935269>>.

7. Bernadette E. Tamayo, “US to invest P1.7T in Manila – envoy,” *The Manila Times*, March 1, 2024, <<https://www.manilatimes.net/2024/03/01/news/national/us-to-invest-p17t-in-manila-envoy/1934758>>.

8. Laura Zhou, “South China Sea: Beijing hits back at Philippine envoy over economic coercion claims,” *SCMP*, March 3, 2024, <<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3254000/south-china-sea-beijing-hits-back-philippine-envoy-over-economic-coercion-claims>>.

abandoned seeking funding sources for railway projects worth over US\$5 billion from China. Instead, it turned to Japan and India for alternative financing.

**Table 1. Chinese Economic Coercion in Southeast Asia**

Coercive tools		Cases
Trade restrictions	Administrative barriers	Philippines (1), Vietnam (1)
	Trade bans	Philippines (1)
Tourism restrictions	Travel warnings	Philippines (2)
	Tour suspensions	Philippines (2)
Company punishments	Popular boycotts	Thailand (1)
	Warnings or threats	Malaysia (1), Vietnam (3)
Cyber operations	Cyberattacks against firms	All ASEAN (41)

Source: Gatra Priyandita, “Chinese economic coercion in Southeast Asia: Balancing carrots and sticks,” *Hybrid CoE Working Paper*, No. 25, October 2023, p. 15, *Hybrid CoE*, <<https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/20231026-Hybrid-CoE-Working-Paper-25-Chinese-economic-coercion-WEB.pdf>>.

Despite the existence of political leaders in the Philippines who are close to China, such as former presidents Arroyo and Duterte, who oppose challenging Philippine-China economic and trade relations over the South China Sea issue, and concerns from provinces in northeast Luzon (Batanes, Cagayan, Isabela, Nueva Vizcaya, and Quirino) about the potential impact of Philippine-U.S. joint military exercises on future Philippine-China cooperation, discontent with China’s economic coercion is also clearly present in the Philippines. Many believe that as China became the world’s second-largest economy by embracing trade with the international community, it used this wealth to pressure its economic partners, making a pushback inevitable — especially with support by the G7.<sup>9</sup> There is also recognition that China has engaged in cyber espionage activities against the Philippines, conducting

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9. “EDITORIAL - Economic coercion,” *Philippine Star*, October 29, 2023, <<https://www.philstar.com/opinion/2023/10/29/2307303/editorial-economic-coercion>>; Camille Elemia, “Philippine provinces linked to US military welcome Chinese investment,” *Radio Free Asia*, December 14, 2023, <<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/philippines-china-investment-12142023145438.html>>.

cyber attacks against government agencies and key industry sectors to steal valuable information such as identifying the location of oil fields in disputed waters.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, China's grey zone operations near the Reed Bank not only undermine the Philippines' sovereignty rights in exploiting the Sampaguita gas field, but also undermine the resilience of Luzon Island's electricity supply in the aftermath of the depletion of the Malampaya gas field.

Thus, whether it is for the pursuit of economic interests or preventing economic disadvantages, it has become increasingly difficult for the Philippines not to divert from the traditional track of relying on China economically.

#### **IV. Theseus in the South China Sea III: The Military Aspects of the Philippines' Paradigm Shift**

In late summer of 2023, the Philippines gradually adopted a more assertive stance in the South China Sea. On August 9, President Marcos publicly denied any agreement requiring the Philippines to remove grounded warships from the Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea. On August 11, the Armed Forces of the Philippines Commander, Romeo Brawner, publicly stated "An attack – even with a water cannon – on a navy ship would be tantamount to aggressive actions against a military ship and that could be interpreted as an act of war already." Brawner also declared plans to train Filipino fishermen and establish maritime militias.<sup>11</sup> Following this, on August 27, Admiral Karl Thomas, Commander of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, spoke about the need to restrain China's aggressive behavior in the South China Sea.

It should be noted that in the fall of 2023, the Scarborough Shoal became a target of the Philippines' opposition to China in the South China Sea, indicating a hardening position in the dispute for Manila. On September 25, the Philippine Coast

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10. Gatra Priyandita, "Chinese economic coercion in Southeast Asia: Balancing carrots and sticks," p. 20.

