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**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE U.S.-CHINA ECONOMIC AND SECURITY
REVIEW COMMISSION**

**Regional Views on China's Military Capabilities and Implications
for Regional Security Architecture**

VICE CHAIR PRICE, COMMISSIONER SCHRIVER, AND DISTINGUISHED MEMBERS OF THE COMMISSION: Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify and offer a Filipino perspective on China's military capabilities and its implications for Indo-Pacific peace and security.

This written testimony addresses the questions prepared by the Commission staff.

Q1. What military security challenges does China pose to the Philippines? How threatening are China's A2/AD capabilities for Philippines's security?

Military or traditional security can be defined as freedom from "the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence" of a state.¹

China presents an acute military security challenge for the Philippines in the South China Sea. China claims almost the whole South China Sea and all the reefs there, including the entire Pratas, Paracel, and Spratly Islands, as well as Macclesfield Bank and Scarborough Shoal. By contrast, the Philippines claims only (1) about a tenth of the South China Sea, a portion it calls the West Philippine Sea (based on the maximum area of exclusive economic zone and continental shelf allowed by the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, or UNCLOS); (2) a subset of the Spratly Islands it calls the Kalayaan Island Group; and (3) Scarborough Shoal. China's assertion of its territorial and maritime claims has infringed on the Philippines' own claims, even after an UNCLOS arbitral tribunal affirmed the Philippines' rights to some of those areas in 2016. China occupies some of the Kalayaan islands and patrols inside the Philippines' exclusive economic zone, undermining the Philippines' territorial and maritime integrity. China has also blocked the Philippines from exploring (much less developing) marine resources in that area, undermining the Philippines' political independence to exercise its exclusive jurisdiction there. China has threatened force but has not used it yet (in the conventional sense) against the Philippines.²

¹ U.N. Charter art. 2, para. 4.

² See, e.g., Antonio T. Carpio, "Five Flashpoints in the Philippines-China Relationship," United States Institute of Peace, 14 August 2023.

Yet focusing only on China's military capabilities would ignore the broadness of its challenge to the Indo-Pacific order. Indeed, China is already achieving its A2/AD goals without needing to use its formal A2/AD capabilities. Instead, China takes a broad view of war as involving not only military operations but also politico-diplomatic, economic, information, and cultural activities.³ The United States calls this broad view of war "irregular warfare."⁴ Irregular warfare is also known as hybrid or gray-zone warfare.⁵

China's assertive actions in the South China Sea have long been recognized by analysts as gray-zone operations. These are efforts to increase one's gains or decrease an adversary's gains in a conflict without using conventional (i.e., kinetic) military force and without reaching the threshold for traditional war. Contextualized in China's military doctrine, these gray-zone operations are not merely a form of coercion but a form of warfare.

The Philippines has faced and continues to face gray-zone warfare by China in the South China Sea. China's gray-zone operations include the following:

- Bullying Philippine ships, including by firing water cannons (sometimes causing injury to crew)⁶ and laser weapons,⁷ aiming naval gun rangefinders,⁸ sailing dangerously close,⁹ and ramming¹⁰ (in one case, sinking a boat and leaving the crew in the open sea)¹¹
- If bullying is successful, blocking Philippine ships on maritime law enforcement operations and humanitarian missions, including resupplies to Philippine-occupied reefs, especially Second Thomas Shoal¹²

³ Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: People's Liberation Army, Academy of Military Science Press, 2001). See also Edmund J. Burke et al., *People's Liberation Army Operational Concepts* (Washington, DC: RAND, 2020).

⁴ Irregular warfare is "a form of warfare where states and non-state actors campaign to assure or coerce states or other groups through indirect, non-attributable, or asymmetric activities, either as the primary approach or in concert with conventional warfare," according to the U.S. Department of Defense. Catherine A. Theohary, *Defense Primer: What Is Irregular Warfare?* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2024).

