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MAKING A FILIPINO THEORY OF VICTORY WORK: RETOOLING OUR DEFENSE AND SECURITY POSTURE

RADM ROMMEL JUDE G. ONG, AFP (RET.), MDM

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 **+ ADRI PUBLICATIONS**
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ABSTRACT

The “Making a Filipino Theory of Victory Work: Retooling Our Defense and Security Posture” provides a strategic framework to counter China's multi-domain challenges. It addresses gaps in previous policy discussions by considering the impact of Donald Trump's presidency on the international order. It takes cognizance of China's strategy in the Southeast Asia, which serves as the driver of its attempts to assert dominance over the country's maritime territories and exert influence over domestic politics. The success of a “Filipino Theory of Victory” requires the synergy between the “People” and the “State”. The people should be an enlightened public that is willing to resist external threats, while the state should be robust enough to uphold the Philippines' national interests and security. It is operationalized through a dual-track strategy. First is a “denial strategy” aimed at preventing China from achieving political and military dominance complemented by a strong alliance and partnerships, avoiding isolation, and resisting economic coercion. Second is a “cost-imposition strategy” that involves calibrated responses, including diplomatic, economic, and military measures, to deter aggression without direct confrontation. It also includes strategic approaches, such as the enactment of political and legal measures to uphold an international rules-based order, enforce maritime laws, combat foreign interference, and review laws protecting national security. It calls for diplomatic engagements including alliances and partnerships outside traditional security frameworks. On information warfare, the country needs to counter Chinese propaganda, increase national awareness, and enhance education against disinformation. Lastly, the need for economic resilience by securing vital industries, restoring control over national resources, and ensuring that Filipino fisherfolk can operate in the West Philippine Sea without Chinese harassment. The paper is emphatic on military reforms. It opines that the Armed Forces must transition to a multi-domain defense approach, enhancing capabilities across land, sea, air, cyber, space, and electronic domains. It should be buttressed by a local defense industry development. Lastly, it underscores the need for decisive leadership, strategic foresight, and broad societal participation to ensure Philippine sovereignty and national security.

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The Ateneo Policy Center (APC) recently released a policy paper that explored the concept of a “Filipino Theory of Victory,”¹ which described how the Philippines can possibly respond against multi-domain challenges launched by China. It considered the current security environment, the country’s strategic interests, policies, and strategies to match it, and prescribed potential diplomatic, informational, military, and economic (DIME) approaches. It was crafted in response to hard power and sharp power challenges posed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) against the country. However, it did not forecast the adverse impact of Trump’s presidency on the international order, and how his transactional approach to diplomacy might sacrifice the interests of small and middle powers in favor of those of major powers. This paper purports to address this gap.

Background

The aftermath of President Donald Trump’s return to power has rocked Europe, the Middle East, and continental America, following his recent policy pronouncements involving Ukraine, Greenland, Gaza, and the Panama Canal. Trump’s wild domestic and foreign policy posture has a method to its madness. What can be discerned is a national security agenda focused on: (1) restoring

control over the US northern and southern border and deal with the problem of illegal migration and fentanyl traffic from China, (2) restoring influence and presence over its periphery where China has either established significant presence, such as the Panama Canal, or is threatening to do so, such as in Greenland, and (3) finding an exit strategy in the current conflict in Ukraine and Gaza. More recently, Trump has imposed a flurry of tariffs against friend and foe alike, apparently designed to isolate China economically and restore America's industrial prowess lost in the aftermath of globalization.

On the Indo-Pacific, we have yet to hear any word from Trump about his future intentions, aside from his interest in rapprochement with Xi Jinping and his obsession with setting up a chip industry in Arizona. There is no comfort in the intimations coming from his Defense and State officials that the US will be refocusing on the Indo-Pacific as a region of interest, and on China as a peer threat. As for the Philippines, we know that Trump considers the country an essential piece of military real estate. In a recent statement by the Philippine Ambassador to the US, he has cast misgivings about America's ironclad commitment, cognizant that the US has its interests to deal with, and there will be times when it may diverge from the country's own.

However, US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's visit to Manila last March 28, 2025 was a shot in the arm for the alliance. He touched on a broader strategy of "peace through strength," emphasizing the need to deter China in the region, and that allies collaborate to ensure freedom of navigation and manage the conflict in the South China Sea. Hegseth also reiterated the US' "ironclad" commitment to its alliance with the Philippines, under the ambit of the Mutual Defense Treaty. His announced deployment of advanced naval systems as part of a bilateral exercise in the country caught attention.

While the government awaits how Trump's Indo-Pacific agenda will unfold, it must still contend with a China that desires to carve out its "maritime lebensraum" in the Indo-Pacific. As part of this grand ambition, it has encroached on our exclusive economic zone (EEZ) using its Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) and militia vessels, harassing our fisherfolk, and various united front work activities to sow civil discord and interfere in domestic politics. However, these actions are part of an effort to assert sea control over the South China Sea and the East China Sea, and to compel the surrounding coastal states to accept China as the dominant regional naval power. More so, its malign influence efforts are intended to co-

opt our political leaders, shape policies within the government, and influence public opinion. Within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), our current posture against China's behavior at sea has isolated the country from the other Member States. Unfortunately, it demonstrated the efficacy of Beijing's geo-economic strategy and its use of sharp power to influence ASEAN capitals and their elites.

Our worst-case scenario is a possible *modus vivendi* between Trump and Xi Jinping, which might sacrifice the Philippines' interests and sideline the alliance. Even in the best of times, consistency in alliance relations is never guaranteed, given the vagaries of domestic politics on both sides of the Pacific. As a responsible middle power, the Philippines should chart its own national security and foreign policy agenda based on the country's enduring interests. While the Philippines-US alliance has been the linchpin of our external defense posture, the aftermath of the Munich Security Conference (MSC) under Trump could serve as a cautionary tale against relying too much on American security guarantees.

