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EXPANDING THE PHILIPPINES–AUSTRALIA
STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

CHARMAINE MISALUCHA-WILLOUGHBY, PH.D

The Stratbase ADR Institute for Strategic and International Studies (ADRi) is an independent strategic research organization with the principal goal of addressing the issues affecting the Philippines and East Asia through:

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2. Fostering strategic ideas based on cooperation and innovative thinking
3. Providing a regional venue for collaboration and cooperation in dealing with critical issues in East Asia; and
4. Actively participating in regional debates and global conversations

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PHILIPPINES–AUSTRALIA
STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

WRITTEN BY
CHARMAINE MISALUCHA–WILLOUGHBY, PH.D

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ABSTRACT

How can the Philippines and Australia maintain their positive relationship? The areas of cooperation under the strategic partnership are wide-ranging but reflect fluid and fluctuating circumstances. What strategies can be implemented to establish a flexible partnership that effectively tackles current challenges and anticipates future obstacles? To identify these, it is essential to understand that Philippines-Australia relations are nested within broader developments in two distinct but complementary spaces. First, the partnership aligns with the practice turn in International Relations to understand state behavior in the context of rising uncertainties. Second, the shift in emphasis from maritime security to blue security reflects an understanding of the sea as more than an extension of power politics on land. The mirroring exercise aids in identifying the emerging areas of further cooperation: the digital economy, blue crimes, climate, and gender. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the evolution of Philippines-Australia bilateral relations, and matches this with scholarly literature of how states interact. It aims to demonstrate the evolution of bilateral relations from alliances (and quasi-alliances) to strategic partnerships, as a means to minimize uncertainties and volatilities in international relations. This analysis uncovers an emerging but untapped area of cooperation. It also looks into the economic ties between the two countries that are mismatched and limited. However, it posits that digital transformation is inevitable, particularly since the geographical locations of both countries optimally position them to support and shape the region's digital economy. Meanwhile, the second part of the paper situates the scholarship on maritime security and blue security. Australia, as a fellow maritime nation, has recalibrated its focus from maritime security to civil maritime security, which includes social ecosystems of ordinary people whose livelihoods are connected to the seas. The broader scope of blue security allows the Philippines-Australia strategic partnership to expand its cooperation to include security, economics, development, and people. This is expected to extend towards the blue economy and the shadowy area of blue crimes.

EXPANDING THE PHILIPPINES-AUSTRALIA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

CHARMAINE MISALUCHA-WILLOUGHBY, PH.D

In 2023, the Philippines and Australia elevated their bilateral relationship from a Comprehensive Partnership to a Strategic Partnership.[1] They committed to strengthening ties, deepening cooperation, enhancing capacity, and promoting an open, resilient, and prosperous region through collaboration in various areas, including politics and strategy, defense and security, economics, development, environment and climate change, and people-to-people connections. As part of this partnership framework, the Australian government recently donated PHP34 million (AUD940,000) worth of drones and operator training to the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) to improve capabilities in maritime domain awareness.[2] Additionally, drone specialists from Australia's Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment, and Water were scheduled to conduct training for PCG Aviation Command Unmanned Aerial Vehicles Squadron members. The donation is a tangible example of the Philippines-Australia strategic partnership at work.

The strategic partnership stems from a longstanding bilateral relationship. Although formal diplomatic relations started in 1946, connections between the two nations began in the 1800s. Trade in dairy and sugarcane and the booming pearling industry in Australia led to the arrival of the "Manilamen," a group of Filipino pearl divers and traders, in northern Australia.[3] Their presence and contributions played a significant role in shaping the early relationship between the Philippines and Australia. During the Second World War, Australian and Filipino service personnel fought alongside Allied forces. Both countries also

worked together to shape the post-war order. Under Elpidio Quirino (1948-1953), the Philippines pursued diplomatic initiatives to lessen its dependence on the United States (US).[4] Initiatives like the Pacific Pact in 1949, which included Australia and was a precursor to the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), were made in the context of the Philippines' attempts to create a regional security framework. The negotiations eventually led to the Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) Security Treaty, which was part of this broader effort to establish a collective security arrangement in the Pacific region.[5]

At the height of the Cold War, institutionalized forums for Philippines-Australia relations included SEATO from 1954 to 1977 and the South Korean-led Asian and Pacific Council from 1966 to 1975. There was a lull in the latter part of the Cold War due to the Vietnam War and the resulting Nixon Doctrine that reshaped America's approach in Southeast Asia and the US' rapprochement with China. Still, the relationship was reinvigorated in the post-9/11 era with a special focus on counter-terrorism efforts. Australia redoubled its commitment in the wake of the Bali bombings in 2002, the terrorist attacks that were perpetrated by Jemaah Islamiyah and that killed 202 people, 88 of whom were Australians.[6] Bilateral counterterrorism cooperation is underpinned by the 1995 Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperative Defense Activities and the 2003 Memorandum of Understanding on Combating International Terrorism.