⁵ Theohary, *What Is Irregular Warfare?*; Alexander Noyes and Daniel Egel, "Winning the Irregular World War," *Newsweek*, 2 November 2023.

⁶ For the latest incident, see Jim Gomez, "Philippine and Chinese Vessels Collide in Disputed South China Sea and 4 Filipino Crew Are Injured," *AP News*, 6 March 2024.

⁷ For the latest incident, see Raymond Carl Dela Cruz, "China Coast Guard Points Laser Light at PCG Ship off Ayungin," Philippine News Agency, 13 February 2023.

⁸ Frances Mangosing, "Wescom Says Chinese Warship Readied Guns vs PH Navy Ship in PH Territory," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 23 April 2020.

⁹ For the latest incident, see Gomez, "Philippine and Chinese Vessels." See also South China Sea Arbitration (Phil. v. China), PCA Case No. 2013-19, Award paras. 1044-109 (Arb. Trib. Const. under Annex VII to the 1982 U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, 12 July 2016).

¹⁰ For the latest incidents, see Gomez, "Philippine and Chinese Vessels"; Jason Gutierrez, "Philippines, China Accuse Each Other of Ship Ramming," *Radio Free Asia*, 10 December 2023.

¹¹ Jason Gutierrez, "Philippines Accuses Chinese Vessel of Sinking Fishing Boat in Disputed Waters," *New York Times*, 12 June 2019. The crew was rescued by Vietnamese fishers.

¹² E.g., Memorial of the Philippines, *South China Sea Arbitration*, para. 3.62 (30 Mar. 2014).

- Swarming (i.e., staking out in large numbers, often hundreds) around Philippine-claimed reefs in the Spratly Islands¹³
- Engaging in illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, including in poaching corals, giant clams, sea turtles, sharks, and other endangered species, and, in the process, destroying coral reefs¹⁴ (while also refusing to arrest Chinese nationals engaged in illegal fishing)¹⁵
- Building artificial islands on Chinese-occupied reefs in the Spratly Islands and, in the process, irreparably destroying the marine environment in those reefs, including Mischief Reef¹⁶
- Militarizing those artificial islands¹⁷
- Blocking and deterring Filipinos from fishing in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone as well as in Scarborough Shoal, including through an annual fishing ban¹⁸
- Blocking the Philippines from exploring oil and gas in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone¹⁹ and deterring foreign firms from investing in offshore energy²⁰
- Airing radio challenges to Philippine government aircraft approaching the Spratly Islands²¹
- Undermining the final and binding ruling of an UNCLOS arbitral tribunal in the *South China Sea Arbitration (Philippines v. China)*, such as by
 - stubbornly refusing to acknowledge, much less abide by, the ruling
 - conducting the gray-zone operations mentioned in this list in areas that the tribunal has already declared to be the Philippines', such as a 200-nautical mile exclusive economic zone west of the Philippines excluding certain reefs in the Spratly Islands (and narrow belts of water around them) but including such reefs as Second Thomas Shoal and Mischief Reef
 - supporting legal scholarship aiming to refute the ruling²²
 - promoting untested legal theories that contradict the tribunal's reasonings²³
 - discrediting the arbitration process and the tribunal members²⁴

¹³ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "Wherever They May Roam: China's Militia in 2023," 28 February 2024.

¹⁴ *South China Sea Arbitration*, Award, paras. 950-93.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, paras. 717-57.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, paras. 976-91.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, *2023 Report on the Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China (CMPR)* (Arlington, VA), 124-26;.

¹⁸ *South China Sea Arbitration*, Award, paras. 758-814. Chinese vessels' presence in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone "has had a substantial chilling effect on the activities of Philippine fishermen." *South China Sea Arbitration*, Memorial, para. 6.29.

¹⁹ *South China Sea Arbitration*, Award, paras. 702-8.

²⁰ Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), ch. 5.

²¹ For the latest incident, see Sundry Mae Locus, "Philippines, China Exchange Radio Challenges in WPS," *GMA News*, 16 February 2024.