Filipino Theory of Victory

Role of the People and State

A Theory of Victory is a compelling concept that requires synergy between the People and the State. The People consists of an enlightened and responsible citizenry with a will to fight and resist challenges against its life, way of life, and national patrimony. The State pursues the country's national interest, adhering to a rules-based international order, and promoting the government's national security agenda.

The two forays of the *Atin Ito* Coalition in the West Philippine Sea (WPS) have best captured the concept of a "People's Will." Defying Chinese maritime might, this civil society movement led a resupply sortie to the Second Thomas Shoal on December 23, 2023, and another mission towards Scarborough Shoal on May 15, 2024. These undertakings were best described as:

"[...a] people's movement, whose journey to the sea was an effort to reach out to the 'hearts and minds' of the Filipino people, hoping to inspire in them a renewed sense of citizenship, and a rediscovery of values shared by

*an imperfect, yet resilient democracy. It is also a spirited effort to ‘civilianize’ our exclusive economic zone and counter China’s “militarization” of our waters and the isles and features within it. By “civilianizing” our seas, we reclaim agency, restore order, and allow Filipinos to enjoy the benefits of their marine resources following international law.”*²

Both saw the emergence of the type of leaders and citizens needed to stand against a regional power such as China: men and women leaders who are courageous, empathetic, and community-oriented. The bravery of the boat captains as they sortied towards Scarborough Shoal last May 15, 2024, was a celebration of the spirit of the Filipino people, demonstrating resilience and a deep understanding of their community's needs, and a selfless commitment to the greater good.³

On the other hand, Iceland’s victory in the “Cod Wars” best demonstrates the efficacy of the “State’s Will” when ranged against a superior adversary. This conflict against the United Kingdom (UK) was over a common maritime space and resources spanning from the 1950s to the 1970s, and Iceland prevailed. Its success was due to a combination of various factors, such as: (1) leveraging its economic dependence on the fishing industry as the citizen’s rallying point, (2) harnessing the support of key international partners to offset the asymmetry of power enjoyed by the UK, and (3) using unorthodox naval tactics by the Icelandic Coast Guard such as cutting the nets of British fishing boats and ramming them to enforce their territorial claims.

A Dual Track Strategy

At a minimum, a Filipino Theory of Victory should ensure that China does not achieve the conditions from which it can claim victory over the Philippines. It should prevent China from (1) isolating the country from our US ally, and other strategic partners with which we have existing defense cooperation arrangement and economic linkages, (2) creating political and social discord in our society, (3) sowing distrust among government agencies and officials, or (4) compelling the government to give up our national interests for fear of escalation at sea.

Proactively, our actions should be guided by the following objectives: (1) employ calibrated responses to avoid a direct conflict with China, (2) restore the

Filipinos' access to and benefits from their country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)/Exclusive Continental Shelf (ECS), despite the overwhelming Chinese presence, (3) employ the country's 'convening power' to form an alternative collective security architecture in the region to balance China and mitigate the loss of US assistance, (4) resist Chinese malign influence and interference activities designed to divide the country, co-opt its political leaders, and subvert state institutions, (5) educate the Filipino voters to be discriminating in their choices of political leaders elected to run the government, (6) ensure that businesses and industries are resilient against Chinese economic coercion; and, (7) promote the family as the foundation of a Filipino nation.

The foundation of a Filipino Theory of Victory is the synergy between an enlightened People and a responsible State, working together to forge a "National Will." However, it is the political leadership that drives a pathway to victory. In the case of the Philippines, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. is the "heart and soul" of strategy execution. Ideally, he oversees the diverse interest groups within his Cabinet, generates consensus among them, and forges them into one functioning team. Such a team should lead the "whole-of-government" effort and communicate the President's policy to the rest of the bureaucracy. But more importantly, it should be able to reach out to the public, keep them informed, and inspire and mobilize them in times of adversity. But of course, this is easier said than done. Given the prevailing politics within the Cabinet, particularly in the national security community, the most workable outcome is a "balance of political power" among the senior-level officials and the competing agencies. This allows these agencies to perform their respective mandates while managing redundancies. Critical collaboration is still achievable, albeit under challenging circumstances.

The policy paper used a RAND study to consider five potential theories of victory vis-à-vis China. The pathways to achieving a strategic advantage are dominance, denial, devaluing, brinksmanship, and military cost-imposition.⁴ Among the five variants, it was determined that denial and cost-imposition strategies were the most appropriate approaches available to the Philippines in dealing with China's hard power and sharp power challenges.

A Filipino Theory of Victory can be framed as a dual-tracked strategy—a denial strategy dealing with the present situation and a cost-imposition strategy in case of imminent conflict. A denial strategy should convince China that it

cannot attain its politico-military objectives. This undertaking will require both a whole-of-nation commitment involving broad sectors of society and a whole-of-government approach in coming up with diplomatic, information, military, and economic interventions. A cost-imposition strategy involves calibrated actions that avoid retaliation, usually employing a blockade or control of chokepoints. However, it needs the correct identification of the geographic, political, or military pressure points, and the support of like-minded partners if it is operationalized at the regional level. Unlike the original Ateneo policy paper, the two strategies have common diplomatic, information, economic, political, and legal approaches. However, for this paper, these approaches, except for the military component, have been consolidated and made applicable for both strategies.

