



# Geopolitical Kingmakers: South Korea and the Philippines as Linchpins amid the China–US Competition

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## Abstract

South Korea and the Philippines hold pivotal geopolitical positions amidst escalating tensions between the USA and China. Both Seoul and Manila find themselves ensnared in the expanding rivalry between these great powers, subjecting them to numerous strategic challenges amid the prevailing regional *status quo* of instability. Despite their efforts to maintain a delicate balance, often characterized as hedging behavior, the space available for such maneuvering is diminishing, compelling them toward perilous geopolitical alignments. Therefore, this paper seeks to address the following questions: How does the shrinking space to hedge influence the alignment strategies of South Korea and the Philippines? How do their alignment choices impact the geopolitical dynamics of the China–US strategic competition? It argues that as this space contracts, they possess the capability to significantly influence the regional balance of power through their alignment, which we frame as the kingmaker’s role and the power of the weak paradox. Seoul, navigating the complex dynamics of the Korean Peninsula, must carefully weigh its commitments to both Washington and Beijing, particularly in light of ongoing developments with North Korea. Meanwhile, Manila, in the aftermath of the Duterte administration’s alignment oscillations, has sought to establish a clearer strategic direction largely influenced by tensions in the South China Sea. Both are now increasingly tacking hard toward Washington for security assurances and have acknowledged economic security anxieties concerning their links with Beijing. Furthermore, they are placing greater emphasis on upholding the rules-based international order amid growing global uncertainties.

## Introduction

The advent of the China–US peer competition has arrived, intensifying, proliferating, and spawning uncertainty within an era of power diffusion, bringing forth a “*status quo* of

instability.”<sup>1</sup> The Asia–Pacific region now garners the bulk of scholarly attention, as it is recognized as the main theater for the China–US competition, in which Beijing and Washington seek to orchestrate power and influence as a power play over various secondary states caught in the middle.<sup>2</sup> While realist approaches often conflate power and influence reducing both to material capabilities, power is better regarded as “the ability of A to make B do something it would otherwise not do,” with the result of exercising power being influence, as influence is the actualization of power.<sup>3</sup> Framing the pursuit of power and influence this way appropriately emphasizes the significance of winning influence over crucial secondary states by the competing great powers to ensure their alignment with either great power and was central to bygone great power competitions. For example, “the guiding principle for the Cold War was alignments” and thus a competition for influence.<sup>4</sup> In short, winning influence over secondary states pays dividends as geopolitical force multipliers in a strategic competition and are thus under increasing pressure to essentially choose a side.<sup>5</sup> Yet, various secondary states are identified as being more significant than others and can be referred to as strategically significant secondary states or linchpins. This constitutes a power of the weak paradox, considering that secondary states with geopolitical significance can tip the balance of power in favor of the great power, with which they seek alignment.

Shifts in the balance of power in Northeast and Southeast Asia have placed South Korea and the Philippines under lenses of scrutiny concerning their ability to cope with the intensifying systemic pressures. Geopolitically, both South Korea and the Philippines are identified by Beijing as part of China’s concept of the near sea (*Jinbai*) and first island chain, as noted by former People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) Admiral Liu Huaqing. They are also recognized by Washington as regional “linchpins,” with Japan acknowledged by the USA as a regional “cornerstone.”<sup>6</sup> The term “linchpin” refers to South Korea and the Philippines’ pivotal positions at the frontline of competing regional ambitions of the USA and

<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Cook, Maximilian Ohle, and Zhaoying Han, “The Illusion of the China-US-Europe Strategic Triangle: Reactions for Germany and the UK,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2022), p. 494.

<sup>2</sup> Victor D. Cha, “Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System,” *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (2010), pp. 158–96; Evelyn Goh, *The Struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy, and Transition in Post-Cold War East Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Simon Reich and Richard Ned Lebow, *Good-Bye Hegemony! Power and Influence in the Global System* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 31–5; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979), p. 118; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 56; Robert Dahl, “The Concept of Power,” *Behavioral Science*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1957), p. 202; Ruth Zimmerling, *Influence and Power: Variations on a Messy Theme* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), p. 105.

<sup>4</sup> Brandon Valeriano, *Becoming Rivals: The Process of Interstate Rivalry Development* (New York, NY, and London: Routledge, 2013), p. 135; Odd Arne Wested, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Kai He and Huiyun Feng, *After Hedging: Hard Choices for the Indo-Pacific States Between the United States and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Huaqing Liu, *Liu Huaqing huiyilu (Memoirs of Liu Huaqing)* (Beijing: People’s Liberation Army Publishing House, 2007), p. 437; Huaqing Liu, “Haijun zhanlue yu mulaihai shang zuozhan” (“Naval Strategy and Maritime Operations”), 29 April 1986, in Huaqing Liu, ed., *Liu Huaqing Junshi Wenxuan (Selected Military Writings of Liu Huaqing)* (Beijing: People’s Liberation Army Publishing House, 2008), p. 467; The White House, “United States-Republic of Korea Leaders’ Joint Statement,” 21 May 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/21/united-states-republic-of-korea-leaders-joint-statement/>; CDR Marie Angelica De Castro Sisican, “Redesigning the United States-Philippines Security Partnership: A Nodal Dense Approach to the Indo-Pacific,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 6 (2023), pp. 1–19, <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Sep/21/20033056666-1-1/1/JIPA%20-%20SISICAN.PDF>; Andrew S. Erikson and Joel Wuthnow, “Barriers, Springboards and Benchmarks: China Conceptualizes the Pacific Island Chains,” *China Quarterly*, Vol. 225 (2016), pp. 1–22; Andrew S. Erikson and Joel Wuthnow, “Why Islands Still Matter in Asia: The Enduring Significance of the Pacific Island Chains,” *National Interest*, 5 February 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-islands-still-matter-asia-15121>; G. John Ikenberry, “Three Worlds: The West, East and South and the Competition to Shape Global Order,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 100, No. 1, (2024), p. 135.

China, while Japan acts as a secure rear base of the US security architecture in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>7</sup> When viewed through a geopolitical lens, South Korea and the Philippines's linchpin *loci* pins them to critical junctures amid the Yellow Sea, Tsushima Strait, as well as the Luzon Strait, Sulu Sea, and South China Sea (SCS), running the full length of the first island chain, thereby either able to cement US regional power or representing a crack from which China may breach it. In essence, the Korean Peninsula represents a pendulum-esque dagger that can be swung toward Chinese or US geopolitical interests in Northeast Asia, much in the same way Korea was recognized as a springboard for Japanese imperial ambitions in the late 19th century by a Prussian military adviser to Japan Klemens Wilhelm Jakob Meckel: “*Korea ist ein Dolch, der auf Japans Herz gerichtet ist*”—Korea is a dagger pointed at the heart of Japan.<sup>8</sup> The Philippines likewise represents a sieve-like archipelago that can be used to allow transit or impede passage, while offering a forward base in the SCS and Taiwan Strait. These geopolitical circumstances provide South Korea and the Philippines with a degree of unforeseen geopolitical power, wherein Seoul and Manila's policies and alignment choices can either reinforce US regional efforts or undermine them in favor of China, emphasizing their linchpin status and simultaneously underscoring the dangers of such linchpins, making an alignment choice. Both South Korea and the Philippines have been identified as states practicing hedging behavior in order to cope with the burden of systemic pressure from the China–US strategic competition. They are attempting to balance security and economic concerns, emitting signals of strategic oscillations, and attempting to rectify security-driven insurance with economically focused return maximization within a regional juxtaposition of US and Chinese influencing efforts.<sup>9</sup>

Hedging has widely been identified as the go-to behavioral determinant for many regional secondary states faced with uncertainties brought about by the rise of China.<sup>10</sup> However, despite being routinely identified as a flexible coping behavior suitable for regional secondary states, hedging has limitations, particularly as systemic pressures via great power balancing intensify, the space to hedge begins to shrink.<sup>11</sup> As such, with a shrinking space to hedge identified and the prospect of secondary states having to make a fundamental choice between China and the USA, this paper poses the following questions: How does the shrinking space to hedge influence the alignment behavior of South Korea and the Philippines? What impact do their alignment choices have on the geopolitical dynamics of the China–US strategic competition? Although the bulk of international relations scholarship recognizes the importance of great powers, by shifting the focus onto secondary states such as South Korea and the Philippines, we discern that a power of the weak paradox exists wherein secondary states undertake a kingmaker's role and are faced with a kingmaker's conundrum. This role is represented as a choice that can tip the regional balance of power, once the space to hedge has shrunk entirely. Correspondingly, we pose that this choice represents an overlooked strategic anxiety and strategic burden that must be tackled as systemic pressure

<sup>7</sup> Richard J. Cook, Maximilian Ohle, and Zhaoying Han, “The Kingmaker's Conundrum: South Korea Navigating the Sino-US Peer Competition,” in Kari Roberts and Saira Bano, eds., *The Ascendancy of Regional Powers in Contemporary US-China Relations* (Cham: Springer, 2023), p. 93.

<sup>8</sup> Susanna Bastaroli, “Als das ‘drollige’ Japan plötzlich Großmacht wurde” (“When the ‘Droll’ Japan Became a Great Power”), *Die Presse*, 20 July 2014, <https://www.diepresse.com/3841250/als-das-drollige-japan-plotzlich-grossmacht-wurde>.

<sup>9</sup> Sukjee Han, “From Engagement to Hedging: South Korea's New China Policy,” *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2008), pp. 335–51; Cook, Ohle, and Han, “The Kingmaker's Conundrum,” pp. 91–111; Mary Fides A. Quintos, “The Philippines: Hedging in a Post-Arbitration South China Sea,” *Asian Politics & Policy*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2018), pp. 261–82; Joseph Ching Velasco and Weiqing Song, “Nexus of Strong Presidentialism and Philippines Foreign Policy: The Case of Duterte Presidency's Hedging toward China,” *Pacific Focus*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (2023), pp. 349–77.

<sup>10</sup> Evelyn Goh, “Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies,” *Policy Studies*, No. 16. Washington, D.C.: East-West Center, 2005, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/meeting-china-challenge-us-southeast-asian-regional-security-strategies>.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Korolev, “Shrinking Room for Hedging: System-Unit Level Dynamics and Behavior of Smaller Powers,” *International Relations of the Asia Pacific*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2019), p. 420; He and Feng, *After Hedging*, p. 7.

ratchets up when great power competition assumes regional bipolar balancing conditions which Northeast and Southeast Asia now embody.<sup>12</sup>

The paper proceeds as follows. First, the *status quo* of instability is critically reviewed to contextualize the regional systemic pressures *vis-à-vis* the China–US peer competition. Second, we explicate the theoretical dynamics of hedging and a shrinking space to hedge for regionally significant secondary states or linchpins while identifying a potential kingmaker role, thereby acknowledging overlooked secondary state leverage and agency amid great power peer competitions. Third, the empirical analysis focuses on South Korea’s relations with both China and the USA through the Moon (2017–22) and Yoon (2022–present) administrations, followed by the Philippines’ relations with China and the USA through the Duterte (2016–22) and Marcos Jr (2022–present) administrations, chosen due to respective timespan correlations. By analyzing foreign policy discourse and signals through a time series analysis, a closer examination of Seoul and Manila’s precarious position amid a shrinking space to hedge can be assessed as well as the corresponding effect on the wider regional geopolitical alignments. Finally, this paper discusses South Korea and the Philippines’s strategic anxieties with respect to a shrinking space to hedge, their kingmaker’s role, as well as the geopolitical implications and their respective roles amid the China–US strategic competition.

