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## PHILIPPINE-CHINA BELLIGERENCY HEIGHTENS After just 2 years, Marcos regime faces stability and economic challenges

This edition has 3 main sections: National Politics, Philippine Economy, and International Relations

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### NATIONAL POLITICS

#### Seismic shift in Philippine Senate leadership

The Philippines Senate on May 20 underwent a leadership shakeup following the resignation of Sen. Juan Miguel Zubiri as 24<sup>th</sup> Senate president. He was replaced by Sen. Francis “Chiz” Escudero. Zubiri’s two-year term as Senate president was hounded by at least two ouster plot rumors, the latest of which took place in March. During this time, Sen. Imee Marcos claimed it was the members of the lower House pushing for a leadership change in the Senate. (The House of Representatives is headed by Speaker Ferdinand Martin G. Romualdez, cousin of President Marcos, Jr.)

The change in the Senate leadership came less than a year before the 2025 mid-term elections.

A few weeks after taking over as Senate leader, Escudero squelched moves in the House of Representatives for an economic charter change (Cha-cha) cited in Resolution of Both Houses No. 6 saying such amendments to the 1987 Constitution have no “earth-changing” impact on the Philippine economy and is not a priority of the Marcos administration.

An earlier survey by pollster Pulse Asia (PA) showed an overwhelming 88% of respondents against Charter change.

The 1987 Constitution mandates the upper chamber, Senate, to be composed of 24 members elected at large, who serve a term of six years; they cannot serve beyond two consecutive terms. Traditionally, the Senate presidential post serves as the legislative route to the presidency, as exemplified by the following senators who became – or ran



for - president: Manuel L. Quezon, 1916-1935 (Commonwealth period); Manuel A. Roxas, 1945-1946; Ferdinand Marcos, 1963-1965; and Jovito Salonga, 1987-1992.

In 2016, Escudero positioned himself for the presidency, but he ended up as the vice presidential running mate of Grace Poe, former chairman of the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board. They both lost in the election. Escudero went back to the Senate to serve his unfinished term. Poe ran and won as senator in 2013.

Escudero hails from a political family in Sorsogon province. He is a fourth-generation politician: his great-grandfather, Salvador Sr., was provincial governor; his grandfather was the mayor of Casiguran, Sorsogon. His father returned to the Department of Agriculture as secretary during the Ramos administration, after completing his three terms as congressman. When Salvador Jr. died in 2012, Escudero's mother, Evelina Guevara, ran and won in 2013 in the same congressional seat, which is now represented by Maria Bernadette, the Senate president's younger sister.

## Mid-Term 2022 elections alliance

The Marcos administration faces not only security challenges on account of unconfirmed destabilization plots but also to cement its political base as it gears for next year's May 2025 mid-term elections. (The 2025 elections will vote for all other offices except the presidential and vice-presidential slots. The outcome, on the other hand, will spell a difference in the 2028 presidential and vice-presidential races.)

In the fractious domestic politics, preparations for next year's mid-term elections are underway with Marcos's Partido Federal ng Pilipinas (PFP or Federal Party of the Philippines) reaching out to other national political parties for potential alliances. Principally this means winning over new PFP members led initially by 33 officials – including 11 provincial governors, 13 vice governors and three congressmen. Marcos's PFP alliance in the May 2022 presidential race included the Lakas-Christian Muslim Democrats whose chair emeritus is former President Gloria M. Arroyo and Nacionalista Party (NP), the country's oldest political party, whose leading Senate figures today are incumbent Sens. Cynthia Villar (whose husband, former Senate President Manny Villar, is the country's top magnate), son Mark Villar, as well as Alan Peter Cayetano, and sister Pia. Vice President Sara Duterte, on the other hand, chairs the regional party Hugpong ng Pagbabago (HNP).

Usually ad hoc and tactical, political or – more accurately – electoral alliances are meant to broaden one's party base and, hence, are often given to political opportunism, expediency and compromise. The underlying condition is that the country's elections in all levels are personality- or elite-oriented – usually led by an influential political dynasty (e.g., Marcoses, Dutertes) – that are not principle-based and where alliances or lists of candidates are clinched for some common, partisan, and short-term goals. The vision of politics of change and platform-based political parties can be found mainly in the country's Party-list system as exemplified by the Makabayan Bloc (nationalist bloc)



which includes Bayan Muna (people first), Act Teachers, Kabataan Party (youth party), and Gabriela Women's Party. The Philippine state has loathed the entry of this bloc in Congress despite earning high number of votes through a systematic campaign of red-tagging, demonization and political killings.

## Fissures

The Marcos-Duterte alliance that dominated the May 2022 elections, however, is now slipping away. Emerging last year, political cracks today continue to widen between the Marcos camp and the Duterte bloc. Last year, a Duterte ally, former President Gloria M. Arroyo, was removed as senior deputy House speaker after she reportedly moved for the ouster of House Speaker Martin Romualdez, a cousin and close ally of Marcos. Had Arroyo succeeded, Marcos's leadership dominance would have been weakened reducing the prospects of a commanding lead in next year's polls.

Marcos Jr. himself faces a contempt judgment issued by a United States court in 1995 in connection with a human rights class suit against his late dictator-father, Ferdinand E. Marcos, Sr. The amount involved for continuous contempt already reached \$353 million. Records from the US District Court and Court of Appeals show that Marcos Jr. is being held in contempt for "contumacious conduct causing direct harm to [a class of human rights victims]." Based on the exchange rate on January 13, the \$353 million is already equivalent to about P18 billion. The contempt judgment specifically names Marcos, Jr. and his mother Imelda as representative of the late dictator's estate. The patriarch died in exile in Hawaii in 1989. His remains were brought home to Batac, Ilocos Norte, in September 1993.