Recent developments in the West Philippine Sea inevitably turned relations between the Philippines and Australia towards maritime security. Australia has staunchly defended the rule of law and consistently supported the Philippines regarding the 2016 arbitration against China. Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. highlighted that the Philippines and Australia are "maritime democracies bound by meaningful commonalities."[7] Caught in the same geopolitical environment characterized by great power rivalry, the two countries must uphold the rules-based order, not least because they are "pioneers of the postwar international order."[8] He further emphasized the spirit of "*bayanihan*" and "mateship" as the defining factors in an enduring friendship.[9] In short, the Philippines-Australia bilateral relationship boasts a strong lineage of shared visions and values and deep connections across a broad spectrum of issues.

Considering the current situation, how can the Philippines and Australia maintain their positive relationship? The areas of cooperation under the strategic partnership are wide-ranging but reflect fluid and fluctuating circumstances.

What strategies can be implemented to establish a flexible partnership that effectively tackles current challenges and anticipates future obstacles? To identify these, it is essential to understand that Philippines-Australia relations are nested within broader developments in two distinct but complementary spaces. First, the agreement between the two countries to establish a strategic partnership, rather than continuing with the previous "comprehensive" partnership, signifies changes in the conduct of international relations (lowercase i, lowercase r). The transition or elevation aligns with developments in the discipline of International Relations (capital I, capital R), especially in new ways of understanding state behavior in the context of rising uncertainties in various areas. Historically, states addressed international threats by forming alliances based on balance of power and balance of threat calculations. Today, states recognize that the constraints imposed by alliance structures mean that the risks of entrapment and abandonment are never fully abated. As a result, states resort to more flexible commitment-exacting methods, like strategic partnerships. In this context, strategic partnerships constitute international practices that minimize the effects of an anarchic environment. In academic scholarship, this development reflects the so-called practice turn in IR.

Second, while the proverbial ivory tower provides a mental map that can situate the present form of Philippines-Australia relations, there has also been a corresponding calibration in the emphasis of the bilateral relationship. Focusing heavily on the maritime domain may be a function of the current geopolitical environment, but Australia's approach has evolved from hardcore maritime security to civil maritime security. This shift to "blue security," a term that encompasses not only traditional security concerns but also environmental and economic aspects of the sea, reflects an updated understanding of the sea as more than an extension of power politics on land.

Hence, the intellectual spaces where theory and scope reside reflect the ground on which the Philippines-Australia relationship grows. The mirroring exercise can help identify the areas in which the strategic partnership can expand, or at least focus more on, to ensure that an open, resilient, and prosperous Indo-Pacific is attained. To do this, the following discussion takes two port calls. The first tracks the evolution of the bilateral relationship between the Philippines and Australia and matches this with the developments in the scholarly literature on how states interact. Since the first part aims to demonstrate that the progression from alliances

(and quasi-alliances) to strategic partnerships is a set of international practices that minimize uncertainties and volatilities, the analysis uncovers an emerging but untapped area of cooperation. Economic ties between the two countries exist but are currently mismatched and limited.[10] Be that as it may, digital transformation is inevitable. The concurrent presence of supply and demand factors optimally positions the Philippines and Australia to support and shape the digital economy within the region.

The second port of call situates the scholarship on maritime security and the recent calibration to blue security. As a maritime nation, Australia has been at the forefront of transitioning from maritime security to civil maritime security, which encompasses not just gray hulls with numbers on the side but social ecosystems for ordinary people making a living on and by the sea. With blue security's broader scope, the Philippines-Australia strategic partnership must acknowledge the deep and abiding intersections between security, economics, development, and people. In short, blue security will necessarily spill over to the blue economy and the shadowy area of blue crimes.

The analysis herein posits that changes in how we understand the world mirror state behavior in highly volatile environments. Consequently, how states behave in turbulent contexts is mirrored in scholarship through a gradation of practices. It matters little if theory follows empirics or the other way around. What matters is that the mirroring goes both ways and is emblematic of the intersubjective nature of how international actors interact, how those actions become institutionalized as practices, and how these building blocks for knowledge and scholarship feed back into creating new forms of exchanges and connections.