²² Chinese Society of International Law, "The South China Sea Arbitration Awards: A Critical Study," *Chinese Journal of International Law* 17, no. 2 (2018).

²³ U.S. Department of State, *Limits in the Seas No. 150: People's Republic of China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea* (Washington, DC, 2022).

²⁴ Pratik Jakhar, "Whatever Happened to the South China Sea Ruling?," *The Interpreter*, 12 July 2021.

- pressuring foreign governments and international organizations from mentioning or supporting the ruling²⁵
- influencing private companies to adopt China’s illegal “nine-dash line” claim, especially in media productions such as Dreamwork’s *Abominable*, Netflix Australia’s *Pine Gap*, Sony Picture’s *Uncharted*, and most recently, Warner Bros.’ *Barbie*²⁶
- Imposing economic sanctions (such as nontariff barriers and tourism restrictions) against the Philippines²⁷
- Investing in strategic industries (such as in national telecommunications and the national power grid)²⁸ and attempting to invest in strategic locations (such as in or near military bases)²⁹ in the Philippines
- Sowing and supporting disinformation on the Philippines’ actions and claims in the South China Sea, including by supporting Filipino voices that espouse pro-China views³⁰
- Potentially carrying out cyberattacks on Philippine government emails and websites³¹
- Potentially failing to meet responsible standards for space rocket debris falling in Philippine waters³²

Q2. How does the militarization of the South China Sea strengthen China’s ability to restrict the operations of foreign military forces?

China’s militarization of the South China Sea intensified in late 2013, when China began to reclaim land on its occupied reefs in the Spratly Islands in response to the Philippines’ filing for arbitration early that year.

China’s reclamation was meant to create a *fait accompli*. China was wary that the tribunal would award jurisdiction of its occupied reefs to the Philippines. The tribunal eventually did rule for the Philippines for Mischief Reef and, with some caveats, Subi Reef. With the *fait accompli* on those very reefs, however, China has made it harder for the Philippines to implement the tribunal’s ruling and regain them, subverting the rule of international law.

²⁵ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, “Arbitration Support Tracker,” 18 July 2023; Reuters, “China Blasts US for Forcing It to Accept South China Sea Ruling,” 12 July 2023.

²⁶ Tim Brinkhof, “The Barbie Movie, the Nine-Dash Line, and China’s Influence on Hollywood,” *Vox*, 13 July 2023.

²⁷ Erick Nielson C. Javier, “Economic Coercion: Implication to the Philippines and Possible Counters,” National Defense College of the Philippines, n.d.

²⁸ Ralf Rivas, “Breaking Up the Philippines’ Telco Duopoly,” *Rappler*, 3 June 2023; “Explainer: How China Got Into the Philippines’ Power Grid,” *Rappler*, 29 May 2023.

²⁹ E.g., Miguel R. Camus, “Cavite Drops China-Backed Sangley Airport Deal,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 28 January 2021; Nyshka Chandran, “Philippines’ Subic Bay: Fears Chinese May Take Over Old US Naval Base,” *CNBC*, 25 January 2019.

³⁰ Frances Mangosing, “China Using ‘Operators’ to Divide PH on WPS—NSC,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 18 August 2023

³¹ For the latest incident, see Reuters, “Philippines Wards Off Cyber Attacks from China-Based Hackers,” 6 February 2024.

³² See, e.g., Jim Gomez, “Chinese Coast Guard Seizes Rocket Debris from Filipino Navy,” *AP News*, 21 November 2022.

Reclamation also allowed China to transform those reefs effectively into naval and air bases. Mischief and Subi Reefs are China's two biggest artificial islands in the South China Sea. On them, China has built runways long enough for combat aircraft, hangars, docks deep enough for large warships, and anti-ship and anti-aircraft missile systems. These de facto bases could give China early advantage against the Philippines in the event of war.