## Framing the Status Quo of Instability and Regional Linchpins as Kingmakers

Secondary states have long played fulcrum roles in great power competitions across the Asia–Pacific. During the Second World War, the USA achieved naval supremacy in the region after the Battle of the Leyte Gulf in 1944, thus cementing the Philippines’ significance. Moreover, symbolized by the two Koreas, the Korean Peninsula presents a geopolitical fault line along the 38th Parallel since the end of the Korean War (1950–53), which served as the chief catalyst for expanding US defense expenditure and order orchestration in the wider Asia–Pacific.<sup>13</sup> For Washington, South Korea and the Philippines represent liberal-democratic linchpins in the region, while Japan is described as a “cornerstone.”<sup>14</sup> Along with Tokyo, Seoul and Manila have received long-time patronage from Washington as members of what is now commonly referred to as the US-led Rules-Based International Order (RIO)—conforming to a normative and value-based canon and practices of respecting human rights, democratic principles, the legal state doctrine, and market economic structures championed by the US liberal hegemony.<sup>15</sup> While under Trump, the USA incurred tensions with its Transpacific allies due to disputes over alliance commitments, the Biden administration has sought to reconsolidate the traditional bonds through friend-shoring as a means to counter an increasingly assertive China.<sup>16</sup> Washington under Biden has noted that the US “strategic competition” *vis-à-vis* China is “to win the 21st century” and is crucial as “Beijing has ambitions to create an enhanced sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and to become the world’s leading power,” representing “America’s most consequential

<sup>12</sup> Suisheng Zhao, “The US-China Rivalry in the Emerging Bipolar World: Hostility, Alignment, and Power Balance,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 31, No. 134 (2022), pp. 169–85.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel S. Kim, *The Two Koreas and the Great Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Department of Defense, “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Preparing a Networked Region,” 22 June 2019, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/department-of-defense-indo-pacific-strategy-report-2019.PDF>; The White House, “United States–Republic of Korea Leaders’ Joint Statement.”

<sup>15</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Lara Seligman and Robbie Gramer, “Trump Presses Japan to Pay Up for U.S. Troops,” *Foreign Policy*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/18/trump-japan-south-korea-pay-united-states-troops-billions-asia-pacific/>.

geopolitical challenge.”<sup>17</sup> While the strategic competition is nevertheless in its early years, Washington has started with its regional alliance system as an advantage, which is well established to influence secondary states in Northeast and Southeast Asia, where many expect a struggle for regional hegemony with China to occur.<sup>18</sup> As such, the USA expects allies to conform to a counterbalancing coalition against China to defend the RIO in the region, with particular emphasis on regional linchpins like South Korea and the Philippines.

Washington’s engagement with Beijing is based upon a liberal institutionalist, if not assimilationist, strategy following the conclusion of the Cold War to promote economic, and thus, political liberalization has ultimately failed.<sup>19</sup> In China’s eyes, the War on Terror and the 2008 global financial crisis punctured the once thought infrangible hegemony and thus made Washington’s “acceptance and accommodation” approach to Beijing—to accept US regional hegemony in return for accommodating China by giving it status and responsibility—futile.<sup>20</sup> As Blackwill and Tellis stress, “Beijing has used the benign US approach to the rise of Chinese power to strengthen its domestic economy and thus the CCP’s hold on power,” reverberating not merely in the failure of engagement but also Washington’s trepidation that Beijing shifted from “rule taker” to “rule maker” and “rule breaker.”<sup>21</sup> The Xi administration has thus accentuated *minzu fuxing* (national rejuvenation) and *Zhongguo meng* (Chinese Dream) as a manifestation to China’s growing global status and ambition under the auspices of a responsible great power. In particular, it offers alternative governance models, development paradigms, and values through *Zhongguo fang’an* (Chinese Solutions), which stand in sharp contrast to the RIO.<sup>22</sup> However, as rejuvenation transcribes aspirations for China’s regional primacy, many surmise that China is following the axiom of a rising great power, which would seek to orchestrate power and influence with the ambition to achieve regional hegemony for security.<sup>23</sup> Beijing, while claiming that it does not seek hegemony, (inadvertently) poses a distinct challenge to Washington’s regional supremacy, the legitimacy of the US-led regional order, and thus the regional *status quo*.<sup>24</sup> In March 2023, Xi referred to competitive elements of the strategic competition, accusing Washington of attempting to contain, encircle, and suppress China, which ultimately necessitates Washington’s mobilization of US allies and partners.<sup>25</sup> While it is highly unlikely that long-standing US allies subscribed to the RIO would defect and align with China, disrupting the regional order with “wedging” and

<sup>17</sup> The White House, “Remarks by President Biden in Address to Joint session of Congress,” 28 April 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/29/remarks-by-president-biden-in-address-to-a-joint-session-of-congress/>; The White House, “The Indo Pacific Strategy of the United States,” 11 February 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Jae Jeok Park and Erwin Tan, “Exploiting Sino-US Geostrategic Competition: The View from Seoul and Singapore,” *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2018), p. 541; Wen Zha, “Southeast Asia amid Sino-US Competition: Power Shift and Regional Order Transition,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2023), pp. 241–61; Alfred Gerstl, *Hedging Strategies in Southeast Asia: ASEAN, Malaysia, The Philippines, and Vietnam and their Relations with China* (London: Routledge, 2022), p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, “The Failure of the ‘Failure of Engagement’ with China,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 2, (2019), pp. 99–100.

<sup>20</sup> Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, p. 356.

<sup>21</sup> Robert D. Blackwill and Ashley J. Tellis, “Revising U.S. Grand Strategy Toward China,” Council on Foreign Relations, Council Special Report, No. 72 (2015), p. 20; Zhaohui Wang, “The Economic Rise of China: Rule-Taker, Rule-Maker, or Rule-Breaker?” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (2017), pp. 597–8.

<sup>22</sup> Feng Zhang, *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 2; Odd Arne Wested, “The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Are Washington and Beijing Fighting a New Cold War?” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 5, (2019), p. 87.

<sup>23</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 141; Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 108.

<sup>24</sup> Randal L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu, “After Unipolarity: China’s Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline,” *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2011), p. 54.

<sup>25</sup> Keith Bradsher, “China’s Leader, With Rare Bluntness, Blames U.S. Containment for Troubles,” *New York Times*, 7 March 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/07/world/asia/china-us-xi-jinping.html>.

neutralization of secondary state(s) is a prospect, as Beijing does not practice alliance politics.<sup>26</sup>

Simultaneously, waning regional views of China disclose increasing suspicion toward its ambitions and intentions, despite Beijing's efforts to deter notions of a China threat. In an attempt to remedy this, Yan Xuetong's conceptualization of *wangdao* (humane authority) "represents the view that China can and wishes to be an enlightened, benevolent hegemon whose power and legitimacy derive from its ability to fulfill other countries' security and economic needs—in exchange for their acquiescence to Chinese leadership."<sup>27</sup> This chimes well with Beijing's signaled ambition to regain its regional status as a great power, particularly when recognizing Chinese diplomats' efforts to instill a degree of asymmetry with regional powers, even prior to Xi's assumption of office, yet more pronounced following his ascension to power. Perhaps one of the more infamous lines acknowledging this was from former Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi at the 2010 ASEAN summit, "China is a big country and you are small countries, and that is a fact," which also captures concerns over Beijing's assertive signaling. Beijing therefore expects deference and can opt to *liangjian* (reveal the sword) in order to seek *hexin liyi* (core interests).

China is empowered with a strategic advantage when recognizing its significant bilateral trade indices with regional secondary states and linchpins, denoting trade dependency on the Chinese market, with which Washington has earmarked concern *vis-à-vis* its Transpacific allies. Recognizing trade dependency as the power to interrupt trade relations with a dependent economy, trade relations include latent power over a dependent state and thus a channel for influence. "The power to interrupt trade [is] an effective weapon in the struggle for power [over a dependent state]," as A making B do something as a result of the threat or actual loss of trade, which harms B's economic activity and thus influences B's policy and strategic preferences.<sup>28</sup> Here, trade dependency on the Chinese market when paired to geopolitical throes is therefore driving economic security debates (including trade diversification efforts and decoupling) in the region, akin to "weaponized trade interdependence," particularly when mobilized *vis-à-vis* geopolitical events are pinned by potential alignment shifts.<sup>29</sup> Here, South Korea is not a stranger to Beijing's responses. The 2017 Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) debacle, for instance, resulted in informal or gray zone economic sanctions designed to cajole Seoul, resulting in the "Three Noes," yet has left a lasting impression on South Korea. Similarly, in the aftermath of the Philippine Navy's unsuccessful attempt to apprehend Chinese fishermen near the contested Scarborough Shoal in April 2012, and President Benigno Aquino's endeavors to garner support for the dispute within ASEAN, along with initiating international arbitration, the Banana War unfolded.<sup>30</sup> During this period, Beijing suspended imports of diverse fruits from the Philippines and imposed restrictions on Chinese tourism to the country, aiming to exert influence on Manila's stance. This too had a lasting impact on how China is perceived in the Philippines and underscores China's assertiveness, *inter alia*, when trade relations spill over into security concerns and vice versa.

Threat perceptions hold paramount significance for secondary states within this rivalry. Factors such as aggregate power, geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and signals

<sup>26</sup> Timothy W. Crawford, "Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2011), pp. 155–89; Ruonan Liu and Feng Liu, "Contending Ideas on China's Non-Alliance Strategy," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2017), p. 153.

<sup>27</sup> Xuetong Yan, "The Age of Uneasy Peace: Chines Power in a Divided World," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (2019), p. 44.

<sup>28</sup> Albert O. Hirschman, *National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 16–7.

<sup>29</sup> Victor D. Cha, "Collective Resilience: Detering China's Weaponization of Economic Interdependence," *International Security*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2023), pp. 91–124.