Political, Legal, Diplomatic, Information, and Economic Approaches

Political and Legal Dimension

The existing international and domestic legal measures are material to a denial and a cost-imposition strategy. To wit:

The July 12, 2016 Arbitral Ruling pertains to the dispute between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea. Here, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague favored the Philippines and rejected China's expansive claims based on its so-called 'nine-dash line.' The salient points of the award include: China's claims to historic rights over resources within the nine-dash line have no legal basis under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS); reefs and rocks do not generate EEZs; and, the Philippines' sovereign rights was violated by China's activities land reclamation and interference with Philippine fishing and oil exploration. This ruling has garnered the international community's support against Chinese aggression at sea. More so, it provided the legal premise for joint naval patrols or 'maritime cooperative arrangements' sorties with the US Navy and the navies of other strategic partners.

The Philippine Maritime Zones Act, or Republic Act No. 12064, complied with the UNCLOS. It indicated the maritime zones under the jurisdiction of the

Philippines, which include the internal waters, archipelagic waters, territorial sea, contiguous zone, the EEZ, and the continental shelf. It also emphasized the country's sovereignty over waters inside its baselines, including airspace and seabed. Further, it identifies the rights and responsibilities within the EEZ, such as resource exploration and management. The Philippine Maritime Zones Act provides the legal basis for the conduct of naval patrols along the EEZ, sustained presence in the occupied isles and features in the WPS, implementation of national laws from the baseline up to the contiguous zone, the protection of critical infrastructure, survey activities, and fishing activities as well. This legal and operational response counters China's excessive maritime claims codified under its national laws.

The Philippine Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act, or Republic Act No. 12065, established the sea lanes and air routes within the Philippine archipelagic waters, allowing foreign ships and aircraft to exercise the right of archipelagic sea lanes passage. Such passage should be continuous, expeditious, and unobstructed transit between parts of the high seas or EEZs.⁵ The Philippine Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act provides the legal basis for enhancing the defense, security, and safety posture along the seven straits, specifically: Luzon Strait, Mindoro Strait, Balabac Strait, San Bernardino Strait, Surigao Strait, Basilan Strait, and Sibutu Strait.

The Ateneo Policy Center recently submitted a draft of the Foreign Interference Law⁶ to a member of the Senate, House of Representatives, and the National Security Adviser. It was part of the study on Chinese malign influence and interference in segments of Philippine society. The government should also review the Foreign Agent Registration Act of 1979. The legal loopholes allow united front work activities to thrive in the bureaucracy, business, academic, and media sectors. These are designed to co-opt political and business elites, create civil discord among Filipinos, and push the Chinese narrative in the public opinion space. Moreover, the government should adopt measures to protect the elections in 2025 and 2028 from malign interference. The election is a battleground for influence, and if the preferred candidates win, it creates an opportunity for them to shape the country's foreign policy. Interference can also come as financing campaigns or sowing disinformation among the public.

Section 24 of the Public Service Act, or Republic Act No. 11659, restricts foreign equity in public utilities. It considered electricity distribution, transmission, and water pipeline systems as public utilities and limited its ownership by foreigners to

40%. However, other public services not classified as public utilities were allowed up to 100% foreign ownership, provided they comply with national security safeguards. Considering that this law was passed at the behest of the Duterte administration, it opened our telecommunications sector, airports, and seaports to toxic foreign investments. The implementing rules and regulations (IRR) for this law should be reviewed to address current concerns or prevent problematic Chinese investments in the future.

The Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012, or Republic Act No. 10175, was intended to deal with online activities and the internet. Specifically, it should prevent, investigate, and penalize cybercrimes while safeguarding the integrity of computer systems and data. These cybercrimes cover violations such as illegal access, data interference, system interference, cyber-squatting, identity theft, cybersex, child pornography, and online libel.

The Self-Reliant Defense Posture (SRDP) Revitalization Act, or Republic Act No. 12024, was intended to improve the capabilities of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) by establishing a viable and sustainable defense industry. It is inspired by the original SRDP program set up in the 1970s by the late President Ferdinand Marcos Sr. The law focuses on the local production of military equipment, encouraging foreign proponents to transfer technology to its partners in the private sector, giving importance to research and development in-country, and providing the mechanism for public-private partnership to prosper.

Diplomatic Dimension

The country's diplomatic track covers the (1) Philippines-US alliance; (2) its relations with ASEAN; (3) its growing number of strategic partnerships among like-minded states that support the July 12, 2016 arbitral award;⁷ and (4) its bilateral relations with China.

The Philippines-US alliance is the cornerstone of our external defense posture. It has not been a perfect set-up, reaching its nadir in the aftermath of the Scarborough Shoal stand-off in 2012. China has also tried to break the alliance, and it almost succeeded in the middle of Duterte's term of office, were it not for the efforts of the Armed Forces to keep it in place. Ferdinand Marcos Jr. restored the alliance when he became the president. While the sporadic joint patrols in the WPS provided better optics for Philippines-US relations, they had little effect compared to the

preponderance of Chinese ships inside the country's EEZ. US commitments in the bilateral security guidelines and the US-Philippines-Japan Trilateral Summit in Washington, DC in 2023 provided the blueprint for security and development packages that should render the country resilient to Chinese coercion.

Following Trump's return to power, the recent policy statements from the US Secretaries of State and Defense offer comfort among our defense policymakers. In the recent visit of Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, he talked about the broad strokes of a regional strategy of "peace through strength," and identifying the deterrence of China as the main effort. But the question is, are these pronouncements backed by a well-thought-out and workable Indo-Pacific "grand strategy"? For now, cautious optimism might be the most viable posture, but our worst-case scenario is a *modus vivendi* between Trump and Xi Jinping that sacrifices our country's national interest.