For context, Mischief and Subi Reefs are very near the Philippines. Mischief Reef is around 140 miles to Palawan, the Philippines' fifth largest island. This is about the distance between Washington, DC, and Philadelphia, PA, or the width of the Taiwan Strait from Xiamen, China, to Taichung, Taiwan. Moreover, Mischief Reef is only around 24 miles to Second Thomas Shoal, the site of recent Philippines-China confrontations, where the Philippines has grounded an old, rusting decommissioned warship to serve as an outpost. The shoal is closer to China-controlled Mischief Reef than it is to any other Philippine outpost or to Palawan. Similarly, Subi Reef is only around 16 miles to Thitu Reef, the Philippines' largest outpost in the South China Sea and the only one with a civilian population.

But more important than their potential in the event of war, these de facto bases on Mischief Reef, Subi Reef, and others are already being used to support gray-zone warfare. China Coast Guard and Chinese maritime militia vessels patrolling the South China Sea are often deployed from or refuel on these bases, allowing China to maintain its presence in disputed waters more regularly and for longer periods.

Q3. Describe the views of China's military strategy within the Philippines defense community. How have these views changed over time?

China as an external threat began to pervade Philippine strategic thinking in early 1995, when the Philippines discovered that China had seized Mischief Reef. Mischief Reef was too close for comfort. The Philippines, an archipelago sandwiched between a sea and an ocean, was unused to a neighbor to its west. And China was no ordinary neighbor. Its economy had been expanding year after year at an astonishing rate, and China had begun using that new money to buy itself a navy and air force worthy of a great power.

The incident is a watershed in Philippine strategic policy. First, Philippine leaders began to take external defense seriously for the first time. Previously, national security referred to managing internal threats, namely, the communist insurgency, separatism in Mindanao, and military rebellions. Philippine officials saw external threats as a problem for the United States as the Philippines' ally. This was especially true when the United States still maintained bases in the country. When the Philippine Senate rejected renewing the lease for U.S. bases in 1991, external defense played little to no role in the calculation. Instead, discussions centered on anti-U.S. nationalism. There were also no serious talks on how the Philippines would fill the security void in to be created by the removal of U.S. bases. President Corazon Aquino's administration did consider in 1989 a long-term program to modernize the Philippine military, but internal security concerns as well as economic problems continued to plague the country, forcing the government to leave the plan on the

back burner. Only after the Mischief Reef incident did President Aquino's successor, Fidel Ramos, reconsider the military modernization plan, and Congress moved quickly to pass it within a month.

Second, due to the removal of U.S. bases, it became important for Philippine leaders to obtain a clear security guarantee from the Americans. They wanted an unequivocal statement that the United States will render military assistance to the Philippines in case of an armed attack, including in the South China Sea, pursuant to its commitment under the mutual defense treaty. The United States, however, refrained from meddling in the disputes and would not throw unequivocal support to the Philippines for the next three decades until under President Donald Trump.

Finally, the mood had changed among Filipinos. The Mischief Reef incident marks the beginning of the transformation of Filipino nationalism from being anti-U.S. to, increasingly thereafter, anti-China. This was most apparent in a major policy U-turn in 1998 when the Philippines agreed to allow U.S. troops, ships, and aircraft to enter the country again under a visiting forces deal. The shift in national mood cannot be overstated. President Ramos's successor, Joseph Estrada, and the new defense secretary, Orlando Mercado, were former senators who had voted for the removal of U.S. bases in 1991. By 1998, the Estrada administration was urging the Senate to concur in the visiting forces deal, and 18 senators—well-above the two-thirds threshold—gave their blessing, paving the way for the Philippines' return to the United States' military orbit.