<sup>30</sup> Xiangning Wu and Joseph Ching Velasco, "Examining the Philippines' China Policy: Great Powers and Domestic Politics," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 6 (2022), p. 679.

of intention collectively contribute to shaping these perceptions of threat.<sup>31</sup> This is also paired to the ambition of a rising great power, which tends to expand their relative capabilities, ambition for power and influence, and thus expectations that the regional *status quo* will be provoked, stoking anxiety in their neighbors and great power adversaries.<sup>32</sup> This chimes well with the notion that the changing power dynamics over time, and not a static distribution of power, is at the crux of how great powers and, more importantly, how secondary states gauge potential threats in great power peer competitions.<sup>33</sup> If a rising power is perceived as threatening, it will ultimately provoke others to align against them at their expense. Likewise, the secondary state(s) must assess whether the rising power is a supporter, spoiler, or shirker of the regional order, amplified by the complexity of the region as being sensitive, fluid, and hierarchical.<sup>34</sup> Such factors weigh into how states form foreign policy over time as “a state’s theory of how it can best cause security for itself,” particularly in times of uncertainty and more so amid a *status quo* of instability.<sup>35</sup>

### Linchpins, the Power of the Weak Paradox and the Kingmaker’s Role

Faced with uncertainty amid great power competition, secondary states can opt to hedge, which is considered to be the prevailing coping strategy. Hedging, although a contested concept due to it being applied with variation by states identified as hedgers and interpreted differently by authors, has the goal of mitigating risk amid structural uncertainty and system permissiveness.<sup>36</sup> Hedging is routinely defined as a behavior to “cultivate a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side at the obvious expense of the other” as “any behavior that sits between balancing and bandwagoning.”<sup>37</sup> Diverging from the dichotomy of balancing and bandwagoning by introducing hedging as a third behavior seem problematic *vis-à-vis* a secondary state mode of behavior since balancing is ontologically reserved for great powers *per se*. A neoclassical realist framework with a system-unit-level analysis helps distinguish that balancing between great powers is the source of system pressure and secondary states’ unit-level-driven foreign policy captures behaviors and strategies to cope.<sup>38</sup> Here, hedging would be better seen as any unit-level behavior that falls between “supplementing the balance” (siding with the established *status quo* great power) and bandwagoning (siding with the source of danger).<sup>39</sup> This also presupposes an ontological difference in great power hedging and secondary state hedging.

For a secondary state, hedging therefore exists as an “engage-and-resist strategy” *vis-à-vis* opposing great powers and their efforts to induce alignment, as they “see the future distribution of global power as uncertain and wish to avoid commitments that will be hard

<sup>31</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Kirshner, “The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Classical Realism and the Rise of China,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2010), p. 54.

<sup>33</sup> Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, p. 93.

<sup>34</sup> Schweller and Pu, “After Unipolarity,” p. 58; Van Jackson, “Power, Trust and Network Complexity: Three Logics of Hedging in Asian Security,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2014), pp. 338, 342.

<sup>35</sup> Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 13.

<sup>36</sup> Gerstl, *Hedging Strategies in Southeast Asia*, p. 17; Adam P. Liff, “Unambivalent Alignment: Japan’s China Strategy, the US Alliance, and the ‘Hedging’ Fallacy,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2019), p. 460; Kei Koga, “The Concept of ‘Hedging’ Revisited: The Case of Japan’s Foreign Policy Strategy in East Asia’s Power Shift,” *International Studies Review*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2018), p. 635; Jürgen Haacke, “The Concept of Hedging and its Application to Southeast Asia: A Critique and a Proposal for a Modified Conceptual and Methodological Framework,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2019), p. 392; Cheng-Chwee Kuik, “How do Weaker States Hedge? Unpacking ASEAN States’ Alignment Behavior towards China,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 25, No. 100 (2016), p. 500.

<sup>37</sup> Goh, “Meeting the China Challenge,” p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Korolev, “Shrinking Room for Hedging,” p. 420.

<sup>39</sup> Cook, Ohle, and Han, “The Illusion of the China-US-Europe Strategic Triangle,” p. 499.

to discharge.”<sup>40</sup> Such behavior includes dual-track cooperative and competitive elements, signaled efforts at “zigzagging between the great powers,” and thus a degree of “ambiguous, mixed and opposite positioning” as a means to offset risk.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, secondary states must contend with the space to hedge, which is impacted by the level of systemic pressure caused by great powers’ balancing intensity and the secondary states’ leadership being competent at a political “game of skill” for “middling” between the great powers.<sup>42</sup> When the space to hedge is wide, secondary states can prioritize return maximization, which is broadly associated with economic engagement, chiefly as secondary states are recognized as having greater space to engage in economic matters.<sup>43</sup> As balancing intensifies between the great powers, risks exacerbate as secondary states are caught in a crossfire of influencing efforts, meaning return maximization and risk management begin to modify one another as seeking insurance for security with a preferred great power becomes essential and economic engagement becomes securitized with the opposing great power.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, a secondary state can diversify a hedge via engagement with other secondary states as to avoid over-reliance on the great powers, yet as great powers and their balancing efforts represent sources of systemic pressure, a diversified hedge with other secondary states may only delay an inevitable choice.<sup>45</sup>

Since hedging is premised on structural uncertainty and systemic permissiveness, it can be inferred that when structural uncertainty decreases and power distribution between great powers becomes more certain—leading to a clearer understanding of the competition’s trajectory—“states are less likely to hedge when the geopolitical environment within which they operate becomes less permissive.”<sup>46</sup> This presupposes that hedging ends when the great power competition becomes more certain as the changing power dynamics become more pronounced, and one great power is seen to be gaining an edge over the other.<sup>47</sup>

Given the primacy of security, as system pressure rises and risks intensify, the hedger state may claim their preferred security insurance, befitting a choice between the opposing great powers. The choice, or refraining from it, likewise represents the secondary state as either a *status quo* or revisionist state *vis-à-vis* the regional balance of power, despite the challenging regional great power also being potentially characterized as revisionist.<sup>48</sup> *Ergo*, both systemic pressures and unit-level foreign policy factors implicate a space to hedge and impact an alignment choice, fueling the *status quo* of instability. Hedging therefore becomes “difficult, if not impossible,” to maintain as intensifying competition between great powers

<sup>40</sup> Vidya Nadkarni, *Strategic Partnerships in Asia: Balancing without Alliances* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 45; Matias Spektor, “In Defense of the Fence Sitters: What the West gets Wrong about Hedging,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 102, No. 3, (2023), p. 8.

<sup>41</sup> Robert J. Art, “Europe Hedges its Security Bets,” in T. V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, eds., *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 179–213; Korolev, “Shrinking Room for Hedging,” p. 420; Kuik, “How do Weaker States Hedge?” pp. 500–14.

<sup>42</sup> Korolev, “Shrinking Room for Hedging,” p. 420; Mark Beeson and Richard Higgot, “The Changing Architecture of Politics in the Asia-Pacific: Australia’s Middle Power Moment?” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2014), p. 223.

<sup>43</sup> Beeson and Higgot, “The Changing Architecture of Politics in the Asia-Pacific,” p. 221.

<sup>44</sup> Zha Wen, “Leader Security and Hedging in the Era of Great Power Rivalry: Responses of the Philippines and Singapore,” *China International Strategy Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2, (2022), p. 307; Cook, Ohle, and Han, “The Illusion of the China-US-Europe Strategic Triangle,” p. 513.

<sup>45</sup> Jackson, “Power, Trust and Network Complexity,” pp. 333–4.

<sup>46</sup> Alexander Korolev, “From Hedging to Balancing: Australia’s China Policy and Implications for US-China Rivalry,” in Kari Roberts and Saira Bano, eds., *The Ascendancy of Regional Powers in Contemporary US-China Relations* (Cham: Springer, 2023), pp. 74–5.

<sup>47</sup> Alexander Korolev, “Transition from Hedging to Balancing in Australia’s China Policy: Theoretical and Empirical Explorations,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 5 (2023), pp. 551–2.

<sup>48</sup> Park and Tan, “Exploiting Sino-US Geostategic Competition,” pp. 537–55.

will lead to a “choice, sooner or later,” between opposing great powers, and states will reach “tipping points” as “great powers may demand a clear commitment.”<sup>49</sup>

IR retains a tendency to theoretically minimize secondary states and their impact on the geopolitical dynamics of great power strategic competitions. Yet, secondary states play important fulcrum roles “at moments of international transition” as they are pressurized to make a choice.<sup>50</sup> Embodying a regional linchpin, “the secondary state is in an enviable position to hold the regional balance of power, yet when caught in regional bipolar structures of great power competition, they become vulnerable to systemic pressures, shrinking their space to hedge.”<sup>51</sup> Here, competing great powers must provide incentives to the secondary state, as an alignment choice would result in the secondary state enabling one great power’s regional power projection over the other. The choice is hazardous, as it may not necessarily lead to a more stable security or economic environment, opening the secondary state up to countermeasures. Moreover, the secondary state will seek a guarantee of reliability from their preferred great power, as concerns about abandonment would be significant. This choice denotes a kingmaker’s conundrum and a kingmaker’s role when pressed to make an alignment choice. Here, we define the kingmaker’s role as a regionally significant secondary state or linchpin holding the balance of power and the kingmaker’s conundrum as the choice between opposing poles, recognized as *cui adhaereo praest* [the party to which I adhere getteth the upper hand].<sup>52</sup> The linchpin, therefore, embodies a power of the weak paradox granting it leverage, wherein it may determine the geopolitical rivalry as its role acts as a force multiplier for a great power *vis-à-vis* its alignment choice, thus impacting regional security architectures and the regional balance of power, normally reserved for great powers.<sup>53</sup> This challenges the notion that “[small and middle powers have] limited influence on deciding the distribution of power in a given regional system.”<sup>54</sup> Considering the wider geopolitical dynamics at play in a great power competition, the more linchpins it brings on side, the greater its power and influence is over the opposing great power competitor. Such a circumstance empowers the linchpin and their decision makers, as the significance of its agency increases. “Agency is a result of practice rather than its source” as secondary states will ultimately determine whether it makes an alignment choice in favor of one of the great powers, despite influencing efforts by the great powers.<sup>55</sup>

As such, secondary states facing a kingmaker’s conundrum play a significant, yet vastly overlooked role in great power competitions, particularly as the shrinking space to hedge is an undertheorized research trajectory. They face alignment choices that may supplement the established power or support the challenger befitting a rational choice of security and economic benefits. It is here where opposing great powers will acknowledge these secondary states as regional linchpins due to their “geographic position” and “extreme strategic significance” and will attempt to influence their role as kingmakers, as demand for them is high to win the great power competition.<sup>56</sup> Likewise, if the number of regional kingmakers is

<sup>49</sup> He and Feng, *After Hedging*, p. 7; Gerstl, *Hedging Strategies in Southeast Asia*, p. 19.

<sup>50</sup> Beeson and Higgott, “The Changing Architecture of Politics in the Asia-Pacific,” p. 215.

<sup>51</sup> Cook, Ohle, and Han, “The Kingmaker’s Conundrum,” p. 95; Korolev, “Shrinking Room for Hedging,” pp. 419–52.

<sup>52</sup> Cook, Ohle, and Han, “The Kingmaker’s Conundrum,” pp. 95–6; Randal L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler’s Strategy of World Conquest* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 53; Herbert Butterfield, “The Balance of Power,” in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, eds., *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 159.

<sup>53</sup> James Manicom and Jeffrey Reeves, “Locating Middle Powers in International Relations Theory,” in Bruce Gilley and Andrew O’Neil, eds., *Middle Powers and the Rise of China* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2014), pp. 23–44.