To compound our concerns, the country has become an outlier among most ASEAN Member States. Historically, the region preferred the US as an external partner, but the winds have shifted in favor of China. This is a testament to the efficacy of the latter's geoeconomic approach and its influence across the ASEAN capitals. It did not help that the government may have been remiss by not engaging other Member States and soliciting their support against China's actions in the South China Sea. To make amends with fellow Member States, the government could deploy a roving diplomatic mission to assuage its political leadership and explain the rationale for the country's position against China. It may not necessarily change their views, but at least we try to restore goodwill across the other capitals.

The government should engage ASEAN through its various mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting and the Plus variant, the ASEAN Navy Chiefs' Meeting, and the nascent ASEAN Coast Guard Forum, among others. These are venues to enhance maritime cooperation and to pursue confidence-building measures with Dialogue Partners, including China. The ACGF can be positioned as a norm-setting institution in the region, which can be employed to shape the behavior of regional maritime agencies, including the Chinese coast guard. It should also collaborate bilaterally with like-minded states such as Vietnam, with which it shares interests and concerns in the South China Sea.

The bright spot is the international support that the country has garnered following the July 12, 2016 arbitral award. This support has been translated into

various defense and security cooperation arrangements and bilateral engagements, such as port visits, joint patrols, and naval exercises. When government forces and our fisherfolk have a run-in against the Chinese coast guard or its militia, messages of solidarity and support have always been forthcoming from the embassies in Manila.

In the end, if the country has any chance of deterring China, it may need to recalibrate its activities under the ambit of the alliance. The US fears being dragged into a major power conflict; hence, it will likely restrain the government from responding to Chinese actions in the WPS. Trump might compel it to give up a key interest to prevent an escalation to a full-blown conflict; a case in point was the Scarborough Shoal stand-off of 2012. Moreover, the Philippines should pursue security ties with other middle powers within and outside the region and seek alternative regional security mechanisms outside the US umbrella. One possibility is a Japan-Philippines-Australia (JPA) trilateral arrangement. In a recent Track-2 dialogue among representatives from each country, the discussion revolved around establishing a robust defense cooperation mechanism and enhancing the resiliency of their respective economies. If the JPA can gain traction among the three governments, it can serve as the core of a regional military alliance.

Granted that it will be a challenge to build a new security architecture from scratch, sans US participation, and with China breathing down its collective neck with threats of sanctions. In time, this arrangement should be the basis of an expanded network of strategic partnerships that could include South Korea, Canada, New Zealand, and later on, France, Germany, and India. This loose coalition of states could later evolve as the Northeast Asia Security Dialogue,⁸ which was envisioned in an earlier ISEAS opinion piece. Either with or without US participation, this should collectively deter China.

The government should also rationalize its engagements with these partner nations, optimize the assistance it receives, and ensure that the relevant agencies absorb and sustain these interventions. For example: Canada's help in enhancing the maritime domain awareness (MDA) posture of the country's various agencies; Japan's donation of offshore patrol vessels (OPVs) to the coast guard; and Poland's efforts to improve the country's cybersecurity capability. Military diplomacy should leverage our "convening power" with the US and among strategic partners to rationalize existing bilateral and multilateral military exercises to enhance our archipelagic and homeland defense posture.

The country's relationship with China has been toxic for the past few years. The riposte of opposing narratives, the revelations of espionage activities, and the constant harassment of Filipino fisherfolk have worn down the patience of the public and limited the ability of the government to look for meaningful ways of de-escalating tensions with Beijing. The bilateral consultative mechanism provides the formal means for diplomatic exchanges. However, its utility is constrained by the lack of trust between the two parties. Conflict avoidance is still the norm, but embarking on trust-building measures and finding a neutral interlocutor remains challenging.

Sustaining the Philippines-US alliance and establishing a formal structure to enhance collaboration and harness the support of a growing number of like-minded strategic partners is essential to a denial and cost-imposition strategy. It denies China the total domination of the Indo-Pacific with the countervailing balance provided by a group of opposing states. A cost-imposition strategy among coastal and archipelagic states allows blockades to control strategic chokepoints vital to China's economy.

Information Dimension

The transparency initiative has been the most prominent aspect of the government's toolkit against Chinese coercion in the WPS. But at some point, it became the be-all and end-all of our strategy against Chinese coercive tactics at sea. Despite its criticisms, it was readily available to counter Beijing's propaganda lines in a tit for tat. China cannot be allowed to control the narrative in the public opinion space and project itself as the righteous party in the WPS.

Chinese propaganda against the country is part of an effort to influence and interfere in government affairs and society. The objective is to sow discord among various interest groups, create a toxic space in domestic politics, and alienate the country from the rest of ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific. It desires to drive a wedge in the Philippines-US alliance and with other strategic partners, through a combination of hard power at sea and sharp power inside our body politic. As a response, the government needs an interagency mechanism to fight against disinformation and cognitive attacks leveled against it by Beijing and its local supporters in Manila.

In the near term, the information track should ensure that the government and civil society work together to instill civic responsibility and patriotism in

the public. This is essential to generating national will between the State and its People. This can be done through advocacy programs disseminated in various media and modalities. The best example is the campus forums initiated by the security sector, and civil society organizations such as the *Atin Ito* coalition, which socializes among the youth the various issues and nuances in our dispute with China in the WPS.

In the long term, the government needs to inoculate the youth enrolled in the K-12 education program against the harmful effects of disinformation. This is not only for Chinese propaganda that has seeped into social media, but also for other political concerns. It is also an opportunity to educate the youth of our maritime heritage, and the entitlements accorded to the country under UNCLOS. Civil society can undertake advocacy and self-learning programs to improve public awareness, independently or in collaboration with the government.