Arroyo's removal enraged Vice President Sara Duterte – Rodrigo Duterte's daughter who considered Arroyo as her mentor and ally in Congress. Sara Duterte resigned from the Lakas–Christian Muslim Democrats party headed by Speaker Romualdez.

In retaliation a few months later, Duterte met her baptism of fire as vice president when she faced congressional scrutiny over her handling of confidential funds – discretionary funds accessed by civilian government agencies to support their discreet activities. The Congress eventually stripped the vice president's budget of confidential funds after she failed to explain how she spent PhP125 million (US\$2.25 million) in 11 days in 2022.

The congressional inquiry into Sara Duterte's confidential funds and her political embarrassment led her father to publicly attack the House of Representatives as a "rotten institution". That drove the House of Representatives to issue a resolution to repudiate former president Duterte who once enjoyed support in the lower chamber.

Last November, the House dropped another bombshell when the chairman of the Committee on Human Rights filed a resolution appealing to the Philippine government to cooperate with the International Criminal Court (ICC) in its investigation of Duterte's



war on drugs. Coming to her father's rescue, Vice President Duterte claimed that allowing the ICC prosecutors to launch their investigations is unconstitutional.

Anticipating the visit in the Philippines of ICC prosecutor Karim Khan and the possible issuance of an arrest warrant on the former president, Marcos has repeatedly said that the Philippines will not cooperate with the ICC and does not recognize its jurisdiction. Under the Rome Statute that created the ICC, the court may have jurisdiction over alleged acts that happened while the Philippines was a member. (Duterte withdrew Philippine membership in the ICC in March 2019. He served as Davao City mayor for 20 years where he launched a drugs war on suspected drug users with a litany of extra judicial killings.) Recently, one of Duterte's most trusted police officers, Police Colonel Richard Bad-ang, was removed from the post of Davao City police chief. The next day, 34 other police officers, including six station commanders, were removed from their posts.

Referring obliquely to his predecessor, Marcos in a visit to Maguindanao del Norte late April warned of "those who preach ideology of dismemberment". His appearance marked the 10th anniversary commemoration of a landmark peace deal on the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). His statement came months after former president Rodrigo Duterte and his allies floated the possibility of a separate Mindanao, although that call garnered little support among leaders in the region. The former president later said he "was just joking".

In a similar event, the former president led a prayer rally organized by the Hugpong ng Maisug in Dumaguete City, Negros Occidental on May 7 held in Quezon Park and not in the Freedom Park. Banned from staging the rally at the Freedom Park, Duterte invoked Article 3 Section 3 of the Bill of Rights saying the right to peaceful assembly and expression is enshrined in the Constitution. In his short message, Duterte said "What is ironic and incongruous about this, it's funny, it makes me angry when I pass by Freedom Park, that's what we wanted, we asked for a permit, it was given to us then and when we arrived, the permit was revoked and it was still inhabited and not allowed to be used".

Swords have been unsheathed by the Marcoses and Dutertes – a concrete illustration of how far dynastic rivalry will go with shifting political loyalties and alliances. Winning scores is Marcos and his allies. Former President Duterte's political party – the once formidable Philippine Democratic Party (PDP) - is now practically in atrophy with less than 10% of its original membership now considered "political bullerflies" having abandoned the Dutertes to flock to Marcos's and Romualdez's parties.

Once considered a "president-in-waiting", the implications for Sara Duterte's political future could be gloomy. Her approval rating suffered a double-digit decrease from 82% to 70% in October 2023. Her trust rating had not shown signs of recovery either as of the latest survey in December 2023, and fell even further.



With limited access to government resources to boost her public image, Sara Duterte's presidential ambitions could be in trouble. Cracks in the UniTeam – the Marcos-Sara winning alliance in the 2022 polls - will likely decouple. If this scenario unfolds, the assumption of a presidential succession from Marcos to VP Sara Duterte would become uncertain.

The country's political system that is dominated by a few traditional families remains intractable to this day. Political power breeds economic power, and vice versa. Tracking the system, a CenPEG study found 50% of the families were dominant before the 20-year Marcos rule (1966-1986) while the balance ran the country in the post-Marcos era. Based on the 2019 official election results, there are at least 163 political families across the country whose winning members include senators, House representatives, or governors. Of this number, 88 are in Luzon, 29 in the Visayas, 44 in Mindanao, and two families in separate island groups: the Suansings in Luzon (Nueva Ecija) and Mindanao (Sultan Kudarat), and the Arroyos in Luzon (Pampanga) and the Visayas (Negros Occidental).

Two more families serve in different provinces, but in the same island group: the Amante-Matbas in Agusan del Norte and Tawi-Tawi, and the Mangudadatus in Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao, all in Mindanao.

Progressive academics, scholars, and analysts proffer it would take a structural overhaul of the class-based, political and economic systems in order for institutional social and political equality to take roots and enable non-dynastic candidates to run and win in elections.

### **Three parties merge to challenge BARMM leadership in 2025 polls**

In Muslim Mindanao, three major political parties of provincial governors have joined forces as they prepare to challenge the current Bangsamoro leadership in next year's mid-term elections.

The coalition's leaders said they would field candidates for seats in the parliament of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in the region's first parliamentary elections in 2025. Lanao del Sur Vice Governor Mohammad Khalid Raki-in Adiong, president of the Serbisyong Inklusibo-Alyansang Progresibo Party (SIAP), said they have coalesced with two other regional parties – Al-Ittihad-UKB party and Bangsamoro People's Party – and would field candidates for the seats in the Bangsamoro parliament.