<sup>54</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 76.

<sup>55</sup> Janice Bially Mattern, “A Practice Theory of Emotion for International Relations,” in Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, eds., *International Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 72–5.

<sup>56</sup> Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances*, p. 18.

low, demand for them and their respective roles are also heightened. High demand increases secondary state bargaining power to offset the potential loss of benefits from the opposing great power. Secondary states will, nevertheless, prefer to maintain a hedging posture for benefit maximization, as long as it is possible. Yet, as they attempt to balance their respective position, they may frustrate the great power's regional ambitions, which may engender hostility as each great power will seek to gain a geopolitical edge over the other.<sup>57</sup> Mindful that a choice may create a regional imbalance of power and exacerbate instability by overthrowing the *status quo*; however, unstable kingmakers must exercise significant unenviable caution in foreign policy and strategy formulation when conditions that facilitate hedging are deteriorating.

Here, the conceptualization of the kingmaker's role is utilized to assess how South Korea and the Philippines cope with the intensifying China-US geostrategic competition. By engaging with South Korean foreign policy discourse, from President Moon Jae-in (2017–22) to President Yoon Suk Yeol (2022–present), and Philippines foreign policy discourse from President Rodrigo Duterte (2016–22) to President Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr (2022–present), we analyze specific signals supported with policy experts' assessments overlaid by a time series analysis, insinuating alignment drivers of Seoul and Manila as they navigate their respective shrinking space to hedge and how they approach their evolving kingmaker's role. As we borrow from Xiaoyu Pu, "signaling uses a subset of signals to convey the information that a state is asserting a particular standing" toward a state-to-state relationship, event, or issue.<sup>58</sup> This allows the analysis to frame the shrinking space to hedge and changing geopolitical dynamics *vis-à-vis* the intensifying China-US strategic competition, as well as to illustrate the emergence of the kingmaker's conundrum. Of particular significance are official political statements and press releases addressing relations with China and the USA, explicit security interests such as *alliance*, (*self*-)defense as well as *THAAD deployment* (only South Korea) or *SCS* (Philippines only), or specific gestures such as bilateral or multilateral meetings which signal joint commitments and deeper cooperation. As the following sections show, although South Korea and the Philippines have the capacity to play a kingmaker's role and thus crown the USA or China in Northeast and Southeast Asia, they simultaneously recognize the challenging costs involved and the dangers of holding the geopolitical balance of power.

## The THAAD Debacle and Moon's Balanced Diplomacy

Throughout his presidency (2017–22), Moon Jae-in placed emphasis on accommodating both alliance commitments to the USA and cooperation with China through *Balanced Diplomacy*. Beijing essentially saw the deployment of THAAD as a geopolitical force multiplier for US military capabilities in Northeast Asia and a violation of its core interests as "[THAAD] goes far beyond the defense need of the Korean Peninsula."<sup>59</sup> Although the Park administration (2013–17) pressed ahead with THAAD deployments after North Korea's nuclear test on 6 January 2016, the issue was left in the hands of Moon, having succeeded her following her impeachment.<sup>60</sup> Beijing perceived THAAD as a destabilizing action and as such responded through economic means with unofficial sanctions. The result was USD 7.5

<sup>57</sup> Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances*, p. 54.

<sup>58</sup> Xiaoyu Pu, *Rebranding China: Contested Status Signaling in the Changing Global Order* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 19.

<sup>59</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Wang Yi: Deployment of the THAAD Missile Defense System Goes beyond Actual Defense Need," 11 March 2016, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/gjhdq\\_665435/3124\\_665443/3220\\_664352/3222\\_664356/201603/t20160315\\_559386.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/3124_665443/3220_664352/3222_664356/201603/t20160315_559386.html).

<sup>60</sup> Richard J. Cook, Maximilian Ohle, and Zhaoying Han, "Bargaining Interactions Reconsidered: The Korean Peninsula Nuclear Crisis Viewed through the Lens of Hierarchy," *Pacific Review*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2021), p. 132.

billion in losses for South Korea.<sup>61</sup> Likewise, mobilized nationalism through state-owned media such as *Global Times* noted that Chinese citizens “should coordinate voluntarily in expanding restrictions on South Korean cultural goods and entertainment exports to China, and block them when necessary.”<sup>62</sup> Seoul perceived the response as punishment for acting in self-defense *vis-à-vis* Pyongyang aggression, particularly as THAAD occupies a defensive nature to intercept ballistic missiles. Yet, its radar detection range does possess the ability to identify Chinese intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) and other military activities.<sup>63</sup> Beijing would also refuse to partake in additional United Nations Security Council sanctions on Pyongyang, vetoing them alongside Moscow, going on to critique the effectiveness of past sanctions. While Beijing had its reservations about THAAD, other geopolitical considerations influenced China’s stance. These included concerns about sanctions or regional instability leading to regime collapse or the Kim regime risking an all or nothing conflict. In such scenarios, China could potentially face a refugee crisis, regional devastation, and the emergence of a unified Korea under Seoul. For China, this outcome is unacceptable not only in contemporary terms but also historically, given Japan’s invasions of China via Korea and the Korean War.<sup>64</sup>

While Moon would maintain the initial deployments of THAAD, his administration would limit deployments and signaled the Three Noes policy principle in an effort to balance China’s concerns with South Korea’s defensive posture with the USA over Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons development. The Three Noes therefore represented “efforts to compromise with both great powers.”<sup>65</sup> They constituted: (1) no additional THAAD deployments; (2) no participation in any regional missile defense system under the umbrella of the USA; and (3) no trilateral alliance with Japan and the USA.<sup>66</sup> The Three Noes ultimately signaled an effort of agency from Moon to reassure Beijing that it grasped its security concerns and further recognized that if Seoul’s strategy were to remove the Three Noes, it would be geopolitically opting for a closer alignment with Washington akin to its kingmaker’s role. Likewise, Moon essentially left the door open for cooperation with Beijing over the North Korean nuclear issue, as further shifts toward Washington would likely see Beijing be less forthcoming on penalizing Pyongyang.

Despite criticism directed at Moon for seemingly providing Beijing with a strategic reward through compromising South Korea’s national defense, the principles of the Three Noes became entrenched in South Korean foreign policy discourse in order to signal more regional calm over the THAAD dispute.<sup>67</sup> Yet, the South Korean ministry of foreign affairs (MOFAROK) reiterated that “Seoul has consistently made clear [to China that] any issues that can restrict our security sovereignty would never be subject to negotiation.”<sup>68</sup> An underlying issue stemming from the THAAD debacle was a deterioration of relations between

<sup>61</sup> Haneul Lee, Tobias Harris, and Alan Yu, “Rising Anti-China Sentiment in South Korea Offers Opportunities To Strengthen US-ROK Relations,” Center for American Progress, 2 August 2022, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/rising-anti-china-sentiment-in-south-korea-offers-opportunities-to-strengthen-us-rok-relations/>; Darren J. Lim and Victor A. Ferguson, “Informal Economic Sanctions: The Political Economy of Chinese Coercion During the THAAD Dispute,” *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 29, No. 5 (2022), pp. 1525–48.

<sup>62</sup> Ben Blanchard and Ju-min Park, “China Reacts with Anger, Threats after South Korean Missiles Defense Decision,” *Reuters*, 28 February 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN16709W/>.

<sup>63</sup> Cook, Ohle, and Han, “Bargaining Interactions Reconsidered,” p. 126.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>65</sup> Wonjae Hwang and Hayoun Jessie Ryou-Ellison, “Taking a Side between the United States and the People’s Republic of China: Strategic Hedging of Korea and India,” *International Area Studies Review*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2021), p. 68.

<sup>66</sup> Darren J. Lim, “Chinese Economic Coercion during the THAAD Dispute,” *The Asan Forum*, 28 December 2019, <https://theasanforum.org/chinese-economic-coercion-during-the-thaad-dispute/>.

<sup>67</sup> Troy Stangarone, “Did South Korea’s Three Noes Matter? Not so much,” *The Diplomat*, 30 October 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/did-south-koreas-three-noes-matter-not-so-much/>.

<sup>68</sup> Jun-suk Yeo, “No Secret Agreement over THAAD: Foreign Ministry,” *The Korea Herald*, 2 November 2017, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20171102000925>.

China and South Korea, which was further fueled by South Koreans holding unfavorable views of China due to its response, which have been further degraded due to greater geopolitical tension and China's handling of COVID-19.<sup>69</sup> Moon's *Balanced Diplomacy* therefore signaled a damage control-oriented approach to mend relations with China, while simultaneously bidding for a wider security assurance with Washington.

Moon would continuously offer an olive branch to the Kim regime in an effort to signal diplomacy despite the partial insurance sought with limited THAAD deployments. His administration's New Northern Policy launched in 2017 envisioned economic cooperation as the basis for denuclearization and inter-Korean unification by strengthening partnerships and connectivity across Northeast Asia with a focus on North Korea.<sup>70</sup> Pyongyang nevertheless showed little interest in commitments and denuclearization. While the meetings between Moon and North Korea's supreme leader Kim Jong-un in Panmunjom on 27 April and 26 May 2018, as well as in Pyongyang on 18–20 September 2018, followed by Kim's meetings with then US President Trump in Singapore and Hanoi, initially signaled a thaw in relations, Kim resumed missile tests in May 2019.<sup>71</sup> As such, South Korea remained principally attached to the US security architecture for needed deterrence. In May 2021, Moon visited US President Biden, underlining the alliance commitments which they saw as "the linchpin for stability and prosperity," along with a call for denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>72</sup> Both presidents signaled the growing significance of a deterrence posture for the Transpacific alliance. They agreed to deepen cooperation in other domains such as cybersecurity and space to respond to activities constituting a threat against the RIO on the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait.<sup>73</sup> The joint statement from Seoul and Washington elicited a heated response from Beijing. Xing Haiming, the Chinese ambassador to South Korea, presumed that both Biden and Moon designated China as the principal threat, while spokesperson Zhao Lijian of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused Seoul and Washington of interference in Chinese domestic affairs.<sup>74</sup> As such, Moon's balanced diplomacy was giving way to an impetus to prioritize deterrent toward the end of his administration, as the space to hedge continued to shrink.

While Moon signaled closer policy alignment with the USA, he again did not choose sides, dodging Seoul's role as a kingmaker. He recognized that South Korea was better off if it did not lean toward either geopolitical pole too sharply, given the dependence on both US security reassurances and economic engagement with China and Chinese sanctioning capabilities. However, while oscillating between the USA and China, Moon's hedging posture exempted him from becoming a kingmaker in the China-US peer competition.

## Yoon Prioritizes Deterrence Pushing Seoul Toward the Kingmaker's Role

Throughout President Yoon's election campaign, he asserted that Moon's policies were "tilting towards China" and that "South Korea has succumbed to Chinese economic retaliation

<sup>69</sup> Laura Silver, Christine Huang, and Laura Clancy, "Negative Views of China Tied to Critical Views of its Policies on Human Rights," Pew Research Center, 29 June 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/06/29/negative-views-of-china-tied-to-critical-views-of-its-policies-on-human-rights/>.

