



EXECUTIVE POLICY BRIEF

Examining the US Grand Strategy in the Indo-Pacific and its Implications for the Philippines

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INTRODUCTION

In 2022, the Biden Administration released strategic documents such as the National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS), and the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), which presented the United States' vision for the advancement of its national interests. In these documents, the United States (US) underscored the assertiveness of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the Indo-Pacific region and the latter's intentions in reshaping the international system.¹ For the US, this translates to being more proactive in terms of enhancing their offshore balancing in the Indo-Pacific. This, then, necessitates a discussion of the US grand strategy in the Indo-Pacific region, including the supposed argument of a containment of China.

The notion of a US grand strategy hinges primarily on the vital interests of the US. One clear interest of the US would be the protection and continuation of the current world order supported by the international economy. Indeed, the US grand strategy also takes the economic aspect into account, but it is worth focusing on the geopolitical dimension as well. With the PRC in mind, the strategic competition between the two powers poses a threat to the current international system. Thus, it becomes more plausible in the US grand strategy that the US will defend its preeminence in the international system through various means, one of which would be the supposed geopolitical containment strategy of the US through re-affirming its allies and strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific.

Although there is no hard definition as to what the US Grand Strategy currently dictates, this paper seeks to examine US strategy documents (NSS, NDS, and IPS), coupled with recent activities of the US in the Indo-Pacific, to understand the geopolitical aspect of the US grand strategy in the region. While this paper

examines the three strategic documents, the paper will only utilize the relevant aspects that pertain to a US grand strategy, and not necessarily cover the entirety of the strategic documents. Afterwards, this paper aims to further understand the strategic opportunities of the US grand strategy for the Philippines.² This policy brief seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the US grand strategy? What are the challenges and constraints faced by the US in implementing its grand strategy?
2. How can the US maintain its preeminence in the Indo-Pacific region?
3. How can the Philippines utilize the strategic opportunities of the US grand strategy in the Indo-Pacific?

MAJOR CASE ISSUES

ELEMENTS OF A US GRAND STRATEGY AND ITS CHALLENGES

For a proper analysis of what constitutes a US grand strategy, it is best to first delineate significant elements that can be found in a grand strategy. A number of scholars have different interpretations to what a grand strategy is. For Brooks and Wohlforth, a grand strategy utilizes a nation's resources towards achieving a nation's objective for their national interest.³ Such resources are then used for the nation's projection of its instruments of power, namely the economic, diplomatic, and military. Dr. Tami Biddle, another scholar, has defined a grand strategy as the "highest hierarchy"⁴ of all strategies that utilize a combination of the instruments of power mentioned earlier. These are then employed with Washington's interests where the US makes the most of its resources to maintain the current international system it benefits from. As such, applying this context will allow us to

investigate how Washington will forward their interests in the Indo-Pacific through economic, diplomatic, and military means.

Moving forward, the elements of the US grand strategy will be discussed throughout this subsection. Under the economic sphere, the NSS of the US puts clear priority on protecting Washington's global trade, as it relies on the current established international economic system.⁵ The US further underscores this by reiterating how it must keep a "fair and open trade" to allow Washington along with its partners and allies to prosper.⁶ However, maintaining this system is met with its own set of challenges as well. With the frequency of trade between the US and the Indo-Pacific region, it becomes a strategic imperative for Washington to ensure that their trade must thrive and free from disruption. As a matter of fact, the total trade between the US and the region amounted to \$1.75 trillion in 2020⁷, which further highlights the economic significance of the Indo-Pacific region. As a result, the US deepens its relationship with the region through bilateral and multilateral engagements, especially with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) to ensure that robust trade perseveres. However, the challenges faced by the US in maintaining preeminence is exacerbated by the PRC. To wit, the NSS mentions the PRC's "economic power to coerce countries,"⁸ where Beijing weaponizes international trade, resulting in higher political and economic leverage to forward Chinese interests. This becomes more prominent when Beijing provides economic sanctions to private companies that do not adhere to China's interests causing economic damage amounting to billions of dollars.⁹ As a response, the US introduced the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) to encourage their allies and strategic partners in diversifying supply chains from China.¹⁰ The framework, however, does

not possess traditional elements of a trade agreement, but its existence signals Washington's interests in establishing reliable supply chains that are free from disruptions and safe from Chinese influence.