Unfortunately, the 1995 Philippine military modernization program ended in 2010 without reaching its goal. From the late 1990s to the early to mid 2000s, the government was distracted by internal security threats. Presidents Ramos and Estrada, confronted a growing communist movement and, with it, increased insurgent guerilla attacks. In addition, President Estrada faced a swelling militant Islamist separatist group in Mindanao that had begun occupying a few towns in the region. President Estrada's successor, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, encountered resurgent militant Islamist organizations emboldened by the September 11 attacks. Military modernization was also beset by funding problems, worsened by the financial crises of 1997 and 2007–2008.³³

Meanwhile, Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea toned down after the Mischief Reef incident. To be sure, there were still other incidents with China after 1995, but tensions substantially increased again only after 2007, when China had significantly expanded its maritime surveillance fleet and increased its patrols in the South China Sea.³⁴ Indeed, between 1995 and 2007, China reassured the region that it was adhering to international norms, especially when it agreed to a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea with ASEAN in 2002 and acceded to the 1976 Treaty on Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in 2003. Thus, the Philippines had little incentive to build up external security capabilities at that time.

³³ Renato Cruz De Castro, "Philippine Defense Policy in the 21st Century: Autonomous Defense or Back to the Alliance," *Pacific Affairs* 78, no. 3 (2005).

³⁴ Andrew Chubb, "PRC Assertiveness in the South China Sea: Measuring Continuity and Change, 1970–2015," *International Security* 45, no. 3 (2021).

President Aquino III's government revived and revised the modernization plan in late 2012, a few months after China seized Scarborough Shoal. The revised program divided appropriations into three five-year "horizons" between 2013 and 2028. Under Horizon 1 (2013 to 2017), the Aquino III administration divided funds almost evenly among the army, navy, air force, and joint staff. Assets acquired included helicopters and trainer, transporter, and fighter planes. Under Horizon 2 (2018 to 2023), President Rodrigo Duterte's administration increased funds for the air force sixfold and the navy nearly threefold. Assets acquired included amphibious armored vehicles, antisubmarine helicopters, warships, and cruise missiles.³⁵ In the South China Sea, President Duterte also allowed the defense and transportation departments to build a beaching ramp and a sheltered port and repair the runway on Thitu Island. For Horizon 3 (2023 to 2028), President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s administration is eyeing more fighter planes, warships, missiles, and submarines.

Under President Arroyo and early under President Duterte, there seemed to be hope that China was becoming a legitimate alternative partner for cooperation, especially on economic development. China promised substantial increases to trade and investment. But in President Arroyo's case, China-funded projects got embroiled in corruption scandals. In President Duterte's case, improved economic cooperation did not spill over into improvements on the situation in the South China Sea. China still waged gray-zone operations at sea against the Philippines, especially during the pandemic, when China seized the opportunity to renew its assertiveness while the rest of world wrestled with COVID-19. Indeed, this led the Duterte administration to eventually harden its initial soft stance on China after 2020.

At present, it seems clear to many Filipino analysts that China is intent on either securing or "breaking" the so-called Pacific island chains, of which the Philippines is part. This means that Chinese gray-zone operations are likely to continue in the South China Sea. Thus, there is a need for the Philippines to push back if it is to enjoy its court-affirmed rights in the South China Sea.

Q4. Explain the significance of the U.S.-Philippines alliance for the Philippines' security objectives vis-à-vis China in the Indo-Pacific region. What military benefits does the alliance provide to the Philippines and to the United States?

For the Philippines, the main benefits of the alliance with the United States include the following:

- Assistance in military capacity-building and interoperability
- Assistance in military operations, especially through intelligence-sharing, in humanitarian missions, and recently, in joint maritime and air patrols
- Assistance in military modernization, especially through arms donations and sales

³⁵ Julio S. Amador, Deryk Matthew Baladjay, and Sheena Valenzuela, "Modernizing or Equalizing? Defence Budget and Military Modernization in the Philippines, 2010-2020," *Defence Studies* 22, no. 3 (2022).