In a denial strategy, the information approach should prevent Chinese United Front work activities from successfully sowing divisions at all levels and in the different aspects of Philippine society. Moreover, such an approach is not conducted in isolation but in synergy with the other tools of statecraft, with a clear end-state in mind.

Economic Dimension

This track should focus on making the country resilient against Chinese economic coercion and subversion. Specifically, the government should ensure that the security features in the Public Service Act and the Foreign Investment Act can vet dubious Chinese investments designed to create vulnerabilities in our national security posture. However, energy and food security would be the government's top-tier concerns.

The first is to restore Filipino control over the National Grid Corporation of the Philippines. This is not an easy undertaking, given the legal and bureaucratic hurdles that government regulators had to go through. The other effort is to muster the political will to explore the Reed Bank to replace the Malampaya gas field. The government should demonstrate resolve against China's actions, preventing us from accessing Reed Bank. More so, there is the insidious possibility that Beijing is pushing for investments in renewable energy to create another vulnerability in the energy sector.

Secondly, we need to protect our fisherfolk against Chinese harassment at sea, which deprives them of access to fishing grounds and shelters among the isles and features in the WPS. Albeit this is not an easy task given the limited number of ships available from the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) to escort all our fishing vessels originating from various ports along the west coast. A “buddy system” might be possible, in which PCG or BFAR patrol vessels will be responsible for the security and sustainment of fisherfolk operating in specified fishing areas in the WPS, enabled by close coordination with the local fisherfolk communities in Northern Luzon, Mindoro, and Palawan.

Third, exploration and research activities in our EEZ must also be protected. Only by allowing our Navy, Coast Guard, and BFAR vessels to patrol and establish a maritime presence in our waters can we prevent China from permanently changing the facts on the ground.

Transitioning the Military for Victory

Structural Reforms in its Defense and Maritime Security Posture

The AFP must retool itself to operate in a multi-domain threat environment and be agile enough to provide a cross-domain response. Such an environment covers the land, sea, air, space, cyber, electronic, and cognitive domains. In terms of logistics, the key initiative would be the establishment of a local defense industry. Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro introduced the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept (CADC). The Armed Forces have developed a plan for this, although the broad strokes of this document have yet to see daylight. Whether the CADC provides sufficient strategic direction for the AFP is still debatable. Ideally, the Department of National Defense (DND) is expected to develop a National Defense Strategy (NDS) first, followed by the AFP’s National Military Strategy (NMS) and its Campaign Plan.

However, the AFP must deal with a more fundamental concern. While we see the proliferation of positions for rear admirals and major generals across the AFP organization, we have yet to see the blueprint of its transition from a counterinsurgency armed force to a conventional force structure. The Ateneo

Policy Center conducted a comprehensive study on defense spending, and it was also able to touch on the organizational issues affecting the AFP's overall performance.⁹ To mitigate one of those infirmities, the study recommended that the AFP conform to the provisions of the Administrative Code of 1987 or Executive Order 292. This recognizes that the "force provider-force employer concept" does not align with AO 1987, and the way forward may be to restore the three services' mandate to conduct homeland, air, and maritime defense operations. Towards this end, some Unified Commands can be repurposed as Army Corps, while subordinating existing divisions and brigades, and adjusting their operating areas. The rest of the joint commands can be deactivated.

For maritime defense, this allows the Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps to implement the erstwhile CADC along our EEZ, including the WPS and our occupied isles and features in the Kalayaan Island Group. Here, a denial strategy should prevent China from attaining total control of parts of the South China Sea from which we are entitled to sovereign rights. This can be done through the following:

- Maritime strike missions by FA-50 aircraft equipped with anti-ship missiles;
- Surface action group patrols in unilateral or multilateral mode involving the combination of frigates and corvettes, as well as amphibious warfare vessels converted as drone carriers;
- Naval presence in key features, China is contesting our legitimate claim by Coast Guard offshore patrol vessels;
- Strategic fires along a 290-km buffer in the WPS using shore-based anti-ship missile batteries; and,
- Operational and tactical fires directed against potential staging points such as Subi Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, and Mischief Reef

For homeland defense, the Army will have to concentrate on ground defense, the protection of critical infrastructure, the security of the seat of government, and stability operations in the remaining conflict areas. In addition, the Army's reservists should be reorganized and redeployed to protect and defend their communities. They should be trained for civil and static defense and doctrinally adept at irregular warfare. To address Chinese united front work activities at the

sub-national level, the Army, in collaboration with the intelligence service, should continue previous efforts to identify these hotspots, uproot any Chinese enclaves, and prosecute local officials working against our national interests.

For archipelagic defense, the Army and Navy will have to work jointly to establish "kill zones" along seven of our archipelagic straits, namely: Luzon, Mindoro, Balabac, Sibutu, Basilan, Surigao, and San Bernardino Straits. These straits must be secured by a joint force equipped with swarms of interdiction boats and drones, short-range anti-ship missiles, naval mines, and electronic countermeasures. The island groups within these straits will be defended through irregular warfare by the Marine Corps in tandem with local reservists.

On the other hand, in maritime security and fishery protection services, the PCG should learn to operate in a combined and interagency environment. Synchronizing its movements in the WPS will go a long way in avoiding repetition of tactical lapses that China has leveraged to its advantage. Given the limited number of ships available, in the near term, it should focus on protecting economic activities in the WPS, such as energy exploration, fishing, and freedom of navigation by commercial shipping. The PCG needed more offshore patrol vessels in the exclusive economic zone. The donations from Japan have helped address the shortfall of ships, but improvements in the local shipbuilding industry would be a more sustainable strategy.