From (Quasi) Alliances to Strategic Partnerships

To identify mechanisms that can enhance the strategic partnership between the Philippines and Australia, it is crucial to recognize that their bilateral relationship is part of a broader field of study focused on understanding state interactions during periods of uncertainty. Hence, tracing the evolution of the Philippines-Australia bilateral relationship reveals a preference for forming alliances and engaging in strategic partnerships. Historically, states were understood to respond instinctively to threats using balance of power and balance of threat calculations.

In this context, states were predisposed to form alliances. However, in a more complex and highly volatile situation, such as today's environment, states resort to more nuanced and flexible arrangements, like strategic partnerships. While alliances and strategic partnerships are significant, they are not the sole methods for states to respond to pressure. The diversity of options available highlights the range of international practices that states can utilize to reduce uncertainty.

Practices are performative and patterned, demonstrating competency in a socially meaningful manner because they are organized around shared practical understandings.[11] They are based on background knowledge and represent the intersection of discursive and material realms.[12] These repeated actions occur within organized contexts and inherently possess spatial characteristics.[13] Practices are organized activities that converge and form fields, constellations, communities, or networks.

States interact through various practices such as war, balancing, bandwagoning, forming alliances, engaging in multilateralism, minilateralism, coalitions, strategic partnerships, and even establishing security communities. It is noteworthy that certain practices become prevalent during specific historical periods, but not necessarily in others. For instance, alliances were the predominant practice in the immediate post-1945 era, whereas strategic partnerships became more prominent only in the post-Cold War period.

Alliances help reduce uncertainty in the international system. Unlike bandwagoning, in which states align with the stronger side to mitigate threats, alliances typically involve aligning with the weaker side to counterbalance the dominance of more powerful entities. States consider several factors when deciding with whom to ally. The threat level is measured by a state's aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intentions.[14] States must also evaluate whether to align with or oppose the power possessing the most significant capabilities. Alongside these considerations, alliance formation involves states' calculations of payoffs and tradeoffs. Doing so entails identifying shared interests and ideologies, internal political configurations, and bargaining as the basis of estimates of benefits, costs, and risks.[15] In addition, there are determinants of choice, including levels of independence, the strategic interests of the parties, the degree of the explicitness of the alliance agreement, whether the parties' interests align with the adversary, and their behavioral record.

In the post-1945 era, alliances complemented the multilateral framework that

the US created. Countries like the Philippines and Australia established alliances with the US to expedite postwar reconstruction efforts and ensure an American strategic presence in the region. From the American perspective, the San Francisco System was a means to prevent Asian states from falling into the Soviet Union's sphere of influence.[16] The US-led network of alliances has the following features.[17] First, at its foundation were several formal bilateral security alliances between the US and Asian states, forming a hub-and-spokes model with the US at the center. Second, the model established an asymmetric structure, where the US provided military and economic benefits to its partners, without imposing equivalent collective defense obligations on them. Third, the system granted allies free trade access to American markets with minimal development aid.

By the late 1950s, the San Francisco System became a comprehensive and networked structure of alliances between the US and its Asian counterparts, including Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, and the Philippines. While not allies, Australia and the Philippines have always been connected through the US. This notwithstanding, being quasi-allies and embedded in the broader hub-and-spokes system allowed Australia and the Philippines to rest easy on American security guarantees. As a result, the bilateral relationship has largely been exogenously driven throughout the Cold War.[18]

Alliances clearly illustrate how cooperation involves a set of converging practices. Strategic partnerships can likewise be considered a practice of cooperation. The concept of strategic partnerships initially emerged when Russia proposed it as a foreign policy tool.[19] Subsequently, the US adopted this term to characterize its relationship with the former Soviet Union.[20] The European Union's 2003 European Security Strategy established the importance of concluding strategic partnerships. Subsequently, many works sought to define strategic partnership parameters. For some, strategic partnerships are seen as a goal-oriented relationship.[21] The essential elements here are shared values and interests, mutual understanding, and equality of size. These issues present challenges as it is unclear which values and interests ought to be prioritized, how one can be given precedence over another, how mutual understanding can be achieved, and how the concept can address the significant asymmetries between international actors in these partnerships. Strategic partnerships are also seen as interest-based because partners have a mutual incentive to cooperate, as they become vulnerable to each other if the partnership fails.[22] Whether strategic partnerships are seen

as goal-oriented or interest-based, their main features are common interests and expectations, long-term view, multidimensional perspective, global range, and distinction from other types of relations.[23] They are also clearly distinct from other types of state interaction, like alliances or coalitions. In fact, they are more flexible than alliances since they are neither targeted at a specific country nor contain binding military commitments.[24]