<sup>70</sup> Ministry of Unification of the Republic of Korea, "Moon Jae-in's Policy on the Korean Peninsula," 2017, [https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng\\_unikorea/policy/issues/koreanpeninsula/principles/](https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/policy/issues/koreanpeninsula/principles/).

<sup>71</sup> Missile Defense Project, "Missiles of North Korea," Missile Threat, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 14 June 2018, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/dprk/>.

<sup>72</sup> The White House, "U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement," 21 May 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/21/u-s-rok-leaders-joint-statement/>.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Elizabeth Shim, "China's Diplomats Voice Disapproval after U.S., South Korea Summit," *United Press International*, 24 May 2021, [https://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2021/05/24/South-Korea-US-summit-China-disapprove/7641621860443/](https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2021/05/24/South-Korea-US-summit-China-disapprove/7641621860443/).

[over THAAD deployments] at the expense of its own security interests,” while identifying China as a threat to South Korea’s interests.<sup>75</sup> He likewise placed emphasis on completing South Korea’s defensive posture *vis-à-vis* North Korea by signaling a desired shift from Moon’s *Balanced Diplomacy* and Three Noes to completing and enhancing a deterrence stance. Here, completing the THAAD deployments captures Yoon’s efforts to practice a “peace through strength” posture.<sup>76</sup> Noteworthy is that Yoon’s conservative leaning People Power Party traditionally retains a skeptical position on China and adheres to greater emphasis on deterrence *vis-à-vis* North Korea. Despite former Chinese Vice President Wang Qishan’s attendance at Yoon’s inauguration, Yoon’s stance remained unchanged as he signaled Moon’s Three Noes were neither a promise nor an agreement.<sup>77</sup> Pursuing a “deeper alliance” with Washington and a “future orientated diplomacy” to thaw relations with Tokyo, Yoon indicated a more proactive regional presence by supplementing a “free, open, and inclusive order in the Indo-Pacific” as “[the US and South Korea] will jointly build order in the Indo-Pacific region backed by norm-based international order.”<sup>78</sup> During Biden’s visit to South Korea to attend the US–South Korean Summit, and his following visit to Japan in May 2022, greater reverence for the defense of the RIO was emitted and hints toward trilateralism in Joint Statements were made. Both visits affirmed support for Biden’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, key for the US’s regional policy vision, albeit Yoon stressed Seoul’s own independent Indo-Pacific Strategy. Overtures toward trilateralism were again seen the following month at the 32nd NATO Summit in Madrid, wherein Biden, Yoon, and Kishida held a meeting, whereupon Yoon was the first South Korean President to take part in a NATO summit.

Seoul and Beijing relations continued to clash over THAAD and the Three Noes, as Beijing sought to encourage Seoul to follow the course of Moon’s *Balanced Diplomacy*. Concurrently, further regional tension was stoked with the former US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi’s August 2 visit to Taipei, which went on to trigger China’s reactionary military drills and the suspension of China–US military and diplomatic exchanges. In lieu of the deteriorating security environment, and opting not to chide China further, Yoon snubbed Pelosi’s follow-on visit to South Korea, yet nevertheless held a 40-min phone call with her, as a means to tame a middle ground. Yoon likely did not want to have the planned foreign ministers meeting in Qingdao later that month between Wang Yi and Park Jin scuttled by aggravating China. Concerning the meeting, both expressed THAAD would not become a “stumbling block,” yet Park appealed to Wang over Pyongyang’s expanding nuclear and missile capabilities. Wang’s official response made no mention of the nuclear issue, while the South Korean Foreign Ministry claimed Wang had said China would continue to make efforts on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>79</sup> Simultaneously, the Chinese Foreign Ministry went on to claim on 10 August that Seoul had agreed to a “Three Noes and One Restriction” policy principle and encouraged Yoon to stick to it. Here, the so-called “One Restriction” referred

<sup>75</sup> Suk-yeol Yoon, “South Korea Needs to Step Up: The Country’s Next President on His Foreign Policy Vision,” *Foreign Affairs*, 8 February 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-korea/2022-02-08/south-korea-needs-step>.

<sup>76</sup> Da-gyum Ji, “Yoon Suk-yeol Pursues ‘Peace through Strength’ on the Korean Peninsula,” *The Korea Herald*, 27 February 2022, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220227000098>.

<sup>77</sup> Soo-Hyang Choi and Joori Roth, “China to Send Vice President to South Korea President’s Inauguration,” *Reuters*, 6 May 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-send-vice-president-skorea-presidents-inauguration-2022-05-06/>.

<sup>78</sup> Yoon, “South Korea Needs to Step Up”; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, “Korea, US Upgrade Ties to ‘Global Comprehensive Strategic Alliance’,” 24 May 2022, [https://sgp.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5674/view.do?seq=320723](https://sgp.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5674/view.do?seq=320723).

<sup>79</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, “ROK-US Leaders’ Joint Summit,” 23 May 2022, [https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5674/view.do?seq=320722](https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5674/view.do?seq=320722); Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Chinese and ROK Foreign Ministers Have In-depth Exchange of Views on THAAD,” 10 August 2022, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx\\_662805/202208/t20220810\\_10738741.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202208/t20220810_10738741.html).

to an agreement that the USA would not operate the previously deployed THAAD battery systems.<sup>80</sup> The Yoon administration issued a rebuttal to dismiss the remark: “The government maintains a consistent position that THAAD is a means of self-defense to protect the lives and safety of Korean nationals, and it is a matter of our sovereignty.”<sup>81</sup> Despite Yoon’s signal that the establishment of a missile shield was “not negotiable” with China, Beijing called for “mutual respect” as it saw the potential violation of the Three Noes as the removal of a guardrail against its security interests and more broadly Washington’s ability to gain a geopolitical edge through further regional alliance cohesion.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, from Yoon’s position, mutual respect was not being reciprocated *vis-à-vis* Seoul’s own security stance, as without completing the deployment of THAAD batteries or allowing South Korea agency to deepen defensive postures by enhancing alliances, South Korean deterrent toward Pyongyang would be incomplete. Referring to China’s concerns, Yoon had remarked: “Just as South Korea does not oppose China’s Belt and Road Initiative and works with Beijing in trade and commerce, China for its part should accept, rather than oppose, South Korea’s cooperative system with its allies.”<sup>83</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the Qingdao meeting, the geopolitical dynamics witnessed further changes, as in the wake of a potential US–Japan–South Korea trilateralism, overtures from Putin to Kim hinted at the possibility of a rival China–Russia–North Korea trilateral entente in the making. Equally, Yoon’s Audacious Initiative was rejected by Kim, largely seen as a redux of the “Vision 3000 through Denuclearization and Openness” from the Lee Myung-bak administration (2008–13) which was tied to the “Grand Bargain” approach and the Six-Party Talks. The initiative was conditional, suggesting that if Pyongyang makes progress in denuclearization, Seoul would sponsor programs on food, industrial modernization, and financing for infrastructure.<sup>84</sup> It was deduced that the initiative could feed into Kim’s New Strategic Line to revive the North Korean economy, despite signals of self-reliance being central to Kim’s efforts and a prioritization of military development and regime survival with the *Byungjin* initiative (2011) and the simultaneous development of nuclear capability. Importantly, notions for any future Seoul-Pyongyang denuclearization initiatives were dashed and impetus for enhancing Seoul’s security stance was garnered by September 2022, when Kim Jong-un announced North Korea as an “irreversible” nuclear weapons state.<sup>85</sup> In response, the USA, Japan, and South Korea participated in trilateral maritime exercises in September 2022, demonstrating their ambitions to deepen security cooperation to cope adequately with security challenges in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>86</sup> Although not officially directed toward China, Russia, and North Korea, the trilateral exercises are

<sup>80</sup> He-rim Jo, “Seoul Dismisses Beijing’s Claim, Says THAAD Is Korea’s Means of Self-Defense,” *The Korea Herald*, 11 August 2022, <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220811000689>.

<sup>81</sup> Jo, “Seoul Dismisses Beijing’s Claim, Says THAAD Is Korea’s Means of Self-Defense”.

<sup>82</sup> Peter Lee, “South Korea’s Bind between North Korea and US China Strategy,” *East Asia Forum*, 6 March 2022, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/03/06/south-koreas-bind-between-north-korea-and-us-china-strategy/>; Scott A Snyder, “China-South Korea Relations Under South Korea’s New Yoon Administration: The Challenge of Defining ‘Mutual respect,’” Council on Foreign Relations, 12 May 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/china-south-korea-relations-under-south-koreas-new-yoon-administration-challenge-defining>; Seung-woo Kang, “Seoul Reiterates That ‘3 Nos’ Policy Is Not Commitment To China,” *Korea Times*, 10 August 2022, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2022/08/120\\_334199.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2022/08/120_334199.html).

<sup>83</sup> Yoon, “South Korea Needs to Step Up.”

<sup>84</sup> Scott A. Snyder, “Why North Korea Might Reject Yoon Suk-yeol’s Audacious Initiative,” *Forbes*, 18 August 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottasnayder/2022/08/17/why-north-korea-might-reject-yoon-suk-yeols-audacious-initiative/?sh=5d6e5b1d13a4>.

<sup>85</sup> Ellen Kim, “North Korea States It Will Never Give up Nuclear Weapons,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 9 September 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/north-korea-states-it-will-never-give-nuclear-weapons>; “DPRK SPA Law ‘On Policy of Nuclear Force of DPRK,’” *KCNA Watch*, 9 September 2022, <https://kcna.watch.org/newstream/1662800662-10863515/dprk-spa-law-on-policy-of-nuclear-force-of-dprk/>.

<sup>86</sup> Ministry of Defence of Japan, “Japan-United States-Republic of Korea Trilateral Exercise,” 30 September 2022, <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2022/09/619ce207beb7a134b48482d82552749db7d070a2.html>.

arguably a response to China's increasing assertiveness and North Korea's weapons testing and reinforce Washington's geopolitical efforts.