11. Michael Punongbayan, "'Water cannons on Philippine Navy ship an act of war'," *Philstar*, August 12, 2023, <<https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2023/08/12/2288078/water-cannons-philippine-navy-ship-act-war>>.



**Figure 5. China Uses Water Cannons Against Filipino Ships in the South China Sea**

Source: Rappler, “China uses water cannons anew vs Filipino ships in West Philippine Sea,” December 9, 2023, *Youtube*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VkMXLNDZVQ4>>.

Guard reported that, acting on President Marcos’ orders, they had dismantled floating barriers set up by the Chinese Coast Guard at Scarborough Shoal. On September 27, Jay Tarriela, a spokesperson for the Philippine Coast Guard, stated that after the new government had taken office, Manila has been planning how to regain control of the Scarborough Shoal. The feature, located 98 kilometers from the Subic Bay, is not only important for the traditional fishing rights of the Philippines, but is also crucial for the security of U.S. warships as they enter and exit the South China Sea through the Verde Island Passage to the south of the Subic Bay.

In addition, the Batanes Islands, located on the northern end of the Philippines and just 98 kilometers from Taiwan, have also become another strategic stronghold for the Philippines amid the tense situation in the Taiwan Strait. The Batanes Islands lie to north of the Bashi Channel and south of the Balintang Channel, serving as choke points for the PLA Navy submarines seeking to enter from coastal waters to depths of up to 1,000 meters to those below 3,000 meters, circumventing from the coastal

regions of China to the eastern waters of Taiwan and the Philippines. The Basco Island in the Batanes Islands was one of the exercise locations for the Balikatan exercises in 2023. As the island may become a gathering point for the U.S. military in the event of armed conflict in the Taiwan Strait, the U.S. military is in discussions with the Philippines on the possible construction of a port on the Basco Island. On October 19, 2023, Commander Brawner stated in a press conference that the Philippines would build stronger facilities at military bases, and the U.S. military would have greater access. He also mentioned that the Taiwan issue is one of the main risks for regional conflict, adding that the military was preparing for various contingencies. In early 2024, Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro ordered an increase in troops stationed on the Batanes Islands and initiated construction efforts.

In January 2024, President Marcos approved the updated acquisition plan by the Armed Forces of the Philippines known as Re-Horizon 3, in line with the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept, involving a procurement list of approximately US\$35 billion. The new Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept proposed by Philippine defense officials places greater emphasis on naval and air force capabilities to defend the country. Under this strategy, the traditionally land-focused Armed Forces of the Philippines are envisioned to engage in maritime operations within the exclusive economic zone and beyond. Facing an external threat from China, the forces are seeking to acquire advanced capabilities in air defense and anti-submarine warfare.<sup>12</sup>

## **V. ‘Ariadne’s Thread’ in the South China Sea: U.S. Momentum and the Philippines’ Paradigm Shift**

Starting from the second year of the Biden presidency, efforts have been made to mend the strained relations between the United States and ASEAN during the Trump

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12. Cliff Harvey Venzon, “Philippines Plans \$35 Billion Defense Upgrade in Sea Claims Push,” *Bloomberg*, February 1, 2024, <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-02-01/philippines-plans-35-billion-defense-upgrade-in-sea-claims-push>>; Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, “Philippines Starts Latest Naval Modernization Attempt Amid South China Sea Tensions,” *USNI News*, February 28, 2024, <<https://news.usni.org/2024/02/28/philippines-starts-latest-naval-modernization-attempt-amid-south-china-sea-tensions>>.



**Figure 6. The 2022 U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit**

Source: Katie Ricks, “President Joe Biden and ASEAN leaders pose for a family photo on the South Lawn of the White House,” May 12, 2022, *Flickr*, <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/whitehouse/52142897722/in/album-72177720297940353/>>.

era. At the 2022 U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit, Biden emphasized the “centrality of ASEAN” as the core of the current U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. The two main pillars of Biden’s Indo-Pacific strategy are maritime security and economic security, addressing “common challenges” and “economic coercion” respectively. In this context, the United States is promoting the “first island chain militarization” on one hand and “supply chain decoupling” on the other.