This leads to the US' strategic imperative in addressing the PRC threat in the Indo-Pacific. In this regard, the military and diplomatic sphere of the US grand strategy becomes highlighted further through Washington's response to the PRC in its strategy documents. With imminent threats to the economic sphere from Beijing, there are also different dimensions of threats to the broader international system that Washington helped advance. The NDS and IPS stated how the PRC's aggressiveness aims to "refashion the Indo-Pacific region"¹¹ to Chinese interests, which undermines international law and freedom of navigation.¹² The PRC, as highlighted by the NDS, intentionally weakens the "foundations of a stable and open international system,"¹³ notably the increased military activity in the South China Sea (SCS) and Taiwan Strait. For smaller powers in the Indo-Pacific and their lack of capabilities, this is a national security threat to the international systems they put high regard for, thus threatening their sovereignty.¹⁴

The US, in this sense, must diplomatically reaffirm their relations with strategic partners and allies in order to enhance their influence away from Chinese coercion which undermines Washington's allies and partners. Indeed, one of the many instruments of power used by the US in the Indo-Pacific is their network of alliances. Whether a major or small power, the various allies of Washington in the Indo-Pacific are committed to expanding its military expenditure in response to the PRC threat. With this, the strategic implications for US' interests is sufficient to urge Washington to increase their defense and security engagements with the Indo-

Pacific region guarding their future as a global power from the PRC.

MAINTAINING AMERICAN PREMINENCE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

The vast distance between the US and East Asia may prove to be challenging for Washington in responding to a crisis in any of the potential flashpoints in the region. To mitigate this, Washington seeks to strengthen its allies and use their capabilities to deter aggression.¹⁵ This concept has been discussed by Mearsheimer and Walt who mentioned offshore balancing, where powers are relied upon to check a rising hegemon, a “realist grand strategy.”¹⁶ However, it is also plausible that the powers will lack sufficient military capabilities to balance out the said rising hegemon. With this, the US must deploy enough military capabilities in the region to “shift the balance” to Washington’s favor paired with the US coordinating their efforts with their allies and partners.¹⁷

Indeed, the local powers in the region could not balance the assertive, aggressive, and coercive China, which particularly became evident in the SCS,¹⁸ East China Sea (ECS),¹⁹ and the Taiwan Strait.²⁰ For this reason, the US committed towards alleviating the PRC threat by supporting their allies and partners in addressing “acute forms of gray zone coercion from the PRC”²¹ through “integrated deterrence” to defend the interests of Washington.²² At this point in time, the PRC’s response towards US’ offshore balancing increasingly turned negative. President Xi Jinping himself said in a speech that US-led countries have implemented an “all-around containment, encirclement, and suppression of China.”²³ While this is clearly rhetoric, the PRC sends a message that it intends to anchor on its strategic goals.

Mindful of the PRC’s assertiveness, Washington aims to “ensure power projection in a contested environment” with its allies and partners.²⁴ Indeed, the growing defense capabilities of the PRC cannot be ignored as China’s strategy in the Indo-Pacific revolves around its naval power.²⁵ Thus, the US intends to invest more “combat credible military” to their allies in the Indo-Pacific for deterring aggression.²⁶ This has been more pronounced with Washington’s commitment to the Philippines’ new four EDCA [Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement] sites strategically positioned facing the northern and western theaters to reportedly prepare “regional readiness” for the two allies.²⁷ Further, much of Washington’s commitment has also became evident in the recent defense engagements between the US and their allies, notably the adoption of the Bilateral Defense Guidelines that institutionalized priorities and mechanisms of the two powers;²⁸ and the recent trilateral meeting between the US, Japan, and Philippines.²⁹