With the recourse for working with Beijing for North Korean denuclearization diminished, paired with Beijing's displeasure over Yoon's prioritization over THAAD and tilt toward potential trilateralism, Yoon had positioned Seoul as a geopolitical kingmaker. Recognizing the reduced space to hedge and the expectations of souring relations with Beijing as an outcome, Yoon signaled a departure from "security with the US, economy with China" (*anbonin mikuk, gyeongjenin jungkuk*) to "security with the US, economy with the world" (*anbonin mikuk, gyeongjenin segye*).<sup>87</sup> While Yoon maintained there should be "high-level strategic dialogues" with Beijing, he made it clear that economic interests with China should not dictate Seoul's broader foreign policy.<sup>88</sup> With economic links largely securitized since the THAAD debacle and the heightened emphasis from Washington toward its allies over economic security, economic diversification efforts became a significant factor in Seoul's interests, which can be seen with South Korea's position in the semiconductor supply chain. Seoul heavily relies on semiconductor exports to China, while simultaneously facing pressures from the USA to join the Chip 4 Alliance which seeks to exclude China from relevant supply chains. Seoul is, nevertheless, proceeding carefully on the Chip 4 Alliance, which Yoon's government is referring to it as a "supply chain consultative body" as opposed to an "alliance," likely in an effort to lower tension.<sup>89</sup> At its crux, efforts to curtail South Korean investment as well as technology and knowledge transfer into the Chinese market to counter China's growing influence over supply chains play a central role particularly when underscoring the geopolitics of the intensifying China-US technology war.<sup>90</sup> However, China accounts for a significant proportion of South Korea's semiconductor exports, placing chipmakers in a crossfire, and Beijing has already emitted veiled signals of potential retaliation, suggesting South Korea should "proceed from its own long-term interests [...] do more things that are conducive to the development of China-South Korea relations."<sup>91</sup>

The revival of the high-level Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group in May 2022 (with its first meeting transpiring in September 2022) to "expand the scope and scale of combined military exercises on and around the Korean Peninsula" is seen as a key priority and signal toward achieving greater alliance cohesion, despite long-time concerns over the operational control of the military.<sup>92</sup> Although the Extended Deterrence Strategy, referring to Washington's nuclear umbrella (also admissible for Japan's security), is directed at threats from Pyongyang, it can also be directed at China and Russia when considering heightened tension. Here, it is worth noting that 71% of South Koreans favor the acquisition

<sup>87</sup> Byeong-gi Moon, Jeon Juyeong, and Yi Sanhwun, "Hangug 'anmigiyeongjung à → anmigiyeongse' jeonhui... Yin "IPEF mudeun bunyaseo hyeongbyeog" (Korea's Transition from 'Economy with China' to 'Economy with the World'—Yun: IPEF Cooperation in All Directions)," *The Dong-A Ilbo*, 24 May 2022, <https://www.donga.com/news/Inter/article/all/20220524/113579077/1>.

<sup>88</sup> Lee, Harris, and Yu, "Rising Anti-China Sentiment in South Korea Offers Opportunities to Strengthen US-ROK Relations."

<sup>89</sup> Andrew Yeo, "Can South Korea Chart a Path between the US and China in the Indo-Pacific?" Brookings, 15 August 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/08/15/can-south-korea-chart-a-path-between-the-us-and-china-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

<sup>90</sup> Haye-ah Lee, "S. Korea Expresses Intent to Join Preliminary 'Chip 4' Meeting," *Yonhap News Agency*, 8 August 2022, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220808001500315>.

<sup>91</sup> Byung-yeul Baek, "Korea Still Balks at Joining US-Led Chip Alliance," *The Korea Times*, 31 July 2022, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/tech/2022/08/419\\_333648.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/tech/2022/08/419_333648.html).

<sup>92</sup> Scott A Snyder, "Evolution of U.S.-South Korean Coordination: Parsing Biden's Joint Statements with Moon and Yoon," Council on Foreign Relations, 24 May 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/evolution-us-south-korean-coordination-parsing-bidens-joint-statements-moon-and-yoon>.

of nuclear weapons.<sup>93</sup> If Seoul perceives Washington's nuclear umbrella and security provisions as unreliable, as well as North Korea's nuclear threat and China's offensive capability as high, nuclear weapon state status may be affirmed as a desirable ambition. Concurrently, Yoon had signaled the further need to integrate Seoul's deterrence posture with Washington with the three-axis system, a concept developed after Pyongyang's third nuclear test in 2016, now feasible due to Washington lifting the missile restriction guideline in June 2021, which had been in place since 1979. This would allow Seoul to launch intelligence gathering satellites and greater independent missile deterrence capability on paper, yet realistically requires forms of integrated cooperation with US military intelligence agencies for coordination and use due to the system dependence on Patriot-2 and Patriot-3 for medium range interceptions.<sup>94</sup>

To build on these developments, the August 2023 trilateral meeting between Biden, Kishida, and Yoon at Camp David signaled a significant shift toward functional trilateralism, with Biden laying the ground for a *casus foederis* in the event of a North Korean attack. From the meeting, an annual Indo-Pacific Dialogue was established which concluded its first meeting on 6 January 2024, wherein Pyongyang's nuclear weapons and missile programs were condemned, aside Beijing's "dangerous and escalatory behavior" in the SCS.<sup>95</sup> Accordingly, Seoul further signaled a significant convergence of trilateralism between Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo, fostering momentum for geopolitical alignment as a kingmaker within the so-called Spirit of Camp David. Critically, in September 2023, Kim Jong-un visited President Putin and Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu in Russia, where they signaled enhanced bilateral security cooperation. When pairing such developments with an emerging Beijing-Moscow entente *vis-à-vis* Washington and the RIO, an opposing trilateral constellation elucidates a distinct possibility. In such a scenario, China (as well as Russia) would be less likely to penalize Pyongyang for its nuclear weapons program or other related provocations. For instance, China and Russia vetoed a UNSC resolution in May 2022, which had been designed to impose additional sanctions on Pyongyang.<sup>96</sup>

On 16 January 2024, Kim Jong-un decreed, "we have formulated a new stand on the north-south relations and the policy of reunification and dismantled all the organizations we established as solidarity bodies for peaceful reunification," signaling the abandonment of peaceful reunification with the South.<sup>97</sup> When paired with Pyongyang's earlier declaration of its irreversible nuclear weapon state status, much of Seoul's strategic outreach for regional security with Beijing *vis-à-vis* Pyongyang has been nullified. Moreover, Yoon's apprehension of previous administrations and Beijing's failed attempts to rein in North Korea have largely set his administration on course for deterrence with Washington and opened the door to cordial security-driven relations with Tokyo, thereby pushing Seoul to grasp its kingmaker's role. Signals suggest considering concerns over Beijing's failed diplomacy with Pyongyang and greater value-driven reverence for the RIO in the wake of not merely regional instability but also global uncertainty coupled with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Seoul is increasingly

<sup>93</sup> Toby Dalton, Karl Friedhoff, and Lami Kim, "Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons," The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 21 February 2022, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/research/public-opinion-survey/thinking-nuclear-south-korean-attitudes-nuclear-weapons>.

<sup>94</sup> Doyoeng Jung, "South Korea's Revitalized 'Three-Axis' System," Council on Foreign Relations, 4 January 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/south-koreas-revitalized-three-axis-system>.

<sup>95</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Joint Statement on the Trilateral United States-Japan-Republic of Korea Indo-Pacific Dialogue", 6 January 2024, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-trilateral-united-states-japan-republic-of-korea-indo-pacific-dialogue/>.

<sup>96</sup> Sue Mi Terry, "South Korea Confronts the New Missile Age: 2020-2022," *The ASAN Forum*, 6 February 2023, <https://theasanforum.org/south-korea-confronts-the-new-missile-age-2020-2022/>.

<sup>97</sup> "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Policy Speech at 10th Session of 14th SPA," *KCNA Watch*, 16 January 2024, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1705369092-194545332/respected-comrade-kim-jong-un-makes-policy-speech-at-10th-session-of-14th-spa/>.

supportive of Washington's geopolitical position in Northeast Asia. Ultimately, Yoon's signals have become less ambiguous and have thrown off Seoul's zigzagging nature between Washington and Beijing, signifying an alignment preference with the USA and thus South Korea stepping up to its kingmaker's role in favor of Washington.

## President Duterte's Strategic Oscillations

Manila's geopolitical position has been significantly influenced by the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) with Washington. This treaty, viewed by the USA as a pivotal component of its hub-and-spokes system and as a vital regional node along the geopolitical fault line stretching from the Korean Peninsula to Southeast Asia, underscores the strategic importance of the Philippines. Additionally, the Philippines' designation as a major non-NATO ally since 2003 further emphasizes its role in the regional security architecture as a linchpin. However, following the ascension of the Duterte administration in 2016, Duterte opted to lean toward Beijing, which was characterized as a turn to an "independent foreign policy" and a departure from Manila's "three pillars," a threat to the long-standing MDT.<sup>98</sup> Importantly, despite being handed a breakthrough in the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) by the outgoing Aquino III administration over territorial disputes in the SCS with China, Duterte opted to downplay it to avoid irking Beijing and open a door for engagement. At the crux of Duterte's electoral program were domestic interests, chiefly to combat the rampant drug issue and to enhance infrastructure under the Build Build Build program and the new Development Plan 2017–22, which came to be known as DuterteNomics. The latter point was echoed in a statement by the then Secretary of Foreign Affairs Perfecto Yasay, "the relationship between the two countries [China and the Philippines] was not limited to the maritime dispute. There were other areas of concern in such fields as investment, trade, and tourism and discussion then could open the doors for talks on the maritime issues."<sup>99</sup> Noticing reduced tensions from Beijing toward countries like Laos and Cambodia upon joining the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Manila sought to engage in a similar manner. Engagement under the BRI was seen as a way to promote confidence building and mutual trust and was signaled by Duterte spending more time with the Chinese ambassador than any other foreign diplomat.<sup>100</sup> Duterte's early strategic approach can be characterized as follows: (1) downplay the SCS disputes, (2) foster economic relations with Beijing: (2a) seek infrastructure investment for development under the BRI and (2b) seek financial investment for development programs, and (3) distance Manila from Washington, which involved halting the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA).<sup>101</sup> Duterte "calculated that the Philippines' hard-line posture against China in the South China Sea dispute had strained the two countries' economic relations" and thus "required softening the country's confrontational stance on China," which were initial drivers for Duterte's "appeasement

<sup>98</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, "The Duterte Administration's Foreign Policy: Unravelling the Aquino Administration's Balancing Agenda on an Emergent China," *Journal of Current South East Asian Affairs*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2016), p. 160; Richard Javed Heydarian, "Tragedy of Small Power Politics: Duterte and the Shifting Sands of Philippine Foreign Policy," *Asian Security*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2017), pp. 220–36; For the "Three Pillars," see Ramon Magsaysay, "Roots of Philippine Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (1956), pp. 29–36.

<sup>99</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, "Navigating Between the Dragon and the Sun: The Philippines Gambit of Pitting Japan Against China in the South China Sea Dispute," in Jeffrey Homung and Kerry Lynn Nankivell, eds., *Chinese-Japanese Competition and the East Asian Security Complex: Vying for Influence* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 190.

<sup>100</sup> Heydarian, "Tragedy of Small Power Politics."