The coalition is headed for a direct collision with the United Bangsamoro Justice Party of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and sets its eyes on the seat of the region's chief minister.



A peace agreement between the MILF, which had led a decades-old separatist rebellion in Muslim Mindanao region, and the national government was signed in 2001 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The pact led to the establishment in February 2019 of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), home to some 4 million Filipinos.

The Bangsamoro Organic Law - the charter of the autonomous region of the Philippines – set the first regular parliamentary election to succeed the Interim Bangsamoro Transition Authority Parliament in May 2022. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic the election was postponed to 2025.

## **Coup rumors: Marcos asks generals to be loyal to country, Constitution**

Amid unconfirmed reports of a destabilization plot against his administration among other security challenges, President Marcos reminded 39 newly promoted generals and flag officers of the armed forces to remain faithful to the Constitution and loyal to the country.

“I know that until the last hour of your last day in office, you will do your work that honors our oath, respects our uniform, earns the admiration of our peers and affirms the prestige that you have earned through a lifetime of service,” Marcos said after administering the oath of the new senior officers. “That you will uphold the principles that made you patriots, professionals, always compliant with command, faithful to our Constitution, loyal to our country and mindful of our conscience.”

Coups d’etat are a lingering bane in Philippine politics for decades. In the Marcos Sr. years both the defense minister, Juan Ponce Enrile, and armed forces chief Fidel V. Ramos, who staged a coup attempt broke their loyalty to the dictator by riding on the crest of a civilian uprising (EDSA 1, 1986) forcing the beleaguered president to be whisked away by the US for exile in Hawaii. Facing impeachment for grave charter violations, Joseph E. Estrada was forced to resign (EDSA 2, 2001) after only two years as president paving the way for Gloria M. Arroyo as successor.

Marcos also ordered the AFP officials to “brace for complex security challenges”. Although he did not elaborate the challenges may refer to the so-called “China existential threat” and the domestic Maoist armed insurgency.

## **SC rescinds dismissal of disqualification petition against Cagayan governor**

The Philippines’ highest court – Supreme Court (SC) – last April 22 overturned the Commission on Elections’ (Comelec) dismissal of a disqualification petition filed against Cagayan Gov. Manuel Mamba. The SC said the Comelec “gravely abused its discretion in dismissing the petition for disqualification” against Mamba. Comelec had disqualified Mamba as Cagayan governor “for illegal use of campaign funds” in relation to the 2022 National and Local Elections (NLE). Mamba, who reports indicated is friendly to China



and opposes US-Philippine joint war drills in his province, had been removed from office by the Comelec for “illegal use of election funds.”

By implication, the high court ruling affirmed Mamba’s non-accommodation to the two countries’ joint war drills in the province and the deployment of US forces inside a Philippine military base under a 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) – a slap in the face of President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr., a hardcore supporter and strong ally of the US. The Cagayan-based EDCA is one of four military locations opened by Marcos for US forces’ access and use. It is proximate to the Taiwan Straits where the US Navy has been sending naval vessels ostensibly to provide security for Taiwan in violation of the One-China principle – which also provides for the peaceful reunification of China and its island province Taiwan – as “adhered” to by the US. (Despite denials that the EDCAs targeted a third country it was clear they are aimed at Beijing. Complicity, Marcos is in violation of the One-China policy likewise.) Taiwan’s ruling Democratic Progressive Party, now led by Lai Ching-te, has openly called for “secession” from the mainland – triggering a strong reaction from China’s Taiwan Affairs Office describing it as a “dangerous situation of high winds and urgent waves in the Taiwan Strait”.

By defending the EDCAs Marcos runs the risk of dragging the Philippines into any potential war between the US and China when hostilities break out. That is a foregone conclusion given Marcos’s earlier commitment to adhere fully to the Philippines’ treaty commitments including the 1951 Mutual Defense Pact which requires both the US and the Philippines for mutual support in case of “an external aggression.”

## PHILIPPINE ECONOMY

Until now, there are little signs of a promising, long-term economic growth in the Philippines. Economic growth in the first quarter of 2024 was nuanced by a contraction in employment from the quarter before and even from the same period a year ago. Economic managers hailed the reported growth as keeping the Philippines “a leading force among Asia’s emerging economies”. To the contrary, the difficulty in creating enough decent and sustainable work which leaves millions of Filipinos to survive off of meager incomes certainly cannot in any way be a source of “optimism and pride,” as the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) put it when the growth figures were released.

Year-on-year gross domestic product (GDP) was reported at 5.7% in the first quarter of 2024 - hyped as faster than in other major economies in the region. Against a bigger economic backdrop, however, the figure shows that the post-pandemic economic rebound is over and the trend of slowing growth in pre-pandemic 2017, 2018 and 2019 is back, the independent economic think tank IBON Foundation avers. To illustrate, first quarter economic growth has slowed from 8.1% in the first quarter of 2022 to 6.4% in the first quarter of 2023, and now to 5.7% in 2024.

Not only is economic growth sliding but it is accompanied as well by job losses and worsening informality. The number of employed dropped by a huge 1.3 million from 49.3



million in the fourth quarter of 2023 to 48 million in the first quarter of 2024. Employment also went down even accounting for seasonality by 288,000 from 48.2 million in the first quarter of 2023. About 19.2 million or 40% of total employed persons, IBON went further, were in openly informal work in the first quarter of 2024, not yet counting perhaps some 16-18 million more wage workers in unregulated informal establishments.