The AFP should consider setting up a strategic support command to centralize combat support and combat service support capabilities. This will be established as a joint organization and is expected to be more efficient than the three services, particularly in cyber defense, countering political warfare, domain awareness, space systems, and logistics.

The AFP's cyber defense posture needs to improve its fundamentals, such as managing personnel behavior in the workplace, recruiting a talent pool to fill the manpower requirements of the AFP, and setting up an effective cybersecurity protocol. How can the AFP and the rest of the security sector defend the rest of society if it is encumbered in protecting its systems against cyberattacks? Right now, the private sector, particularly those in the telecommunications, finance, and utilities sectors, is investing in its defense to mitigate the gaps in the public sector. Our US ally and strategic partners, Australia, Canada, the Czech Republic, Japan, Norway, Poland, and the UK, have provided cybersecurity training in-country. However, these training interventions tend to dissipate without a robust

cyber ecosystem in government to absorb their capacity-building initiatives. An ideal cyber defense organization would have the following features: manned by a civilian workforce, strong on public-private partnership, inherently interagency in its systems and processes, and linked to similar organizations among our allies and partners.

In countering political warfare by China, the government should capacitate the security sector to address this challenge and enact legal measures to counter malign influence and interference activities in the country. Chinese united front work activities are designed to weaken institutions through elite capture, to sow divisions in domestic politics, shape government policies that affect China's interests, push for its narrative to dominate the public opinion space, among others. If left unchecked, it will erode the Filipinos' morale center and their will to fight.

On domain awareness, our experience with information-sharing has been dismal in the past. Agencies and units find it difficult to surmount institutional firewalls that inhibit collaboration. For the AFP, the challenge is creating a fusion mechanism that can build a comprehensive operating picture based on the inputs from the Geospatial Intelligence Group, the 300th Air Intelligence Wing, the Maritime Research Information Center, and other potential intelligence collectors. It should also be able to process data from surveillance programs run by the US, Canada, and, in a limited way, from Changi, Singapore. The AFP should also develop a database for electronic and acoustic signatures and cyber-related events.

On space systems, a few years ago, the Navy considered nano-satellite technology to replace its legacy land-based surveillance system. The objective was to develop, assemble, and deploy a constellation of micro-satellites allowing for 24/7 coverage of the entire archipelago. This initiative can be revived and included in the Navy's modernization program. The government should also hear Rogel Mari Sese, a prominent Filipino astrophysicist and aerospace engineer, who is a key figure in advocating for a space program in the Philippines. He proposed Mati, Davao Oriental, as a launching facility and strategic hub for aerospace activities, which can be used for deploying civilian and military payloads.

On logistics, a robust defense industry is critical to a sustainable modernization program. This undertaking will have a long gestation period unless the government can develop a viable public-private partnership scheme under the SRDP, which assures start-ups of reasonable 'return on investment' and a well-defined market. Two initiatives are at the top of the list. First, restore our domestic shipbuilding

industry. We need it to churn out ships to support the Coast Guard, BFAR, and the naval auxiliary. Second, instead of acquiring drones, set up a “drone factory.” This will be used to conduct research, develop, assemble, and mass-produce different variants of drones that can be employed in the WPS, be it for combat or surveillance, or unmanned surface, sub-surface, or aerial platforms. It is a cost-effective system that can challenge the dominance of Chinese maritime forces encroaching within the country’s EEZ. These initiatives will show that the AFP is pursuing a double-pronged approach in improving its capabilities for conventional defense.

Military Track in a Denial Strategy

The study of the Ateneo Policy Center described China as a state employing a combination of hard power and sharp power against the Philippines, designed to wrestle away the control of the WPS and destabilize our institutions, leaders, and the public to weaken our nation’s resolve. For a denial strategy to work, the paper opines that the government should prevent it from achieving two conditions: (1) successfully creating divisions within the government, among the Filipino public, or with the country’s allies and strategic partners, and (2) compelling government to give up national interests to prevent escalation of conflict.

The Philippine Navy is no stranger to the basic tenets of denial strategy. This was reflected in its Naval Capability Plan crafted in 2016, which called for acquiring asymmetric capabilities for sea and area denial, to be employed in the WPS and along the archipelagic straits. But of course, expanding its coverage beyond the maritime theater of operations and across the other members of the security sector requires a more comprehensive approach and the buy-in of different government agencies.

A denial strategy can prevent China from establishing total sea control over the WPS, co-opting the country’s critical institutions and political leaders, and gaining a foothold in strategic areas within the archipelago. For the strategy to be effective, it should convince China that it cannot succeed, discouraging it from continuing its current approaches against the Philippines.

In crises, the country should be able to deter Chinese coercive actions by demonstrating the capability and resolve to thwart any aggressive moves and prevent them from escalating an incident to an actual conflict. In the most

extreme conditions involving a limited war, such a strategy should be directed towards weakening China's naval or maritime capabilities through targeted strikes or by preventing it by mounting seaborne operations using defensive measures. A denial strategy is intended to avoid a catastrophic escalation to an open conflict and to maintain stability while achieving strategic objectives. Here are key scenarios where a denial strategy can be employed:

- Promote civic responsibility and patriotism among Filipinos to enhance the national will
- Deter China's ability to sustain a naval presence within the WPS, the Philippine Sea, and in our other maritime areas of interest
- Deter China's ability to blockade the Philippine-occupied isles and features
- Deter China's ability to prevent Filipinos from accessing its exclusive economic zone, and the peaceful exploitation of its marine resources within it
- Prevent China from interfering in domestic politics at the national and local levels
- Protect key economic resources and critical industrial infrastructure against potential control by Chinese state-owned enterprises; and
- Secure military and civilian bases and supply lines, and ensure they remain free from disruption

For the defense of the entire archipelago, the population centers, the seat of the national government, and critical infrastructures, the armed forces need to build their sea denial and air defense capabilities. This is to counter the principal threats coming from the sea, which are the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy surface force, the coast guard, and the militia. From the air, the concerns are possible attacks from the air using missiles, aircraft, and drones. In the near term, the Philippines should work quietly with the US government to deploy critical defensive capabilities that match China's escalation dominance, such as the Mid-Range Capability-Typhon missile batteries, the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) rocket batteries, or the Navy-Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS).