Today, strategic partnerships enjoy a prevalence that alliances no longer do. This is not to say that alliances no longer exist, but they are a product of the post-1945 era rather than a reflection of the dynamics of the post-pandemic world. To understand the historical contingency of state behavior and interactions, consider the period when alliances were the default way to reduce uncertainty. The liberal rules-based international order has been the world's "operating system" since 1945, with the general organizing principle of a multilateral order aimed at managing an open economy and operationalized through international institutions.[25] Under the auspices of the United Nations, the American-led order established the Bretton Woods system, supported by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Simultaneously, it forged security alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the hub-and-spokes model in Asia. The liberal order was designed to prevent conflict and promote commerce, achieve significant success in maintaining peace among major powers, and create a complex economic system of interdependent entities. The success of this international order largely depended on the leadership of the US. Indeed, preserving the liberal order has been a primary motivator for American involvement globally.

Unfortunately, the US-led liberal order has become increasingly challenged since the end of the Cold War, when calls for deglobalization started gaining more traction.[26] In short, shifts in the distribution of power drove the American-led order to a crisis, which became the springboard for arguments that the post-1945 liberal order rested on mythical foundations, that the long peace was due not to the liberal promise but to the balance of power during the Cold War, and that US engagement in the world was a means to preserve liberal democracy *within* America.[27] In this context, China is well-positioned to take advantage of the present circumstances.[28] China's version of an international order "with Chinese characteristics" manifests through the Belt and Road Initiative, which focuses on connectivity across policy coordination, infrastructure, trade, finance, and interpersonal relations. By linking China to Asia, the South Pacific, East

Africa, and Europe, this networked capitalism bolsters the Chinese government's narrative that positions China as a leader in global capitalism.[29]

In this intersection, the Philippines and Australia realize the limits of their respective alliances with the US. At a time when uncertainty was extraordinarily high and the American-led rules-based international order was severely challenged, the quasi-allies responded not by allying themselves but by entering into a new form of state interaction. As one might expect, the changes were slow and incremental, but they culminated in the 2023 strategic partnership. Both countries have long had a consistent defense cooperation, but a clear indication of the bilateral relationship moving closer to each other was the Philippine Senate's ratification of the Philippines-Australia Status of Visiting Forces Agreement in July 2012.[30] The agreement provided a comprehensive legal framework for the presence of Australian forces in the Philippines and vice versa. The agreement's reciprocal nature entails that both parties assume the same obligations.

By 2015, the Philippines and Australia agreed on a comprehensive partnership where bilateral relations are institutionalized through a biennial Philippine-Australian Ministerial Meeting.[31] With China's assertive moves in the West Philippine Sea despite the issuance of the 2016 arbitration award in favor of the Philippines, the comprehensive partnership added Navy-to-Navy strategic-level talks in 2017, a landmark move in that security cooperation officially moved beyond counter-terrorism efforts.[32] Finally, the bilateral relationship culminated in the official launch of the strategic partnership in 2023.

Of course, there are various motivations for the Philippines and Australia to elevate their bilateral relationship to a strategic partnership. From an interstate level of analysis, a noted pattern in these two countries' interactions is that they are largely externally driven, with periods of robust cooperation followed by lulls.[33] One way of looking at this is that relations naturally ebb and flow, but conversely, it can also be seen as a stop-and-go process, which makes gains unsustainable. Regardless of the angle, the China factor cannot be ignored.

Meanwhile, from a state-level analysis, domestic dynamics also play a role in these states' calculations to finally agree to a strategic partnership. As a small power with limited resources and capabilities, compounded by a threat from a great power, the Philippines' decision was a logical result of its internal configurations.[34] The country has been characterized by personality politics and how such drove assessments about economic security.[35] Ultimately, the Philippines

realized that it was disadvantaged by its inability to compel China to abide by the 2016 arbitration award, and that if it were to leverage such an award, it needed as many partners as it could gather. For Australia, on the other hand, the waning of the US-led security architecture in the region demanded that it play a more active role in the Indo-Pacific. After all, the so-called tyranny of geography does not necessarily equate to a buffer that ensconces Australia from regional dynamics. However, the more it vies for an active role, the more it risks "exemptionalism," especially considering rising authoritarianism in the neighborhood.[36] For obvious reasons, Australia prefers the perpetuation of the US-led order, a sentiment that is reflected in the language of the 2023 strategic partnership.[37]

Considering the current environment in which the Philippines-Australia strategic partnership emerged, the significant focus on geopolitics is understandable. Even though the areas of cooperation identified in the 2023 Joint Statement include development and climate change, for instance, these are still viewed from the prism of intensifying great power competition and as a stopgap solution to a rising China. Arguably, separating these threads may be infeasible, considering the intricate interdependencies that are a core feature of the global context. Still, they can be seen as more than just a function of – or a coping mechanism for – the rise and fall of great powers. Calibrating the strategic partnership from geopolitics to geoeconomics is therefore warranted.