The root of weakening economic growth and poor job creation lies in the country's fragile economic foundations: Manufacturing started 2024 at its smallest share of GDP in 75 years since 1949, and agriculture at its smallest in the country's history.

Slow growth can also be attributed to weak domestic demand – Filipino families' spending has diminished due to low incomes and high prices. Families' meager incomes are unable to keep up with the rising cost of living. As of April 2024, the average minimum wage nationwide is only Php441 or around one-third (36.5%) of the PhP1,208 average family living wage (FLW) for a family of five.

## Rising hunger

Because Filipinos are not earning enough, there is rising hunger and widespread poverty. Filipino families experiencing involuntary hunger increased to 14.2% in March 2024 from 12.6% in December 2023, while 46% of Filipino families rated themselves as poor and 33% as borderline poor in March 2024, according to the Social Weather Stations (SWS). "Involuntary hunger", SWS says, refers to experiencing hunger and not having access to food at least once in the past three months. "Compared to December 2023, hunger rose by 1.6 points, from 12.6 percent," the SWS said."

The Marcos government continues to downgrade the negative figures on poverty and hunger with the president himself vowing to eliminate hunger during his presidency. Such reiteration however has received little commendation even among non-state economists regarding his promises disappointed as they are – along with the people most especially – over his election campaign promise to, for instance, stabilize the price of rice to PhP20.00. The current price of rice per kilo stands at PhP42.00. The Philippines also remains the world's largest rice importer; its total rice imports next year is forecast at 4.2 million metric tons (MT) to meet the "continued" increase in consumption.

Poverty, inflation, hunger, and unemployment are the indicators that explain the president's descent in the latest trust and popularity ratings. OCTA Research said on May 20 Marcos (and Vice President Sara Duterte) registered significant declines in their respective ratings in the first quarter of 2024 although they continued to enjoy high trust and approval ratings. The OCTA Research "Tugon ng Masa" (TNM) survey results showed that 69% of Filipinos trust President Marcos and 65% approve of his performance. However, his trust and performance ratings significantly declined by six percent (from 75% in the first quarter of 2024) compared to his trust and approval





ratings in the last quarter TNM Q4 survey conducted in December 2023,” OCTA said in its report.

Surveys conducted over the past few decades showed a consistent high rating for most presidents as they begin their term only to fall toward the end with even a negative level. In her case, President Gloria M. Arroyo (2001-2010) ended her nine-year term with a dismal 16% approval rating, capping off what would be an average of 37.1% rating from when she assumed the presidency from the ousted Estrada regime in March 2001 to Aquino’s victory in July 2010. Except in the phenomenal case of Duterte, the collapse in the approval rating of most presidents – who promise the moon and stars during campaign - can be explained by dismal economic performance, increase in poverty, unemployment, and hunger, as well as corruption.

## **International Peoples' Tribunal on the Philippines (May 18, 2024)**

### **GUILTY!**

This was the verdict meted by the International Peoples’ Tribunal (IPT) on Philippine President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr., former President Rodrigo R. Duterte, President Joe Biden and the US Government for war crimes and violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). The IPT was held on May 18 in Brussels, Belgium.

The guilty verdict was welcomed by more than 200 observers in Brussels, who heard demands for justice from expert witnesses, direct victims like Jonila Castro, a witness and youth activist with AKAP Ka Manila Bay, who was abducted, tortured and presented as a rebel surrenderee by the Philippine military last year. Castro testified together with other family members of deceased victims of the US-directed counterinsurgency operations over two days of IPT proceedings.

Séverine de Laveleye, member of the Belgian Parliament and IPT juror, stated “We found substantial and compelling evidence of widespread extrajudicial killings, civilian massacres, enforced disappearances, indiscriminate bombings, and other gross violations of international humanitarian law. The atrocities and anti-people policies and actions of Mr. Duterte appear to persist and intensify under the current Marcos Jr. administration.”

In a 10-page decision signed by an international panel of jurors including former legal counsel to Nelson Mandela, Prof. Lennox Hinds, the tribunal found “a steady rise in cases of abduction and enforced disappearance perpetrated by GRP (Government of the Republic of the Philippines) forces against activists.”

“We want to stop the pattern of killings, abductions, and fake surrenders — we want the government to stop equating activists as combatants, and to surface all missing activists. We demand to hold state forces accountable,” stated Castro.



Elaborating on the basis of the guilty verdict, Laveleye stated, “Our decision is founded on the comprehensive examination of the evidence presented. The testimonies of the witnesses, many of whom have shown tremendous courage by coming forward, played a crucial role in shaping our understanding of the systemic abuses perpetrated under these regimes with the tacit support of the US.”

Although the defendants in the case had been duly notified they failed to respond, failed to provide witnesses, and are therefore deemed to have waived their rights,” noted lead juror Lennox Hinds before convening the jurors to deliberate on the verdict. “The evidence presented was credible and consistent,” said Hinds, as witnesses shared an inability to seek justice in the Philippines due to neglect of the judicial process of the GRP, or due to harassment and intimidation by GRP authorities themselves.

“We demand justice for the killing of our family. They were innocent and I suspect no one else but the military themselves,” shared Emile Fausto, whose murdered parents Billy and Emelda Fausto were both leaders of the Farmworkers Association BABICAF, working to implement genuine land reform in the Buenavista municipality of Negros Occidental. Both of Fausto’s parents and two young brothers, Ben Fausto, 15, and Ravin Fausto, 12, were murdered together in June 2023 after facing years of red-tagging and harassment by the 94th Infantry Battalion of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).