In the WPS and the rest of our EEZ, the Navy and Coast Guard need to increase

patrols and restore presence, particularly in areas where Chinese maritime forces are significant in numbers. However, either service has an extraordinary deficit in the number of ships it can deploy. In comparison, Chinese vessels can surge in quantity to specific locations, conduct blockades, and employ dangerous maneuvers and tactics. Moreover, both services should develop non-lethal tactics that mitigate China's coercive tactics at sea. This allows for a calibrated response with minimal risk of escalation.

In the immediate term, there should be a more sustained approach to combined naval patrols among the US Navy and other strategic partners. The operational tempo can be improved if the government allows our international partners to use the facility in Subic for forward support. This can be complemented by increasing the number of bilateral and multilateral naval exercises and spreading them across the calendar. On the other hand, the PCG should leverage its membership in the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum to advocate for more proactive, albeit benign, activities to improve maritime governance in the South China Sea, such as search and rescue exercises or enforcement of environmental protection measures. In the near term, the government might consider a lease-to-own scheme to acquire commercial vessels, which can be repurposed as offshore patrol vessels.

A maritime domain awareness infrastructure is needed to fuse information gathered from different collecting agencies and platforms and make it available 24/7 to all end-users. This should support military and law enforcement operations conducted unilaterally or in cooperation with other like-minded states. Also, the AFP should enhance the "kill chain," which links its Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, and Reconnaissance (C4ISTAR) and sea and air denial capabilities. However, the first step is to deconstruct the barriers to collaboration prevailing among the various agencies in the national government.

The transition of the ground forces from counterinsurgency to homeland defense should be pursued. The current force structure can be redesigned with minimal manpower reduction. However, the ground and reserve forces must be retooled for conventional and irregular warfare in the main islands and for island defense and seizure in the isolated ones. It should also investigate Chinese-owned real estate properties and investments in critical areas likely to be used as bases for malign operations.

Cyberspace in the Philippines is an open field. Critical infrastructures are

vulnerable to cyberattacks from state and non-state actors. Since the government cannot adequately defend this domain, public-private sector cooperation is needed to contain the breach. The AFP's cyber defense should be able to collaborate with other agencies and private businesses to address this gap.

Military Track in a Cost Imposition Strategy

A cost-imposition strategy should make China's efforts so costly, outweighing any potential benefits, and discouraging them from continuing their actions. Such an approach uses blockades or other forms of economic disruption, which can force China to reconsider its position and potentially lead to a resolution that avoids further conflict.

One proposal is a distant blockade of China's maritime trade at chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca. Note that this approach is more effective as part of a coalition effort, rather than a unilateral response by a single state such as the Philippines. However, a cost-imposition strategy is often used with other approaches to create a comprehensive plan that maximizes pressure on the adversary while minimizing risks to one's side. Here are some scenarios where a cost-imposition strategy can be employed:

- Deter aggression by increasing the costs of such actions, such as through economic sanctions or military responses
- Prolong a conflict to impose sustained costs and wear down China's resources and resolve over time; and
- Target China's economic foundations through trade restrictions or cyber-attacks

For the Philippines, the first step is to "harden" the seven archipelagic straits by fortifying its key islands and features. Appropriate joint capabilities are provided to monitor local maritime and air traffic, interdict vessels and aircraft exhibiting suspicious behavior, and prevent the ingress of Chinese vessels intruding into archipelagic waters with the intent to violate international law. If a conflict arises, deployed forces should be able to defend their respective areas. The critical straits are the Luzon Strait-Balintang Channel, Mindoro Strait-Verde Passage, Balabac Strait, and Sibutu Strait.

Applied unilaterally, the Philippines should be able to restrict the movement of Chinese vessels transiting any of the seven archipelagic straits. This is "guerrilla warfare" waged along our strategic chokepoints, where the interplay of fast-moving surface and aerial capabilities and restricted maneuver space works to our advantage. This can be implemented using available ships, shore-based fires, and aircraft in the Navy's and Air Force's current inventory. In the future, the AFP's acquisition program can consider the introduction of drones and naval mines. The Navy should pursue the establishment of a naval base at Mapun Island. This is the most centrally located area in our archipelago that can respond to Chinese naval incursions coming from Mindoro or the Sibutu Straits and address any incidents in the interior. On the other hand, surface action groups can be organized as "hunter-killer formations" interdicting Chinese fishing fleets operating east of the Philippine archipelago.

As part of a maritime coalition, the Philippines, with other navies and coast guards, tracks and interdicts Chinese shipping transiting through the major strategic chokepoints in the Indo-Pacific on the way to China's east coast. A coalition will require a combined coordination mechanism to fuse intelligence, develop a comprehensive maritime operating picture, and synchronize naval operations across various theaters of operation. Major and middle powers with the requisite naval and air power, such as the US and Japan, should be tasked to deal with the PLA Navy and Chinese Coast Guard deployed in the East and South China Seas and the Philippine Sea. The country's armed forces will focus on the defense of the archipelago. Chinese trade and commerce depend on keeping the sea lanes open to the Americas, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Its protein requirements are provided by fishing fleets operating in various parts of the world. Cutting access to its overseas resources, export markets, and food sources is an existential issue for them. A cost-imposition strategy means threatening China's merchant shipping and fishing fleets transiting the global commons.