The Philippines is one of Southeast Asia's fastest-growing internet economies. In terms of gross merchandise value, the Philippines' digital economy grew to PHP1.726 trillion (USD31 billion) in 2024 from PHP1.448 trillion (USD26 billion)[38] in 2023. Several explanations for this growth are consistent domestic consumption, a revitalized services sector, and increased remittances from overseas Filipino workers. If inflation remains stable and unemployment rates decrease, the demand for digital services may increase private consumption. Introducing affordable logistics solutions in rural areas has helped the prevalence of e-commerce for most Filipino consumers. Of course, there are still some challenges with last-mile logistics, but these notwithstanding, e-commerce has posted steady growth. Moreover, financial technologies such as e-wallets and micro-lending platforms that gained traction during the pandemic now serve the underbanked population. With the continued growth of the e-commerce and financial technology sectors, not to mention the increased adoption of artificial intelligence technologies, the Philippine digital economy is expected to remain robust in 2025.[39]

Australia, meanwhile, is at the forefront of these emerging technologies. It was among the first countries to introduce blockchain regulations in 2020 to minimize cryptocurrency risks.[40] Australia's regulatory framework ultimately served as an exemplar for other nations, highlighting its leadership and dedication to developing secure and scalable blockchain solutions. Given these, the Philippines-Australia strategic partnership should further expand in the digital economy, encompassing cybersecurity, financial technologies, and digital infrastructures. These are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, "cybersecurity ensures digital trust, fintech expands financial inclusion, AI enhances efficiency, and blockchain secures transactions."[41]

In sum, enhancing the strategic partnership between the Philippines and Australia to encompass the digital economy represents a logical advancement in their bilateral relationship and priorities. The preceding section has demonstrated that developments in International Relations (capital I, capital R) mirror international relations (lowercase i, lowercase r), and vice versa. On one hand, explanations for state behavior under extreme pressure chronicle mechanisms ranging from the most stringent (alliances) to the more flexible (strategic partnerships). Both are international practices that exact commitments, although the levels and extent of the commitment vary. Both are also historically contingent, which illustrates why alliances gained more traction during the Cold War and why strategic partnerships proliferated after the fall of the Soviet Union.

On the other hand, the Philippines and Australia have been deeply embedded in the American-led security architecture in Asia since the end of the Second World War. Although not allies in the strictest sense of the term, the two enjoyed quasi-alliance status with deep and abiding commitments ranging from shared values, the rule of law, defense cooperation, counter-terrorism measures, and development assistance. As a result of intensifying geopolitical circumstances, the two countries elevated their bilateral relationship to a strategic partnership in 2023, a move that parallels or coincides with developments in scholarship.

From Maritime Security to Blue Security

The previous section's focal point was on theory, specifically how states behave under conditions of uncertainty. It was posited that, depending on the historical

context, states have resorted to a spate of international practices, ranging from alliances to strategic partnerships. The Philippines-Australia strategic partnership is a prime example of this mirrored image. The following section then transitions from theory to scope. In particular, the cornerstone switches from how states behave to where their priorities converge. In the case of the Philippines and Australia, that convergence point is the maritime domain.

Driven by developments in the South China Sea, the Philippines and Australia have incorporated these considerations into their maritime security frameworks. As an archipelagic nation, the Philippines has arguably long been maritime conscious. Filipinos make up a significant number of seafarers worldwide and, therefore, contribute to the global merchant fleet.[42] The Philippines provides an estimated 300,000 shipping crew members in domestic and foreign-flagged shipping vessels.[43] However, the issues surrounding the South China Sea placed maritime security at the forefront of the Philippines' concerns. From the Philippines' perspective, relations with China from 1949 until the late 1970s were characterized by numerous challenges.[44] This was mainly due to China's communist ideology, which resonated with radical Filipino leftists and led to the formation of the underground Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People's Army, in the 1960s. Diplomatic relations were normalized in 1975 and cordial until 1995, when Mischief Reef became a turning point.