As regards armed combatants and execution of hors de combat, the ruling noted that the GRP military repeatedly operates in violation of Geneva Convention rules of war, citing testimony on the recent case of New People’s Army (NPA) combatant Hannah Cesista. Cesista, along with four other NPA combatants, surrendered to the 47th Infantry Battalion in order to protect civilian children nearby, but were subsequently executed without trial. Cesista was forced to roll in mud before being shot at point-blank range, while her counterparts were stripped and executed in front of Bohol province villagers.

Juror Julen Arzuaga Gumuzio, member of Basque parliament and the European Association of Democratic Lawyers, noted “These are blatant violations of the most fundamental rules of war... apart from being war crimes, these acts of the AFP expose an utter disdain for the principles of humanity and deserve the utmost condemnation from this tribunal.”

“To the defendants, this verdict is a solemn reminder that the international community is watching you and will hold accountable those who perpetrate or condone human rights abuses and violations of international laws governing the rules of war,” asserted Laveleye in a statement on the verdict.

The Tribunal also expressed their gratitude to the witnesses for their courage in bringing their stories to light. We applaud the witnesses, the prosecution, the jurors, the amicus curiae, the clerk of court, the conveners including the International Association of Democratic Lawyers (IADL) and endorsers like 1Sambayan Australia, Center for



Research and Elaboration of Democracy, Movement Against Tyranny Australia, Atty. Beth Lyons, OCML Voie Prolétarienne, the Permanent People's Tribunal) of the 2024 International People's Tribunal (IPT), for bringing the Filipino people closer to justice.

The findings of this tribunal are not legally binding, the IPT jurors said. But, “peoples’ tribunals, while essentially political in nature, can serve as alternative fora, and provide a peoples’ record for future litigation, both nationally and internationally. Moreover, the IPT process once more underlines the fact that human rights violations continue to stain Philippine political dynamics and maintain a culture of impunity (abductions, illegal detention, massacres, assassinations, burning of whole villages and aerial bombings), since the Marcos dictatorship (1972-1986) until today. The anti-insurgency atrocities – leaving tens of thousands of victims - have had the all-time support of the US often with the deployment of Green Berets and military equipment. Joint planning is dealt with at the two countries’ Mutual Defense Board headquartered at Camp Aguinaldo, Quezon City.

## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Philippine-China relations were defined in May by the annual US-Philippine war drills; a national security adviser’s threat to expel Chinese diplomats; a controversy on the issuance of Chinese visas; and trenchant attacks against China by President Marcos at the Shangri-la world security dialogue in Singapore, May 31-June 2.

### **Balikatan: Nuclear weapon deployment**

Consistent with a standing mutual defense plan, the US and the Philippines held their annual joint war exercises from April 22 to May 10 with over 16,700 troops participating. Fourteen other countries, including Australia, France and Japan, took part in the exercise as observers.

The increase in the number of observers in this year’s Balikatan (shoulder-to-shoulder) drills showed the Philippines’ intention to increase its international support against China through the military exercise. With the first-ever US-Japan-Australia-Philippine joint drill already conducted in the South China Sea (SCS), the trajectory is that some observers, Japan in particular, would become formal members of the Balikatan in the future. Predictably, the Balikatan is transforming from a bilateral exercise to a multilateral one between the US, the Philippines and its allies and partners in the coming years.

The three-week-long Balikatan focused on several high-end coastal defense activities, including counter-landing and sinking exercises – the first time such games were included. Earlier, the Philippine military had announced plans to sink a retired



Philippine Navy ship, the “BRP Lake Caliraya” which is of Chinese origin. The vessel will serve as the “enemy” ship during the drill.”

This year’s Balikatan included the unleashing of high-precision rockets, artillery fire, and airstrikes where a mock enemy ship was sunk as part of a large-scale war. President Marcos himself, along with allied military officials and diplomats watched the firepower display from a hilltop along a sandy coast in Laoag City, Ilocos Norte, Marcos’s home province. The latest drills were claimed to have bolstered the defense treaty alliance that started in the 1950s (with the 1951 Mutual Defense Pact) amid what the two countries – a former colonial master and a junior, economically undeveloped ally fighting a proxy war – perceive as China’s increasingly aggressive actions in disputed maritime territories in the South China Sea (SCS).

Reacting particularly on the Ilocos Norte drills, China’s defense ministry strongly condemned the deployment of a US long-range missile system in the northern Philippines during the military drills saying it “brought huge risks of war into the region”. Defense Ministry spokesperson Wu Qian said in Beijing that China remained highly vigilant and opposed the deployment, the first in the Indo-Pacific region.

## **Secret deployment of nuclear weapons**

In April this year, the US Army’s 1st Multi-Domain Task Force deployed to the Philippines with a new long-range weapon exceeding previously adhered to Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty constraints. “This is a significant step in our partnership with the Philippines, our oldest treaty ally in the region,” Brig. Gen. Bernard Harrington, commanding general of the 1MDTF, said.

The land-based system is designed to launch Raytheon’s existing SM-6 missiles and Tomahawk cruise missiles and hit targets between the Precision Strike Missile’s (PrSM’s) planned 500-kilometer range and the 2,776-kilometer reach of the future Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon (LRHW). US Army Pacific commander Gen. Charles Flynn said last year the new launcher would be bound for the Indo-Pacific region, but didn’t disclose where or if the US had struck a deal with a foreign government to rest it on its soil.