Based on the aforementioned, it is clear that Washington endeavors to capacitate its allies’ defenses in light of China’s aggressiveness in the Indo-Pacific region, and not because it seeks to contain China. Thus, the current posturing through offshore balancing of the US in the Indo-Pacific may present strategic defensive implications from Washington for the Philippines.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PHILIPPINES

As the oldest ally in Asia, the Philippines finds itself within Washington’s priorities to rebalance China.³⁰ When efforts of appeasement to the PRC led to more maritime expansion, it became clear for Manila that the PRC intensified its maritime exploits in the West Philippine Sea, even leading to several incidents that continue to signal Beijing’s increasing assertiveness.³¹ As a result, the Philippines turned to a

different approach in its foreign policy where Manila consequently reaffirmed its alliance with Washington, resulting in a more aggressive China.³² However, the gains on enhanced security and defense cooperation from the US to Manila also brings further possibilities of increased aggression from the PRC.

The recent aggressive actions of the PRC in the SCS may indicate that they would not stop from intensifying its incursions as seen from the military-grade laser incident³³ to the dangerous maneuvers by the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG).³⁴ Although the maritime operations of the PRC may not necessarily trigger the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) between the US and the Philippines as it falls just below the threshold of warfare, there remains a strong risk that China's actions may escalate beyond the gray zone. Thus, this drives the Philippines' increased defense engagements with Washington and their allies.

Not only the US strengthened its ties with the Philippines but strategic partnership with other US allies have also been elevated by Washington. Much recently, in a joint statement, the US President Joseph Biden Jr. and Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. announced initiatives between the two countries, notably on "establishing trilateral modes of cooperation among the Philippines, Japan and US" as well as a trilateral cooperation with Australia.³⁵ Based on the foregoing, the strategic opportunities of the Philippines in the Indo-Pacific lie in engaging with fellow US allies. Indeed, Washington's allies are engaging closer with Manila having the most notable engagement so far is the first trilateral coast guard exercise with the Philippines, Japan, and the US.³⁶ With the network of US allies emphasizing military modernization, the Philippines has the opportunity to transform their capabilities to what Washington needs from Manila:

integrated deterrence against the PRC threat.

Certainly, the US seeks to grow the Philippines' capabilities and even went as far as saying that Manila is "a priority of the Biden administration."³⁷ This was later ensured in the Joint Statement of the 2+2 US-Philippines Ministerial Dialogue where they committed towards adopting a "Security Sector Assistance Roadmap" to institutionalize defense modernization investments in the Philippines for the next ten (10) years.³⁸ With numerous strategic opportunities in the pipeline, the growing capabilities of the Philippines will help the Southeast Asian power to deter adversaries that threaten its sovereignty.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

With the US priming its allies for its apparent offshore balancing grand strategy, the Philippines should take advantage of its strategic leverage now into modernizing its capabilities for deterrence. To utilize this advantage, the Department of National Defense (DND) now has the strategic imperative to endeavor on enhancing ties with other like-minded powers in the Indo-Pacific. Thus, the following considerations may help secure further strategic advantages for the Philippines:

Strengthen bilateral ties with fellow US allies and strategic partners. The growing capabilities of the PRC along with its assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific has prompted the US to reinvigorate its allies in the region. Currently, there are no signs of the US slowing down on its efforts. As such, the Philippines should capitalize on the strategic environment that the US is shaping, an environment where Washington's Indo-Pacific allies like **Japan and Australia** are establishing more rapport with the Philippines. Based on earlier discussion, the Philippines has

prospects for greater modes of cooperation with like-minded countries.

Utilizing the current strategic environment will lean the Philippines closer with Japan and Australia, which will open more opportunities for Manila to grow its defense and economic power against the ever-assertive PRC threat. Manila is fortunate that their fellow US allies share a common threat perception towards China, which will not only enable the country to obtain strategic leverage for its deterrence, but may also widen the Philippines' prospects for trilateral – or even quadrilateral – partnerships with Washington serving as the link.

While Tokyo and Canberra explore a trilateral or quadrilateral partnership with the Philippines, it is still worth considering expanding each of their bilateral engagements with Manila's potential growth in the Indo-Pacific region.