Mischief Reef, situated 135 nautical miles west of the Philippine province of Palawan, is a partially submerged feature in the Spratly Islands. In January 1995, Filipino fishermen reported to authorities that Chinese troops had detained them on Mischief Reef. This led the Philippine government to investigate, revealing that China had constructed buildings and installed satellite equipment on the previously unoccupied reef. Initially, the Chinese government denied any knowledge of these structures but later stated that local fishing authorities from Hainan province had built them to provide shelter for Chinese fishermen. The Philippine government responded assertively: the Philippine Navy dismantled territorial markers placed by the People's Liberation Army Navy at various locations within the Spratlys and, alongside the Philippine Air Force increased patrols around the reef. Concurrently, in Manila, political entities openly criticized China's actions. As a result of these incidents, diplomatic protests were exchanged between the Philippines and China.

Another major incident occurred in 2012 in Scarborough Shoal, located approximately 120 nautical miles west of the Philippine province of Zambales.[45] In April 2012, a Philippine Navy surveillance plane spotted eight Chinese fishing vessels anchored in the shoal. Viewing it as illegal fishing, the Philippines sent its largest naval frigate, the BRP Gregorio del Pilar. They boarded the Chinese ships for inspection, prompting the trawlers to send a distress call to authorities in China's Hainan province. Shortly thereafter, two unarmed China Marine Surveillance vessels responded and took position nearby. The standoff had begun. A series of diplomatic talks, backchannel negotiations, and poor coordination within and between bureaucracies led to decisions based on imperfect information, eventually pushing the Philippines to pursue international arbitration in 2013.[46] The arbitration hinged on the role of historic rights and the source of maritime entitlements in the South China Sea, the status of certain maritime features therein, and the lawfulness of China's actions that the Philippines viewed to violate the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to which both the Philippines and China are parties. The Permanent Court of Arbitration issued its award in 2016 in favor of the Philippines.[47]

Australia may not be a claimant in the South China Sea, but as a maritime nation, it has likewise turned its attention to how the seas connect it to the rest of the region. Interestingly, however, Australia does not seem to have an official definition of maritime security, even though the government widely uses the concept. In general, its deployment of the concept of maritime security has macro and micro components.[48] The macro component is externally oriented, primarily the purview of Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Department of Defense. Conversely, the micro component is internally oriented, involving the Department of Home Affairs, the Australian Border Force, and other supporting agencies. The lack of a clear definition may not necessarily be a problem; an argument can certainly be made that Australia, not a party to the South China Sea disputes, has no reason to spell out its maritime security agenda. Others have argued that the conceptual ambiguity may be to Australia's advantage as it can, at times, assist broader government security objectives.[49]

For all the attention states pay to the maritime domain, the academic discipline of International Relations is peculiarly and stubbornly "seablind."[50] A compelling reason for this is that territoriality is a foundational pillar of the discipline. The Westphalian roots of the modern state system are predicated on territories

delineated by sovereignty and legitimized by recognition. In this context, IR is a land-based discipline.[51] To the extent that the seas factor into IR analyses, they become extensions of power projections from land. Colonial expeditions illustrate this point. The British Empire, for example, relied on ocean travel to deliver goods to and from the colonies to the imperial center. Thus, the sea was featured in many studies of naval and sea power.[52]

As a result, the sea fell into the following categories in IR: a space that needs to be "tamed," "traversed," and "controlled."[53] These categories coincide with "grand ocean visions" that view the sea as either *mare clausum*, *mare liberum*, or part of the global commons.[54] *Mare clausum* views the sea as something that can be carved into territories, much like land, and therefore subject to sovereign control. Crucial here is not so much drawing arbitrary lines in the water, but rather who has access to ocean resources, including fisheries and oil and gas reserves, and who has the responsibility for safety at sea. *Mare liberum*, meanwhile, takes the position that the sea is a free space beyond ownership and control. At stake here are issues like freedom of navigation and movement, but engenders a lively debate on, for example, piracy, smuggling, raids, or the extent to which a state can claim ownership of home waters. The sea is also frequently regarded in IR as part of the global commons, representing humanity's shared heritage. However, this raises an important aspect of the equitable distribution of gains from ocean resource exploitation.

The dimensions of maritime security add further nuance to the study of the sea in IR.[55] Whereas historically, maritime security found a likely equivalence with interstate conflicts, the agenda is much broader today. The concept of blue security resonates with the multifaceted nature of issues in the maritime domain, incorporating national, regional, international, human, and environmental factors.[56] Of course, interstate conflicts remain an indispensable aspect within the blue security framework. Considering the competing claims in the South China Sea and notwithstanding the 2016 arbitration award, interstate conflicts continue to shape the maritime security agenda. The second dimension involves maritime terrorism and extremist violence. Terrorist organizations have increasingly utilized maritime routes for their operations, resulting in extremist attacks at sea. Extremist groups like Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines have in the past engaged in maritime crimes to solicit funding for their activities. The third dimension of the maritime security agenda revolves around the intricate linkages of various blue crimes.