As part of Exercise Salaknib 2024, soldiers arrived in the Philippines with the new weapon. “This landmark deployment marks a significant milestone for the new capability while enhancing interoperability, readiness, and defense capabilities in coordination with the armed forces of the Philippines,” the Army added. Salaknib (“shield” in Ilocano) is an annual Philippine Army-led, US Army Pacific-sponsored bilateral exercise designed to enhance the U.S. and Philippine Army’s capacity and interoperability across the spectrum of military operations while strengthening the ties between the two long-standing allies.)



To iterate, Marcos is in gross violation of the country's commitment to the Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ or the 1995 Bangkok Treaty) and the 2017 UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

“The United States and Philippine practices put the entire region under the fire of the United States (and) brought huge risks of war into the region,” Wu said, adding it “seriously undermined” regional peace. “Intermediate-range missiles are strategic and offensive weapons with a strong Cold War color,” he added.

Philippine military official Col. Michael Logico said that the 40-ton missile system, which can fire Tomahawk land attack and SM-6 missiles, was brought to Laoag city in Ilocos Norte province, northern Philippines.

The exercises irked China at the time and it warned of destabilization when countries outside the region “flex muscles and stoke confrontation”. Philippine and US officials had said the exercises were meant to improve interoperability between their forces and were not directed at any third country.

With the drills held each year including in Palawan overlooking the SCS, the Balikatan continues to stalk China and increases tensions in the region between China on the one hand and the US-Philippines, on the other. In the guise of Freedom of Navigation (FONOP), the US regularly deploys its Navy and coast guard often provocatively approaching Chinese naval and fishing stations. China has strongly opposed the move, which allows US forces to establish staging grounds and surveillance posts in the northern Philippines across the channel from Taiwan, and in western Philippine provinces facing the South China Sea.

In 1998, seven years following the US military bases' closure in Subic, Olongapo, and Angeles City, Pampanga, the two countries signed the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) which contained guidelines for the conduct and protection of American troops visiting the Philippines, and stipulated the terms and conditions for the American military to enter Philippine territory. A reciprocal agreement, the VFA also outlines the requirements for Philippine troops visiting the United States. (This term has not been fulfilled.) The agreement led to the establishment of the Balikatan exercises, as well as a variety of other cooperative measures. The Balikatan exercises are designed to maintain and develop the security relationship between the two countries' armed forces through crisis-action planning, enhanced training to conduct counterterrorism operations, and promoting interoperability of the forces.

## **Defense secretary's “new strategy” on China**

Last March, Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro, Jr. revealed the Philippine armed forces embarked on the “Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept” (CADC).



Explaining CADC Teodoro said, “We are developing our capability to protect and secure our entire territory and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in order to ensure that our people and all the generations of Filipinos to come shall freely reap and enjoy the bounties of the natural resources that are rightfully ours within our domain.” The CADC is also in line with President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr.’s directive for the armed forces to focus on external defense, Teodoro said. As part of the CADC, Teodoro ordered an increase of military presence in Batanes, the country’s northernmost island province near Taiwan, as he highlighted its strategic importance for the country.

Teodoro’s order with regard to Batanes drew a flak from Beijing, warning Manila to “tread carefully” on the Taiwan issue as it considers it a “red line.” Taiwan is China’s island province based on the One-China policy and is subject to peaceful reunification. Beijing has denounced US interference on the issue including the provision of military aid and the travel of US congressional leaders.

Tensions in the Taiwan Straits are heating up as the island province’s Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) persists on adhering to the separatist stance of “Taiwan independence” and refuses to acknowledge the 1992 Consensus, which embodies the One-China principle. It also colludes with the US in provocations over “Taiwan independence,” Chen Binhua, a spokesperson for the State Council Taiwan Affairs Office, said in May. Chen made these remarks following the inaugural speech of Taiwan region’s new leader Lai Ching-te. The new leader of the Taiwan region, Chen said, stubbornly adheres to the “Taiwan independence” position, loudly propagates the fallacy of secession, incites confrontation and antagonism across the Taiwan Straits, and intends to “rely on external forces to seek ‘independence’” and “seek ‘independence’ by force.”

Teodoro, at the same time, said the Philippines is weighing a new approach in the South China Sea, following another reported encounter between its vessels and Chinese coastguard ships firing water cannons – signaling that he wants maritime operations to be “less telegraphic”. “We are re-strategizing the way we do things, naturally with the end in view of both preventing injuries and number two, upholding the dignity of our country,” Teodoro. He refused to give details.

## Communication

Just as China and the Philippines continue to trade denunciations over the continuing maritime feuds and related incidents, communications appear to remain open between the two states. Last January 17 the Philippines and China convened the 8<sup>th</sup> Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on the South China Sea in Shanghai. This is pursuant to the agreement reached between President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and President Xi Jinping in San Francisco in November last year to ease and manage tensions in the South China Sea. This was followed by a phone call between Philippine Secretary for Foreign Affairs Enrique Manalo and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in December 2023. (The first agreement on a regular dialogue was reached between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte in Beijing, May 2017.)



Government reports said Philippine Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Ma. Theresa P. Lazaro and Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Nong Rong held discussions to de-escalate the situation in the South China Sea and both sides agreed to calmly deal with incidents, if any, through diplomacy. They also agreed that continuous dialogue is important to keep peace and stability at sea. Both sides presented their respective positions on the Ayungin Shoal and assured each other of their mutual commitment to avoid escalation of tensions.

## South China Sea

Despite the two parties' bilateral communication, China once more accused the Philippines of setting off hostilities in the disputed SCS waters by encroaching in what it says are its offshore territories. Accordingly, the Chinese coast guard and navy took action to expel Philippine coast guard and other vessels from those areas. On the other hand, the Philippines has repeatedly cited a 2016 international arbitration ruling based on the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) that invalidated China's claim over virtually the entire South China Sea on historical grounds. China did not participate in the arbitration complaint filed by the Philippines in 2013, and has rejected the ruling.