<sup>101</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, "China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Duterte Administration's Appeasement Policy: Examining the Connection between the Two National Strategies," *East Asia*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2019), p. 214; Zhaohui Wang and Yuheng Fu, "Local Politics and Fluctuating Engagement with China: Analysing the Belt and Road Initiative in Maritime Southeast Asia," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2022), pp. 163–82.

policy” toward Beijing.<sup>102</sup> Despite Duterte’s foreign policy shifts, it was initially unsettling to the Philippine public due to China’s continued poor public perception.<sup>103</sup>

Beijing reciprocated with support for Duterte’s signals for strategic autonomy and the domestic agenda his administration began to push. Moreover, the gap between Manila and Washington continued to grow. In particular, the war on drugs campaign irked Washington, leading to criticism of the Duterte administration over human rights and extra judicial killings. At the September 2016 ASEAN summit in Laos, Duterte put his efforts to appease Beijing into full play by initiating backroom talks.<sup>104</sup> The summit resulted in one of Duterte’s initial insulting remarks toward then President Obama in reference to wanting President Obama to keep off the subject of extra judicial killings amid the drug war, which resulted in talks with President Obama being canceled at the ASEAN summit.<sup>105</sup> Following the summit Duterte again signaled insulting remarks to Obama followed a few days later by “Eventually I might, in my time, I will break up with America. I would rather go to Russia and to China.” Moreover, Duterte used the USA’s move to revoke Philippine Senator Bato Dela Rosa’s visa over the issue of extrajudicial killings as a means to suspend the US–Philippine Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA).<sup>106</sup> By January 2020 during the Trump administration, Washington would ultimately sanction a range of leading Filipino government officials over the extrajudicial killings with the Magnitsky Act.

Duterte’s characteristically undiplomatic rhetoric should have come as no surprise, particularly his scorn toward Washington. “A self-described socialist, Duterte has been historically close to the Philippine communist movement, which vehemently opposes America’s military presence in the Philippines as an imperialist anchorism.”<sup>107</sup> In lieu of criticism toward the USA, in September 2016, Duterte had signaled his ambition to position Manila alongside Beijing and Moscow, going as far as describing efforts to conjure an “alliance.” The central geopolitical driver for Duterte’s disdain for the Washington–Manila alliance under the MDT was signaled as far back as October 2015, when discussing China’s reclamation activity in the SCS: “America did nothing” [...] “And now that it is completed, they want to patrol the area. For what?” [The US should have stopped China] “when the first spray of soil was tossed out to sea.”<sup>108</sup> Here, the concerns over US reliability *vis-à-vis* the MDT and the SCS were significant points of contention for Duterte’s administration.<sup>109</sup> They were reiterated by cabinet-level adviser Jesus Dureza, “The idea is that our allies are not going to go to war for us, so why should we align with them?”<sup>110</sup> Nevertheless, despite such signals, Duterte did not totally abandon the PCA ruling in its entirety. As noted, on 31 May 2019, he suggested this by stating: “I love China, it helped us but it behooves upon us to ask: Is it the right country to claim the whole ocean?”<sup>111</sup> Equally, this corresponded

<sup>102</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, “Caught Between Appeasement and Limited Hard Balancing: The Philippines’ Changing Relations with the Eagle and the Dragon,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (2022), pp. 262–3.

<sup>103</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, “Twenty-first Century Philippines’ Policy towards an Emergent China: From Equi-balancing to Strategic Balancing,” *Asian Politics & Policy*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2016), pp. 305–28.

<sup>104</sup> Laura Southgate and Nicholas Khoo, “Enter the Vanguard State: Reinterpreting ASEAN’s Response to the South China Sea Issue,” *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2016), p. 10; De Castro, “China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Duterte Administration’s Appeasement Policy.”

<sup>105</sup> Damien Gayle, “Barack Obama Cancels Meeting after Philippines President Calls Him ‘Son of a Whore,’” *The Guardian*, 5 September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/05/philippines-president-rodrigo-duterte-barack-obama-son-whore>.

<sup>106</sup> Velasco and Song, “Nexus of Strong Presidentialism and Philippines Foreign Policy,” p. 364.

<sup>107</sup> Heydarian, “Tragedy of Small Power Politics,” p. 221.

<sup>108</sup> Gordon G. Chang, “America, Not Duterte, Failed the Philippines,” *The National Interest*, 16 April 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/america-not-duterte-failed-the-philippines-20195>.

<sup>109</sup> Quintos, “The Philippines: Hedging,” p. 278.

<sup>110</sup> Chang, “America, Not Duterte, Failed the Philippines.”

<sup>111</sup> Cliff Venzon, “Duterte Presses Xi to Fast-track South China Sea Rules,” *Nikkei Asia*, 31 May 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Future-of-Asia/The-Future-of-Asia-2019/Duterte-presses-Xi-to-fast-track-South-China-Sea-rules>.

with Duterte's signals of favor toward a code of conduct for handling the SCS with China and ASEAN, albeit Duterte likewise expressed frustration with what he termed as Beijing delaying the effort. This stance remained throughout his administration, as on 21 April 2021, former Philippine Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque referred to the PCA ruling as unenforceable, rather than abandoning the ruling altogether.<sup>112</sup>

Early signals not only placed the MDT in extremis but also presented Washington with a potential strategic throe in a traditional ally, wherein a major geopolitical gap along the first island chain was widening as China was being increasingly recognized as a strategic competitor, and the prospect of a defection toward Beijing was real as far as Manila's kingmaker's role. In essence, it appeared early on, prior to Trump's electoral victory, that if China were able to mobilize economic incentives *vis-à-vis* Duterte, "this effectively substitutes the Philippine-US security arrangement with Philippine-China ties as the country's most important bilateral relationship."<sup>113</sup>

The ascension of the Trump administration further garnered concerns over US reliability, as Trump pushed for allies and security partners to take on greater independent defense capacities. When later asked about Duterte following Manila's notice to terminate the VFA, Trump responded: "I really don't mind, if they would like to do that, that's fine [...] we'll save a lot of money [...] and more important, possibly American lives as well."<sup>114</sup> Such signals arguably corroborated Duterte's doubts over the reliability of the MDT. Likewise, if paired to an event in which US assistance would be required due to the MDT not offering an automatic response, rather a consultation prior to a commitment for a US security response, Duterte's concerns would be amplified.<sup>115</sup> Despite Duterte's shift toward Beijing in an effort to garner economic and financial support for infrastructure development, funding pledges failed to materialize. Critically, China thus missed an opportunity that could have helped direct Manila's kingmaker's role in its favor, particularly as the USA under Trump was openly questioning alliances and security arrangements, which lent weight to Duterte's initial skepticism toward US security reliability under the MDT. Toward the end of his administration, he began to direct nominal steps in opposition to Beijing, bringing the SCS onto the table in talks with Xi. Likewise, he made positive overtures to Trump and the USA in reference to China and the SCS disputes.

On 20 March 2021, a pivotal moment occurred during the latter part of the Duterte administration. Despite official rhetoric emphasizing improved Philippine-China relations, over 200 Chinese fishing boats, reportedly manned by the Chinese maritime militia, occupied the disputed territory of Whitsun Reef. This reef lies 175 miles from Palawan, the westernmost Philippine Island, well within the country's 200-nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).<sup>116</sup> Although Manila lodged diplomatic protests, and the vessels eventually departed without a major incident akin to the Banana War of 2012, the event signaled an ever-present concern for Duterte that despite cordial overtures to Beijing, China was still committed to utilizing various means of force to press claims over the SCS.

Following President Biden's election, a major US shift was undertaken which would conform to friend-shoring in the region. This coincided with the Duterte administration's U-turn, which was on full display during US Secretary of Defense Llyod Austin's July 2021 visit. Efforts to repair discord led to the extension of the once abrogated VFA and the Joint Vision Statement from Bilateral Security Dialogue later in November of the same year, which

<sup>112</sup> Velasco and Song, "Nexus of Strong Presidentialism and Philippines Foreign Policy," p. 366.

<sup>113</sup> AC Wong and AC Tan, "The Philippines' Institutionalised Alliance with the US: Surviving Duterte's China Appeasement Policy," *National Security Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2021), p. 5.

<sup>114</sup> Doug Bandow, "Time to Drop Defense Guarantees to the Philippines," CATO Institute, 16 February 2020, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/time-drop-defense-guarantees-philippines>.

<sup>115</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, "Abstract of Crisis in Philippine-U.S. Security Relations: From an Alliance to a Security Partnership?" *Pacific Review*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2022), p. 477-505.

<sup>116</sup> De Castro, "Caught between Appeasement and Limited Hard Balancing," p. 271.

reaffirmed the significance of the VFA and the MDT.<sup>117</sup> In essence, the dramatic pace of the U-turn achieved a desired strategic change, largely pursued by former Secretary for foreign affairs Del Rosario and then Philippine foreign secretary Theodore Locsin whom favored stabilizing ties with Washington, designed to enact a sequence of hard-to-reverse security *faits accomplis* prior to the Philippines 2021 general election, wherein signals from then front-runner Marcos Jr instilled a prospect for returning to Duterte's initial weeks in office and the swing toward Beijing.<sup>118</sup> Here, the signals to rekindle security relations with the USA would illustrate a late zigzag back in favor of Washington following an appeasement outreach to China for unfulfilled economic benefits, emphasizing Manila's significant role as a kingmaker.

## President Marcos Jr's Shift Toward the USA

During Ferdinand Marcos Jr's presidential election campaign, initial signals were emitted supposing that Manila would retain Duterte's appeasement policy toward China. Crucially, Marcos Jr was the only presidential candidate to endorse a continuation of the policy and, like Duterte at the start of his term, played down the PCA ruling over the SCS in favor of Beijing's preferred bilateral consultation process.<sup>119</sup> Early signals were reaffirmed during the Presidential debate of 18 February 2022, albeit Marcos Jr also appeared to distance himself with Duterte's past characteristically undiplomatic quips *vis-à-vis* Washington, highlighting the significance of the alliance with the USA. Concurrently, Marcos Jr appeared to attach his position to that of Duterte's, that a war against China over the SCS territorial disputes would be detrimental, thereby directing Manila's kingmaker's role away from an alignment choice early on.

With Marcos Jr's ascension to the presidency on 30 June 2022, economic recovery following COVID-19 and continued efforts for development formed the initial basis for an outreach to China. The revival of three BRI sponsored rail projects that had been unimplemented due to funding issues under the Duterte administration represented Marcos Jr's initial outreach with Beijing as an attempt at a better do better approach for his administration's "Build Better More" and Philippine Development Plan. Critically, during Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's July 2022 ASEAN tour, a meeting was held at the Malacañang Palace. Prior to the meeting, Marcos Jr noted that the SCS issue should be off the table for discussions, reiterated that economic concerns should remain central to talks, and highlighted that China was the Philippines' most significant trading partner. Wang Yi remarked that China and the Philippines were potentially on the verge of a "golden era" of ties.<sup>120</sup> Nevertheless, on 12 July, the sixth anniversary of the arbitral award of the SCS and only a week following Wang Yi's visit, Secretary of Foreign Affairs Enrique A. Manalo would signal the ruling as one of the anchors for Manila's policy toward territorial disputes and a crucial factor for protecting global and regional peace. The following day, Department of Defense Undersecretary Jose Faustino Jr signaled that the Armed Forces of the Revised Philippine's Military Modernization Act (2012) would be continued through Horizon Three, underscored by Marcos Jr's directive to defend territorial integrity and the Filipino people and state sovereignty, for which Washington would be a major partner due to naval vessel purchases (such as the Del Pilar-class offshore patrol vessels, formally US Coast Guard

<sup>117</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Joint Vision for a 21st Century United States-Philippines Partnership," 16 November 2021, <https://www.state.gov/joint-vision-for-a-21st-century-united-states-philippines-partnership/>.