Blue crimes can be divided into crimes against mobility, against flows, and against the environment. Crimes against mobility harm global trade by causing supply chain disruptions, economic losses, and dangers to seafarers, passengers, coastal economies, and port facilities. Some examples include piracy, kidnapping, seizing ships and cargo, robbery and theft, and cybercrimes that can potentially halt or disrupt port operations. Piracy incidents in Southeast Asia have been acute in the Straits of Malacca and the Sulu and Celebes Seas.[57] Blue crimes that impact flows mainly target economies and societies. Smuggling illustrates this type of blue crime, whether on weapons, narcotics, illicit goods, counterfeits, wildlife, or human trafficking. Finally, blue crimes against the environment pose a danger to ecosystems and include illicit fishing, pollution, illegal resource extraction, and crimes against critical infrastructures and cultural heritage. The environmental impact of these activities cannot be undermined, as they risk biodiversity loss and the robustness of legitimate coastal economies and livelihoods, which can effectively influence food security.

The Philippines and Australia mirror the shift from maritime security to blue security, albeit with some limitations. In November 2024, the Philippines enacted significant maritime security frameworks. The Philippine Maritime Zones Act defines the country's maritime zones in accordance with the UNCLOS standards. This alignment with international law enhances the nation's governance capabilities and strengthens its maritime policies to support economic development and national security. Additionally, the Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act establishes a system of designated sea lanes and air routes for foreign vessels and aircraft, facilitating safe passage while preserving national security and maintaining environmental protection. Although existing policies are in place, the Philippines does not have a comprehensive strategic policy framework that defines its maritime interests, outlines measures to safeguard those interests, or specifies the agencies responsible for implementing those measures. In the absence of such a framework, the Philippines relies extensively on maritime law enforcement agencies, each operating under its respective mandates and activities. In addition to the substantial impacts of climate change, coastal communities face challenges related to food and economic security in the absence of effective governance, security, and marine protection. Increased conflict and competition in traditional fishing areas cause fisherfolk to travel further to less productive waters, resulting in increasing debt. Consequently, some fishers, in their desperation, resort to illegal

and environmentally harmful fishing practices, creating cascading problems for themselves, their families, and the environment.

Australia released its Civil Maritime Security Strategy in 2021 to establish a framework for delivering a comprehensive government approach to civil maritime security. This strategy aims to create a cohesive and adaptable national civil maritime security system, despite the absence of an official definition of maritime security.[58] In conjunction with this strategy and under the auspices of the Philippines-Australia strategic partnership, the two countries signed the Memorandum of Understanding on Enhanced Maritime Cooperation in February 2024.[59] They reaffirmed their commitment to pursue cooperation in civil maritime security, marine environment, marine cultural heritage, international law, and defense. The agreement can enhance information sharing, capacity building, and the interoperability of relevant government agencies operating in the maritime domain and the marine environment.[60]

Considering the enlarged scope of blue security and to sustain the efforts of the Philippines and Australia in recognizing the significance of civil maritime security, there are spaces where the two countries can further push their partnership. At the state level, the Philippines and Australia must continue the strong foundations of their defense and diplomatic cooperation. Platforms for Navy-to-Navy discussions should be sustained, and Navy-industry cooperation can be given a much-needed push. In the long run, these efforts can but improve interagency coordination. The Philippines and Australia are likewise well-positioned to keep up anti-piracy operations. The partners can build on similar mechanisms in this regard. For example, the joint Malacca Strait Sea Patrol established in 2004 became a venue for coordinated patrols and information sharing for Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. In 2005, these three countries, with the addition of Thailand, launched the Eyes in the Sky, which established operations centers and monitoring agencies to coordinate efforts in the Malacca Strait, a crucial waterway for global trade. By 2017, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines set the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement in the Sulu and Celebes Seas. Also known as INDOMALPHI, it involved joint patrols and information sharing to combat threats like piracy, terrorism, and other illegal activities. These efforts can be instructive for the Philippines and Australia in improving interagency coordination across the civil-military spectrum. The Australian Maritime Security Operations Center can play a central role here.

At the sub-state level, Australia's civil maritime security strategy allows it to better shape capacity-building efforts in the Philippines' blue economy. The Philippines must develop a comprehensive maritime security strategy that addresses both maritime and blue security needs while coordinating responses across multiple agencies. This strategy should incorporate a dual approach, combining top-down policy framework coordination with bottom-up community empowerment initiatives. Community-level programs should encompass skills training, coastal management initiatives, coral reef restoration efforts, marine cleanup activities, and fisheries management. Additionally, these programs should integrate measures to promote gender equality, disability accommodation, and social inclusion. By adopting a coordinated approach, the Philippines will be better equipped to address its maritime security challenges while asserting its sovereign and territorial rights on the international stage. The success of this strategy relies on transitioning from fragmented policies to establishing a genuinely integrated approach to maritime security.