- Assistance in maritime domain awareness, including providing equipment and training
- Deterrence against China through the above assistance
- Linkage to other like-minded countries within the U.S.'s diplomatic orbit (e.g., connecting the Philippines with other U.S. allies and partners)
- Socio-economic cooperation, including for vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic

For the United States, the main benefits of the alliance with the Philippines include the following:

- Strategic location for forward deployment of forces
- Strategic location for military logistics (e.g., resupplies in Philippine bases and access to Philippine waters and airspace) in expeditionary missions in the Indo-Pacific if allowed by the Philippine government or if mutual defense obligations are triggered
- Assistance in U.S.-led military operations if allowed by the Philippine government or if mutual defense obligations are triggered (as the Philippines did during the Korean and Vietnam Wars and the Global War on Terrorism)
- Assistance in U.S. global counterterrorism campaigns
- Strengthening the United States' hub-and-spokes alliance system into a networked security system by participating in spoke-to-spoke cooperation
- Diplomatic support for U.S. initiatives, including toward a free and open Indo-Pacific and arrangements such as the Quad and AUKUS
- Holding the line in defending a rules-based order in the South China Sea by asserting the rights of coastal states and the freedom of navigation for all states under international law
- Holding the line for promoting good order at sea by preventing, to the best of the Philippines' ability, piracy, armed robbery at sea, maritime terrorism, trafficking at sea, illegal fishing, marine pollution, and maritime accidents in Philippine waters—and in so doing, helping secure international trade flows and undersea communications infrastructure, including those going to and from the United States

Filipino analysts are aware of the concern among some Americans that the Philippines can seem to be an unreliable partner, such as when President Duterte nearly sank the alliance after a high point under President Aquino III. On the one hand, this is inevitable in highly presidentialized systems that give more autonomy to the chief executive on foreign and security policy than on domestic policy. Thus, a similar concern could be said about the United States, as when President Trump reversed several of his predecessor's foreign policies. On the other hand, there are ways to keep the Philippines' alignment with the United States. The most important is probably to make the United States an indispensable partner in economic development. President Arroyo's and President Duterte's forays into China were motivated largely by the Chinese government's promises of substantial developmental assistance and increased trade, investment, and people-to-people exchanges to the Philippines. The United States must provide a viable alternative to these. This is a lesson from Japan's playbook. Indeed, no Philippine president has ever realigned the

country away from Japan. Philippines-Japan relations endured even as Philippines-U.S. ties fluctuated. Fortunately, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and recent promises of U.S. investments to the Philippines worth over billions are steps in the right direction. The challenge for the United States now is to ensure that it follows through on these commitments.

Q5. What are the most important military capabilities that the Philippines currently has or is developing that could be used to defeat or complicate China's A2/AD?

Please see my response to Q3.

Q6. How do multilateral initiatives, such as the U.S.-Philippines-Japan trilateral cooperation, support Philippine security objectives in the Indo-Pacific?

U.S.-Philippines-Japan trilateral cooperation complements the Philippines' alliance with the United States and strategic partnership with Japan. While the United States is the Philippines' most valuable security partner, Japan is its most valuable economic development partner. The Philippines has long pushed to extend alliance cooperation with the United States into the economic domain. Similarly, the Philippines has also supported expanding ties with Japan to include security cooperation as well. Thus, Japan became the Philippines' first strategic partner in 2011—the first time that the Philippines sought substantial security cooperation with a country other than the United States.

The 2014 Philippines-U.S. Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement must be understood against this backdrop of Philippine partnership diplomacy with like-minded countries under President Aquino III. Despite EDCA, the Scarborough Shoal incident showed the United States' unbending ambivalence at that time toward its commitment to defend the Philippines, its oldest military ally in Asia, against China. Due to this uncertainty, the Philippines looked for other security partners besides the United States. In 2015, the Philippines reaffirmed its strategic partnership with Japan, formed a new strategic partnership with Vietnam, and entered a comprehensive partnership with Australia.

From 2016 to 2022, however, President Duterte changed the trajectory of Philippine partnership diplomacy. He set aside nurturing the Philippines' network of security cooperation pacts with the United States, Japan, Vietnam, and Australia and instead sought to expand the network to include so-called non-traditional partners, such as China, Russia, and India.