Amid the turbulence between the two countries the Chinese defense ministry stated, "The Chinese military does not wish to make trouble, but if trouble comes, we won't shy away." Ministry spokesperson Zhang Xiaogang vowed that China will continue to take resolute measures to firmly defend its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, and safeguard peace and stability in the South China Sea. Raising the traction, he said China is empowered to detain South China Sea "trespassers". Press reports said Beijing has approved a new policy authorizing its coast guard extensive powers starting on June 15 to detain foreigners deemed "illegally crossing" its borders without trial, according to media reports. "Foreigners suspected of illegally passing China's borders can be held for up to 60 days," the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post reported.

Marcos's hard-line alliance with the US which clearly targets China, as reinforced by the annual Balikatan joint war exercises, is a militarist, confrontational approach that serves the security interests of the US. As perceived by US policy makers, China's economic rise poses a threat to the now moribund American global hegemony. This fear – dubbed by the Americans as "existential threat" - of the US losing its status as the dominant global power is at the heart of Washington's foreign policy vis-a-vis Beijing where the Marcos government plays an exiguous role. First used during the Cold War against the USSR, the US applies a strategy of containment toward China to blunt its rise: by seeking to isolate it through military encirclement, foreclosing its access to key markets and supply chain, and cutting it off economically from the rest of the world through severe trade and financial sanctions. This policy is intended to cripple China's development, ensuring US imperialism's control over the entire globe.

Encirclement, which reinforces the US containment strategy toward China, has been surrounding the country with a chain of military bases and hostile military alliances. With



bases across South Korea, Japan, Guam, Singapore, and the Philippines the US has steadily been creating a military arc around China with 313 military installations in East Asia alone. Further escalating the encirclement strategy the Biden administration created AUKUS — the military alliance between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia — and JAPHUS — a trilateral alliance between the US, Japan, and the Philippines — both of which are aimed at countering China. Further completing the military arc surrounding China stretching from South Korea and Japan in the north to Australia in the south, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in February secured a deal with the Marcos government to grant US access to four of its military bases (under the 2014 EDCA), bringing the total number of US installations in its former colony to nine. Three of these bases are situated in the north, near Taiwan.

The goal of this military encirclement, according to defense policy expert Michael T. Klare, is “to enable Washington to barricade [China’s] military inside its own territory and potentially cripple its economy in any future crisis,” leaving it with no other option but to “fight its way out of containment.”

The US thus is actively pushing China into a direct military confrontation.

As a whole, the aim of the US’ containment and encirclement strategy on China is to deter if not halt its economic rise as well as to diminish its security – particularly, maritime – in the South China Sea as well as East China Sea. Such threats, however, are bound to fail given Beijing’s growing global economy through such paths as the Belt and Road Initiative and BRICS.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) founded in 2013 is a Chinese-led massive infrastructure investment project aimed at improving connectivity, trade, and communication across Eurasia, Latin America, and Africa. Among the infrastructure projects it has supported are airports, ports, power plants, bridges, railways, roads, and telecommunications networks.

Formed in 2009 BRICS is an intergovernmental organization comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. It has added Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, the United Arab Emirates, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and several other countries including Thailand. Combined, the BRICS members encompass about 30% of the world's land surface and 45% of the global population. Brazil, Russia, India, and China are among the world's ten largest countries by population, area, and gross domestic product (GDP) nominal and by purchasing power parity. All five initial member states are members of the G20, with a combined nominal GDP of US\$28 trillion (about 27% of the gross world product), a total GDP (PPP) of around US\$57 trillion (33% of global GDP PPP), and an estimated US\$4.5 trillion in combined foreign reserves (as of 2018).

Marcos, meanwhile, has exacerbated diplomatic relations with China with self-inflicted wounds – ditching Beijing’s infrastructural investment pledges in the Philippines which is a full-throttle departure from the preceding government’s close economic ties





with Asia's economic giant. In a major move packed with geopolitical risks, the Philippines' transportation department last year announced the unilateral and full termination of a series of big-ticket infrastructure projects with China in favor of Japanese and Western rivals. As a result the Senate said nearly all of China's key investment initiatives in the Philippines are now doomed. China pledged as much as \$24 billion in infrastructure projects under Duterte. Obviously, Marcos's departure from the promising China-initiated Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can be attributed to deep albeit ill-advised grievances over contested territories in the South China Sea.

## China's historical claims

In line with an objective analysis and to add a backdrop to China's declarations on the SCS, this paper evaluates China's historical and sovereign claims over the SCS especially its habitable waters and land/rock formations. The Chinese perspective is based on historical facts – that discovery, naming, and continued use and practice of state authority all constitute sovereignty and sovereign rights over the four-island groups within the U-shaped line in the SCS. The time of discovery is not later than the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 BC) of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty - not later than the Han Dynasty 1,500 years before the time (1630-1653 AD). Nan Hai (South China Sea 南海 or "sea in the south") is the current Chinese name for the SCS. Southern Chinese have a long tradition of seafaring and seaborne trade via the SCS dating all the way back to the 11<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. To illustrate, found in the Xisha Islands were stoneware and pottery relics made in China especially in the primitive era (pre-21<sup>st</sup> Century BC).