Several factors hinder effective responses to climate change adaptation and environmental protection in the Philippines. Primarily, political barriers and institutional limitations, such as weak or uncoordinated governance and inadequate policy implementation, impede progress. Additional obstacles include economic interests from extractive industries, prioritizing other economic agendas over environmental concerns, and limited investment in sustainable infrastructure. Socially and culturally, significant barriers arise from insufficient public awareness and the lack of meaningful involvement of marginalized communities in public policy, obstructing the implementation of responsive, inclusive, and evidence-based mitigation activities.

From a gender perspective, power imbalances within the maritime sector significantly influence its political economy in various ways, including economic opportunities, resource distribution, and decision-making structures. These imbalances, evidenced by discrimination, unequal representation, and limited access to resources, affect both the economic performance of the sector and its social dynamics. Despite women's substantial contributions to the industry, particularly in logistics, processing, and administration, their access to high-paying positions, such as those in shipping and navigation, remains restricted. Consequently, women are predominantly found in lower-paying, less stable roles, which hampers their economic empowerment and impacts overall income

distribution within the industry. This economic disparity diminishes women's bargaining power, perpetuating a cycle of economic exclusion that undermines gender equality across the sector.

In closing, the Philippines and Australia can enhance their strategic partnership by not losing track of the momentum. Defense and diplomatic cooperation have been consistent and longstanding, building mutual trust and confidence. The partners can also adopt best practices from Southeast Asia's anti-piracy operations to improve interagency coordination efforts. Other crucial areas that need deeper and more sustained cooperation are climate change adaptation, gender, and inclusion. The strategic partnership between the Philippines and Australia is on an upward trajectory, as demonstrated by the fact that the maritime security agenda is no longer the sole purview of states. Instead, it is now more widely recognized that maritime security has spillover effects on humans and the environment. Maritime security is now broadened to blue security.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion centered on how the Philippines and Australia can sustain the upward momentum of their strategic partnership. To arrive at the areas that require further and deeper cooperation, i.e., the digital economy, blue crimes, climate, and gender, the analysis herein necessarily took two ports of call to demonstrate that international relations (lowercase) and International Relations (uppercase) are mutually constitutive of each other. Far from being mutually exclusive, they mirror each other and are therefore intersubjective. This mirroring exercise was first demonstrated here by tracing the evolution of the Philippines-Australia bilateral relationship from quasi-allies to strategic partners. The preference for this form of interaction is, in many ways, a product of its time, as indicated in academic scholarship on the prevalence of alliances in the post-Second World War era and the predisposition of states to form strategic partnerships today. In addition to tracing the shift from alliances to strategic partnerships and identifying state practices for responding to uncertainties and volatilities, a similar transformation occurred in the scope of the Philippines-Australia relationship. Maritime security was long thought to be the sole purview of states as actors and recipients of action. However, new interpretations of the

role of the sea in IR consider unfolding realities on the ground (on the waters, that is), including not only the propensity for interstate maritime conflicts, but also extremism and terrorism at sea and the shadowy realm of blue crimes.

Philippines-Australia relations, in short, mirror the developments in scholarship. Likewise, new ways of thinking about the world are reflected in the dynamism of the bilateral relationship. Two challenges, however, can potentially derail this. First, the potential for US President Donald Trump to be more isolationist to "make America great again" is highly likely. At the same time, while the Philippines and Australia are quasi-allies and remain heavily dependent on security guarantees from the US, the likelihood of decoupling from the US-led architecture will be risky and quite unlikely. With the US increasingly unwilling to sustain the post-1945 rules-based order it has sponsored, it will become more difficult for the Philippines and Australia to continue to hold the line in a region that is slowly but surely being encroached by China. Unfortunately, scholarly literature has been scant about transitions from one international order to another without resorting to war. Second, there is always a chance that domestic politics can change international politics. One only needs to look at the Philippines under the Duterte administration (2016-2022) or the US under Trump (2017-2021 and again since 2025) to understand the extreme shifts these countries' foreign policies have taken under different leaderships. Australia and the Philippines are both undergoing elections in May 2025, the midterm election for the Philippines and a federal election for Australia. The turnout of these elections will determine the countries' foreign policy direction. The hope is that the strategic partnership has institutionalized practices sufficiently to withstand drastic changes in the domestic or international realms.

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