Strategically, this follows the US Navy's asymmetric approach against Japan during the Second World War. It deployed a fleet of submarines along the routes used by Japanese merchant shipping to import oil and other critical goods essential to support a war economy. Japan's geographical isolation makes its industries and populace dependent on resources from abroad. Operationally, it should follow the methods recently employed by the Houthis at the Red Sea and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards at the Strait of Hormuz. The Houthis' intent might have

been to constrict inbound maritime trade to Israel's port of Eilat. However, because of its indiscriminate use of missiles and drones, it affected all international shipping passing through the Red Sea; there was also the environmental impact of the vessels they had sunk over the past few months. In the case of the IRGC, it has at times employed swarm tactics using fast boats to attack US Navy vessels and oil tankers.

Way Ahead: Immediate and Near-Term

The current trajectory of Philippine politics drives the nation in opposing directions, and its people are divided by the toxicity of partisan interests. According to an esteemed political scientist, the government's failure to address urgent issues provides fertile ground for the Duterte narrative of persecution to gain traction among its supporters. He avers that the current predicament can still be reversed if Marcos resolves pressing economic issues and improves his strategic communications. The Dutertes are now the nexus of our foreign policy and national security dilemma, as well as the continued stability of the state. Given the vagaries of the Filipino public and the timidity of those currently in power to exercise crisis leadership, by 2028, the country might find itself on the brink of Chinese interference not only in the WPS but also in the halls of government itself.

If the situation in Taiwan flares up, our adherence to the "One China Policy" will not be able to protect us from its geopolitical impact. We will lose Taiwan as our buffer against China's eastward expansion and see the collapse of the bulwark of like-minded democracies holding the line in East Asia. We must continue to improve our defense posture in northern Luzon, particularly the Batanes Group of Islands, and extend sea control over the vital Bashi Channel and Luzon Strait. Populating these islands with the US Marine Corps' NMESIS batteries will hopefully disrupt any plans by China to ingress Taiwan through its southern underbelly. Our Marine Corps should complement this by bolstering the defense of these islands in terms of counter-air, counter-mobility, and counter-landing capabilities.

A final word of caution. Despite the flurry of American support that followed the visit of US Defense Secretary Hegseth, the government should still invest in the country's defense. America's military has been gutted by decades of

counterinsurgency conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the degradation of its industrial and shipbuilding capabilities. It can only fight against non-peer adversaries and does not have the resources it had before to operate simultaneously anywhere. Given our limited budget, the AFP's modernization should focus on developing unmanned air, surface, and sub-surface systems for surveillance, combat, and payload purposes, while leveraging the US alliance to accommodate the various types of missiles to disrupt China's escalation dominance over the country. We should also strengthen our military cooperative arrangements with other strategic partners. The Philippines must learn how to defend its interests with its resources, unconstrained by America's "fear of entrapment" and escalation towards direct conflict with China.

Summary

A Filipino Theory of Victory is possible if the People and the State are of one mind and of one heart. The "moral center of gravity," their synergy channeled to a coherent strategy, executed by the appropriate instruments of national power. The diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments are the tools of statecraft readily available to the President and his national security team. However, the military must deal with three lines of effort: organizational reform and capability development, implementing a denial strategy to deal with the current challenges, and planning for a future conflict using a cost-imposition strategy. With resolve and unity, Team Philippines should carry the day and move forward!

¹ Ong R, Amador, J, Baladjay D., Garcia K. “Towards a Filipino Theory of Victory: A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Countering China’s Strategy Against the Philippines.” Ateneo Policy Center. October 24, 2024.

² Rommel Ong. “Atin Ito’s foray to Scarborough Shoal: A quest for the Filipino’s ‘Theory of Victory.’” Vera Files. May 22, 2024. <https://verafiles.org/articles/atin-itos-foray-to-scarborough-shoal-a-quest-for-the-filipinos-theory-of-victory>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Heim, Jacob L., Zachary Burdette, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga. U.S. Military Theories of Victory for a War with the People’s Republic of China. RAND Corporation, 2024. pp 6-9.

⁵ Foreign vessels and aircraft must pass through designated lanes quickly and without delay. They cannot deviate more than 25 nautical miles from the axis of the sea lanes and must avoid navigating closer to the coasts than 10% of the distance between islands. Stopping, anchoring, or loitering is prohibited unless necessary due to force majeure, distress, or to assist others in danger.

⁶ Ong, R. J., Silva, N. S., Arceo, J. G., and Garcia, K. C. (2024, December). Strengthening Democratic Governance: Countering Malign Foreign Influence and Interference in the Philippines. (Working Paper 24-017). <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5086709>

⁷ United States, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, the European Union, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

⁸ Rommel Ong. “Beyond The Squad: Ideas For the Philippines to Work with A Northeast Asian Minilateral Arrangement.” Fulcrum, July 3, 2024. <https://fulcrum.sg/beyond-the-squad-ideas-for-the-philippines-to-work-with-a-northeast-asian-minilateral-arrangement/>

⁹ Ong, R.J., Mendoza, H., Tarriela, J. T., Geganzo, L. G., Valenzuela, S., Arceo, J. G., and Garcia, K. C. (2023, November). Toward Increased and Stable Investments in National Security in the Philippines: An Analysis of Trends, Allocations, and Policy Options in Philippine Defense Spending (Phase 2). (Working Paper 23-012). <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4597679>

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