President Marcos Jr. turned the country's focus back on enhancing security cooperation within the network originally built by President Aquino III. In 2023, the Philippines gave the United States access to more military bases under EDCA. The Philippines also upgraded its relations with Australia to a strategic partnership. Moreover, the Philippines reset its strategic partnership with Vietnam, a fellow claimant in the South China Sea. It resumed high-level bilateral meetings after a four-year pause due to the pandemic. It also reassured Vietnam that the Philippines could be relied on to uphold international law in the South China Sea—something that was missing under President Duterte. Meanwhile, the

Philippines continued to strengthen its strategic partnership with Japan. It began to negotiate a reciprocal access agreement, which would make it easier for the Japanese self-defense forces to enter the Philippines and the Philippine military to enter Japan.

President Marcos Jr. is also seeking to expand the network to include more like-minded countries. South Korea is likely next in this expansion. The Philippines and South Korea have been preparing to upgrade their relations to a strategic partnership since 2022. Philippines-South Korea relations will approach its 75th anniversary this March, and the Philippines hopes to enter a strategic partnership with South Korea during this anniversary year. If successful, this would make South Korea the Philippines' fourth bilateral strategic partner, after Japan, Vietnam, and Australia.

Q7. How does China perceive Philippines security cooperation with the United States and other partners in the Indo-Pacific?

When the Philippines' interests align with the United States', China refuses to acknowledge the Philippines' agency. China paints the Philippines simply as a "pawn" of the United States and Filipino officials as "puppets" of the Americans. This framing is useful for China. If the South China Sea conflict is framed as between great powers, China would appear to be standing up to the United States as a hegemonic power. If, instead, the conflict is framed as between a great power and a small state, China would appear to be the bully.

China, too, paints as provocation any action in the South China Sea short of acquiescing to its demands. There is no real room for maneuver by the Philippines to defend its maritime rights without "provoking" China other than inaction or appeasement. In any case, none of the Philippines' actions so far have matched China's seizure of Scarborough Shoal, construction of militarized artificial islands, undermining of the rule of international law, and other gray-zone activities. The Philippines has too few and too small ships at the moment to convincingly bully the much larger fleets and vessels of the People's Liberation Army–Navy and even the China Coast Guard. The Philippines also has too underdeveloped installations in the South China Sea to support advanced military operations. The outpost on Second Thomas—the epicenter of recent tensions—is the poorest in condition, so besieged by leaks and rust and so exposed to the elements that no soldier would survive there for long without regular resupplies.

Q8. How can the United States and the Philippines strengthen peace and stability and improve their ability to maintain freedom of operations in the Indo-Pacific?

Please see my response to Q9.

Q9. What recommendations for legislative action would you make?

- Approve continued funding for Philippine military modernization and training.
- Approve continued funding for Philippine coast guard modernization and enhancing Philippine maritime domain awareness.

- Urge the executive branch to forward-deploy more forces, including the U.S. Coast Guard, and increase freedom of navigation operations and joint patrols with other countries in the South China Sea.
- Support continued economic sanctions against Chinese entities involved in gray-zone operations, illegal fishing, and marine environmental destruction in the South China Sea.
- Support cooperation on cyber security and combatting disinformation.
- Support cooperation on marine scientific research, marine environmental protection, and fisheries management.
- Support the executive branch's efforts to strengthen economic cooperation and follow through on existing trade and investment commitments.
- Encourage more aid and investment in the Philippines, especially in maritime infrastructure and the blue economy (e.g., fisheries and offshore energy).
- Increase interparliamentary linkages, especially between the foreign affairs and defense committees of each other's Senate and House of Representatives.
- Pass a resolution adopting the executive branch's interpretation that the Mutual Defense Treaty with the Philippines applies to an armed attack in the South China Sea.³⁶
- Consent to the ratification of 1982 UNCLOS.

³⁶ E.g., H. Res. 843, 118th Cong.