In sum, China's sovereignty claims over the 4-island groups of the SCS is derived from its historical rights based on discovery, naming and a history of continued use and demonstration of authority over 2,000 years. China's sovereignty claim is confirmed by international documents including the Cairo Declaration 1943 (China, US and Britain; USSR) providing for return to China of the following territories - Manchuria, Taiwan and Pescadores that Japan had seized). The Potsdam Declaration (1945 China, US, Britain) called for the enforcement of the Cairo Declaration: and Treaty of Peace with Japan.

In diplomacy, despite its resolute claims, China has a long-standing flexible approach to resolve conflicting claims in the SCS. In a 1988 meeting in Beijing with President Corazon Aquino China's paramount leader Deng Xiaoping proposed for both countries to shelve the territorial disputes and conduct joint development. This was reportedly disregarded by the Philippines in 1994 when it invited a US oil company to conduct energy exploration.

Yet another thorny issue between the two countries pertained to a demand by the Philippines' national security adviser and former defense chief, Ed Año, in mid-May for the expulsion of Chinese diplomats over an alleged leak of a phone conversation with a Filipino admiral. Año swore that China's Embassy in Manila had orchestrated "repeated acts of engaging and



dissemination of disinformation, misinformation and malinformation", with the objective of sowing discord, division and disunity. Interposing on the public accusation, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Lin Jian called the comments provocative and said Chinese diplomats in the Philippines had "to be allowed to do their job." The Chinese Embassy in Manila also countered that there was a "record" or "minutes" of the discussion when Philippine military officials supposedly agreed to a "new model" of arrangement on how to manage Ayungin Shoal to avoid conflict."

A transcript of the supposed recording of a phone call between the Chinese side and the Philippines' Western Command (WESCOM) Commander Vice Admiral Alberto Carlos on January 3 was revealed by media in recent days, in which Carlos agreed to a "new model" for resupply missions concerning Ren'ai Jiao.

The transcript which documented the phone conversation between the Chinese side and Carlos on January 3 has been confirmed to be true, the Chinese daily *Global Times* has learned from a source familiar with the affair. Following the conversation, the Philippine side adhered to the "new model" in the subsequent resupply mission, only delivering essential daily supplies to the grounded warship, and notified the Chinese side in advance."

## **Addendum: China's maritime power**

A survey of the maritime power of China in the international seas including the SCS may indicate how Beijing will conduct its role in a hypothetical armed conflict with the US – or with even the Philippines.

China has the biggest maritime force in the world with an inventory of about 355 vessels. With 355 ships in its fleet, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is slated to expand its inventory to 420 ships within the next four years. By 2030, the PLAN is expected to have 460 ships. The 355 estimation accounts for "major surface combatants, submarines, aircraft carriers, ocean-going amphibious ships, mine warfare ships, and fleet auxiliaries." This figure does not include 85 patrol combatants and craft that carry anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs).

On the submarine front, China will keep building and purchasing conventional submarines, while it also builds new ballistic missile boats and nuclear-powered boats.

"Equipped with the CSS-N-14 (JL-2) submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), the PLAN's six operational Jin-class SSBNs represent the [People's Republic of China]'s first credible sea-based nuclear deterrent. Each Jin-class SSBN can carry up to 12 JL-2 SLBMs. In 2019, Beijing displayed these missiles at the PRC's 70th anniversary parade, revealing that at least a full complement of 12 JL-2s are complete and operational," the report reads. "The PRC's next-generation Type 096 SSBN, which likely began construction in the early 2020s, will reportedly carry a new type of SLBM. The PLAN is expected to operate the Type 094 and Type 096 SSBNs concurrently and



could have up to eight SSBNs by 2030. This would align with Chairman Xi Jinping's 2018 directive for the SSBN force to achieve 'stronger growth.'"

## **In South China Sea**

The number of Chinese vessels in Philippine waters – including warships – has significantly increased to more than a hundred recently, as the Philippines was preparing for this year's Balikatan joint military exercise with the US, the Philippine Navy reported. The buildup started early this month from April 2 to 8, comprising 78 vessels of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), China Coast Guard (CCG), Chinese maritime militia (CMM) and fishermen, according to Philippine Navy data. By April 16 to 22, or just when the Balikatan exercise was about to commence, the number of Chinese vessels in the South China Sea skyrocketed to 124.

The Philippine Navy said there are now 38 vessels near Panatag Shoal, 31 in Ayungin Shoal, 46 near Pagasa Island including a navy vessel, three in Parola, one navy vessel in Lawak, four in Panata and at least one naval ship in Patag.

## **21<sup>st</sup> Shangri-la world security dialogue in Singapore, May 31-June 2**

President Marcos, Jr. stuck to a government position that the 1982 UNCLOS and the binding 2016 Arbitral Award provide a solid foundation for the peaceful resolution and management of disputes. "Our policy in the South China Sea is built upon these two touchstones," he said. He also vowed to continue to work with ASEAN and China toward an effective and substantive code of conduct, one that is firmly moored in UNCLOS.

Although he acknowledged that China's determining influence over the security situation and the economic evolution of this region is a permanent fact, he underlined the importance of the US armed presence for "stability" and "regional peace". In the international forum, Marcos thus once more placed himself squarely on the apron of the US which projects itself as a force stabilizer by military means whereas countries in the region and the whole of Asia embrace economic growth and harmonious relationships advocated by China. He looks at the world virtually from the American lens.

Speaking for China at the dialogue, Chinese Defense Minister Dong Jun centered on China's Approach to Global Security on June 1. "China values peace and harmony. Peaceful development is an integral part of our Constitution. We never seek hegemony or military expansion," Dong said. "We countries in the Asia-Pacific have the ability to resolve tensions among ourselves; we despise coercion from outside hegemonic powers," he said. #