Since 2016, Japan and the Philippines established a legal framework that enables the two countries to engage in transferring defense equipment and technology.³⁹ As the two powers enhance their ties, the closest to procuring more defense equipment and improving capacity building that Manila has with Japan is the Terms of Reference (TOR) on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF).⁴⁰ This can be further expanded to the military dimension through Japan's Official Security Assistance (OSA), mainly because HADR agreements can be a precursor to further defense agreements. Other than HADR capabilities, the Philippines can utilize OSA to procure surveillance capabilities to monitor its territorial waters and airspace.⁴¹ In this regard, the Philippines can build on this opportunity by conducting a Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting (2+2 Meeting) as committed in the previous Japan-Philippines Summit Meeting conducted last

February 2023.⁴² This will provide a clearer platform for the two countries in discussing further engagements and cooperation regarding Tokyo and Manila's common security issues in the broader Indo-Pacific region.

On Australia's end, Canberra's defense relations with the Philippines have already been thriving. As a matter of fact, the recent visit of Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong to the Philippines committed to transforming the bilateral relations of the two countries into a "Strategic Partnership."⁴³ Building on the two countries' agreement on "Comprehensive Partnership," Ambassador of Australia to the Philippines Hae Kyong Yu has detailed that there will not only be economic integration but also opportunities for Manila to procure assets from Canberra once the "Strategic Partnership" becomes established.⁴⁴ This signals an opening for the Philippines to streamline further defense capability procurements with Australia and can lead to deeper defense bilateral relations.

Continue the current trajectory of thriving engagements with the US. By sustaining ties with the US, the Philippines gains strategic leverage from Washington's strategic interests of capacitating its allies in the Indo-Pacific. In essence, building the defense capabilities of US allies and strategic partners will eventually counterbalance the PRC in the Indo-Pacific, and Manila faces opportunities to gain from it. Since the Philippines is geographically one of the core powers in the Indo-Pacific, the US is readily inclined to support Manila's defense modernization. As mentioned earlier, the US and the Philippines have committed to adopting a "Security Sector Assistance Roadmap," which details how the US will assist in modernizing the Philippines.

For the Philippines, the roadmap helps refocus its resources towards other

dimensions in modernizing its capabilities while strengthening its deterrence against the PRC. In the case of long-term strategic planning, Manila needs to utilize the opportunities provided to them by Washington. The US cannot stretch its resources thin with all the ongoing international issues happening simultaneously. For this reason, the Philippines should step up in transforming its defenses to become an effective Indo-Pacific power along with its fellow US allies forming an effective deterrence network against China. However, the PRC is firm on its stance in the SCS and will bring more challenges for the Philippines. This opens the possibility of exploring more defense engagements to fast-track the Philippines' modernization.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the US strategic documents and how it currently shapes the US grand strategy. Indeed, the strategic documents have delineated that Washington has to act on the increasingly aggressive PRC or else it would result in China's regional hegemony. It was also discussed that the intensified coercive tactics done by Beijing openly challenges the systems and foundations of the international system. With China undermining established systems, regional

actors in the Indo-Pacific will face more challenges. As a result, the US utilizes its strategic partners and allies in the Indo-Pacific in counterbalancing China. Of course, this led to the PRC amping up its aggressiveness in the SCS, but Washington responded by further engaging its allies to grow their defense capabilities. With this in mind, the US' offshore balancing continues to bring many opportunities for Manila.

This paper proceeded to also examine the implications of the current US grand strategy in the Indo-Pacific to the Philippines. Offshore balancing has indeed brought the network of US allies together towards sharing a common threat perception against China. Even the US has committed to assisting the Philippines in its modernization. With the cordial strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific, the Philippines could expand its reach and attempt to utilize more of what US allies offer, be it defense capabilities or economic opportunities. In any case, given the potential benefits, the strategic opportunities that Manila currently has are worth pursuing to essentially deter China's aggressive and coercive tactics in the Indo-Pacific.

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