The modernization of the Philippine-U.S. alliance can be seen as a product of the aforementioned dual-track strategy. During the ministerial-level 2+2 dialogue held on April 11, 2023, both sides reiterated the importance of “modernizing the Philippine-U.S. alliance.” At the declaration of the “alliance modernization,” the Philippines and the United States reaffirmed the *Mutual Defense Treaty* as the cornerstone of their

cooperation. For the Marcos administration, the modernization of the Philippine-U.S. alliance undoubtedly serves as the Ariadne's Thread in the Philippines' resistance against China in the South China Sea.

The key to Manila embracing the Philippine-U.S. "alliance modernization" lies not only in invoking U.S. military assistance and strengthening the Philippines' modern military capabilities in countering China in the South China Sea, but also in a particular focus on the "development-oriented" dimension and prospects of this "alliance modernization." Therefore, Philippine Foreign Minister Manalo emphasized that the modernized alliance should not only serve as a tool for peace but also as a positive force for nurturing the sustainable economic interests of both countries.

Under the guidance of the American-made Ariadne's thread, the Philippines is able to embrace the paradigm shift more effectively and swiftly. In the realm of defense, while the United States continues to enhance interoperability between combat forces and weapons systems, it will prioritize providing the Philippines with defense platforms including radar, unmanned aerial systems, military transport aircraft, and coastal and air defense systems over the next five to ten years. Furthermore, based on Washington's strategic aim of bolstering deterrence capabilities across the first island chain, the U.S. has not only expanded bilateral exercises with the Philippines but also encouraged allies such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia to enhance their security relations with the Philippines and engage in multilateral maritime cooperation.

In the development domain, U.S.-Philippines cooperation plans will cover priority issues for the Philippines, including agriculture, food security, enhancing energy security, transitioning to clean energy, boosting trade, establishing supply chain resilience, enhancing connectivity, and digitization. At the end of February 2024, Ambassador Romualdez stated that American businesses will invest in infrastructure, energy, artificial intelligence, healthcare, manufacturing, and semiconductor industries. Meanwhile, the Marcos administration is considering amending the country's constitution to attract more investment, including from the United States. Despite President Marcos' emphasis that people sometimes mischaracterize the remedies adopted by the aggrieved as mere tactics in a grand strategic game,



deliberately highlighting the Philippines' strategic autonomy amid U.S.-China competition, as the Philippines revises its traditional path of "economic reliance on China," the trend towards "economic reliance on the United States" should prevail, injecting new momentum into the Philippines' paradigm shift.

## VI. Conclusion

For a long time, ASEAN countries, including the Philippines, have embraced economic reliance on China while choosing to tolerate the Minotaur's bullying behavior in the South China Sea. However, China's grey zone operations in the South China Sea last year, which clearly aimed at seizing islands from the Philippines, served as a significant catalyst for President Marcos' pursuit of a paradigm shift by the Philippines.

The paradigm shift in Philippine-China diplomacy is an ongoing process. In light of this, whether Beijing intends to use the "Besiege Wei to rescue Zhao" (圍魏救趙) approach by pressuring the Philippines in the South China Sea to constrain



**Figure 7. Taiwan-Philippine Relations should be Strengthened**

Source: Depositphotos.

(1) U.S.-Philippine relations with regards to the Taiwan Strait; (2) potential support by the Philippines to U.S. allies intervening in a Taiwan crisis; (3) efforts by the Philippines to use Taiwan as an alternative partner in its efforts to break free from Chinese economic coercion; (4) the use of the Batanes Islands adjacent to Taiwan as a key center for U.S.-Philippine security cooperation; or (5) Taiwanese assistance to the Philippines in promoting semiconductor industry development amid modernization of the Philippine-U.S. alliance, the strategic and tactical landscape is closely linked between the security situations in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

Therefore, while Taiwan enhances its security relations with the United States and Japan, it should also quickly strengthen its relationship with the Philippines, to prevent Taiwan-Philippines relations from becoming the weak link in the first island chain security network.