<sup>118</sup> Dan Steinbock, "Philippine 2022 Election Amid U.S. Cold War Against China," *China-US Focus*, 29 November 2021, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/philippine-2022-election-amid-us-cold-war-against-china>.

<sup>119</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, "The Marcos Administration's Foreign Policy towards the Great Powers: Seeking the Elusive Balance in Dealing a Changing Indo-Pacific Region," *East Asian Policy*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2023), p. 105.

<sup>120</sup> "China-Philippines Ties Usher in 'Golden Era': FM," *People's Daily*, 7 July 2022, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0707/c90000-10120137.html>.

Hamilton-class patrol vessels) and aircraft acquired from South Korea.<sup>121</sup> Under Horizon Three, Manila's "archipelagic defense concept" weighs into the geopolitical linchpin notion and wider US strategy toward China.<sup>122</sup> The zigzagging remarks came on the eve of the former US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's planned controversial trip to Taipei, thereby somewhat downplaying geopolitical tensions that could otherwise fuel the impending Beijing–Washington sabre rattling. Four days after the trip, and amid PLAN exercises in response, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken visited the Philippines on August 6, wherein Manila's careful balancing act was on show. Here, Manalo sought to balance the position of the Philippines and remarked "the Philippines continues to look to the big powers to calm the waters and keep the peace. We can ill afford further escalation of tensions in the region," yet also reaffirmed the USA as an "ally and friend."<sup>123</sup> However, a major signal was emitted by Philippine Ambassador to the US DC Jose Romualdez, which revealed the Marcos Jr. administration could allow the USA to use Filipino military bases in the event of a conflict concerning Taiwan, "if it is important for us, for our own security."<sup>124</sup> This corresponded with a further reaffirming of the MDT by both Faustino and US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin on September 29. In an effort to maintain a balance, amid the Bangkok November 2022 APEC summit, Marcos Jr and President Xi signaled that territorial disputes in the SCS would not impede nor define Beijing–Manila economic relations. Following the meeting Marcos Jr noted: "Our foreign policy refuses to fall into the trap of a Cold War mindset" [...] "ours is an independent foreign policy, guided by our national interest and commitment to peace."<sup>125</sup> This signal nevertheless ran counter to Marcos Jr's efforts to re-bolster security ties with the USA, thereby deemphasizing a hedge rooted on return maximization, rather led to a rapidly expanding security-driven hedge that tacked hard on Washington. The signaling efforts denote strategic ambiguity, and chiefly, the zigzagging between China and the USA was not of equal proportion and thus failed to reassure China, particularly on issues of Taiwan, which holds geopolitical significance along the Strait of Taiwan to the Luzon Strait.

In January 2023, Marcos Jr was hosted by Xi in Beijing on a state visit. While much of the meeting signaled reinvigoration for economic exchanges, on 5 January, both presidents signaled support for easing security concerns over the SCS with the 23rd Philippines-China Foreign Ministry Consultations and the 7th Bilateral Consultations Mechanism, the latter geared at avoiding incidents. Nevertheless, bilateral relations briskly soured following the announcement of four additional EDCA bases from the original five on 2 February, wherein rotating US military forces and equipment would be spread across the Philippines, greatly enhancing the archipelagic defense concept and the Philippines as a linchpin.<sup>126</sup>

<sup>121</sup> Priam Nepomuceno, "Faustino Pledges to Continue Horizon 3 of AFP Modernization," *Philippine News Agency*, 12 July 2022, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1178714?fbclid=IwAR3pGW8613vU0FJ0UtQw3JeeqDMi5j-mOFFF86S7xHhK7TgDQFIBfnGudQE>.

<sup>122</sup> Priam Nepomuceno, "AFP Modernization's Horizon 3 to Focus on Archipelagic Defense," *Philippine News Agency*, 15 January 2024, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1216955#:~:text=MANILA%20-%20The%20Horizon%203%20phase,country%27s%20military%20chief%20said%20Monday>.

<sup>123</sup> Republic of the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs, "Remarks by Secretary Enrique A. Manalo at the Opening of the Bilateral Meeting with Secretary Anthony J. Blinken," 6 August 2022, <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/statements-and-advisoriesupdate/30952-remarks-by-secretary-enrique-a-manalo-at-the-opening-of-the-bilateral-meeting-with-secretary-antony-j-blinken>.

<sup>124</sup> Ryo Nakamura and Yuichi Shiga, "Philippines May Allow U.S. Military Access during Taiwan Crisis," *Nikkei Asia*, 5 September 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Interview/Philippines-may-allow-U.S.-military-access-during-Taiwan-crisis>.

<sup>125</sup> Republic of the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs, "Presidents Marcos, Xi, Meet for First Time, to Forge Deeper Philippines-China Ties," 18 November 2022, <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/dfa-releasesupdate/31365-presidents-marcos-xi-meet-for-the-first-time-to-forge-deeper-philippines-china-ties>.

<sup>126</sup> De Castro, "The Marcos Administration's Foreign Policy towards the Great Powers," p. 112.

February continued to see a downward trend in Beijing–Manila relations due to the expanding US–Philippine security developments, which further irked China’s position on the SCS and more importantly the Taiwan issue. Critically, this development paired with a signal from the Philippines’ ambassador to the USA, Jose Manuel Romualdez, that the bases in the Philippines could be used by the USA in the event of a conflict in the Strait of Taiwan, provided that Manila had sufficient security guarantees. Marcos Jr likewise provided a more nuanced signal: “When we look at the situation in the area, especially the tensions in the Taiwan Strait, we can see that just by our geographical location, should there, in fact, be conflict in that area ... it’s very hard to imagine a scenario where the Philippines will not somehow get involved.”<sup>127</sup> Here, such signals indicate that Manila’s wider regional security scope is fixated on tensions in the Strait of Taiwan, as much as it is focused on the SCS.

In mid-February, Marcos Jr visited Japan and crucially signaled with Japanese Prime Minister Kishida that Manila and Tokyo would enhance security exchanges, with the potential for a trilateral security agreement between the Philippines, Japan, and the USA, in the wake of rising tensions with China and concerns over the Taiwan Strait. Marcos Jr noted, “It is something that we certainly are going to be studying upon my return to the Philippines. I think just part of the continuing process of strengthening our alliances because in this rather confusing, and I dare say dangerous situation, that we have, I’m not talking only about the South China Sea,” a signal reinforced by Senator Jinggoy Estrada, chairperson of the Defense and Security committee, who acknowledged the importance of a trilateral security arrangement.<sup>128</sup> Critically, such a step not merely enhances Manila’s kingmaker’s role but also emphasizes that if it were to shift toward trilateralism with Washington and Tokyo, it could ultimately move the region toward a dual trilateral security framework *vis-à-vis* the US orchestrated hub-and-spokes system, as Seoul has also opened the door for trilateralism under a South Korea–Japan–US framework in Northeast Asia. Both could thereby geopolitically solidify Washington’s ambitions, not just as regional force multipliers but also by tightening up containment of China along the first island chain, a major shift in their kingmaker’s role.

In an effort to garner reassurance for Beijing, on February 17, a Chinese delegation led by Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong and a Philippine delegation led by Foreign Undersecretary Theresa Lazaro engaged in talks to tackle growing clashes in the SCS.<sup>129</sup> At the planned 23rd Philippines-China Foreign Ministry Consultations and the 7th Bilateral Consultations Mechanism talks on 24 March, Philippine officials brought up Chinese incursions and an incident on 6 February wherein a Chinese vessel aimed a military-grade laser, which briefly blinded some crew of a Philippine patrol vessel. Chinese officials responded by reinterring claims of sovereignty and intrusions by Philippine vessels.

Washington–Manila security alliance cohesion was further intensified following the *Balikatan* combined military exercise in April 2023, wherein a combined force of 17 000 personnel was deployed, which included Australia, surmounting to additional signals that the USA was keen to include wider regional partners and the Philippines would play ball. In May 2023, Manila and Washington further devised the Bilateral Defense Guidelines focusing on information sharing, Philippine military modernization, and Chinese gray zone

<sup>127</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, “The Philippines’ Evolving View on Taiwan: From Passivity to Active Involvement,” Brookings, 9 March 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-philippines-evolving-view-on-taiwan-from-passivity-to-active-involvement/>.

<sup>128</sup> Azer Parrocha, “Gov’t to Review Tripartite Agreement with US, Japan: Marcos,” *Philippine News Agency*, 12 February 2023, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1194993#:~:text=MANILA%20-%20The%20Philippines%20will%20review,President%20Ferdinand%20R.>

<sup>129</sup> Republic of the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs, “DFA Undersecretary Lazaro Holds Phone Conversation with Chinese Vice Foreign Minister,” 21 February 2023, <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/dfa-releasesupdate/31829-dfa-undersecretary-lazaro-holds-phone-conversation-with-chinese-vice-foreign-minister.>

operations in the SCS *vis-à-vis* Filipino sovereignty concerns.<sup>130</sup> China's response to *up the ante* in the SCS disputes continued to provide a *raison d'être* for Manila's growing tack toward Washington. In response to Chinese increased PLAN pressure in the SCS and collisions between Chinese and Filipino vessels which Manila framed as "dangerous maneuvers" in their respective EEZ, on 25 October, President Biden signaled a strong cooperative defense commitment to the Philippines *vis-à-vis* SCS tension during Australian PM Anthony Albanese's visit to the White House: "The United States' defence commitment to the Philippines is ironclad. Any attack on the Filipino aircraft, vessels, or armed forces will invoke our Mutual Defense Treaty with the Philippines."<sup>131</sup> China's foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning responded the following day by rebuking Biden's signal, stressing that the "[US] has no right to interfere in the issue between China and the Philippines."<sup>132</sup> Concurrently, Japanese PM Kishida's visit to the Philippines in early November expressed greater efforts to synergize Tokyo's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy and Manila's ASEAN Outlook in the Indo-Pacific, referencing both values and security ties.<sup>133</sup> Amid the rising tensions on 10 November, Philippine Transportation Secretary Jaime Batista called into question Chinese financing of infrastructure projects: "We have these projects that won't be funded by the Chinese government anymore. We can't wait forever, and it seems like China isn't that interested anymore."<sup>134</sup> While Chinese financing concerns had plagued a range of projects, the timing of the signal suggested that geopolitical concerns were spilling over into economic relations, something that both Marcos Jr and Xi had hoped would not happen. Efforts to stabilize relations ultimately proved to be futile, primarily due to the escalating situation in the SCS. This was particularly evident at the 2023 APEC summit in San Francisco, where Xi and Marcos Jr met on 17 November amid wider attempts by Xi and Biden to alleviate tension in broader China-US relations. Furthermore, Marcos Jr's suggestion to establish a separate Code of Conduct for the SCS once again provoked Beijing and prompted an outreach to Vietnam and Malaysia. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning warned that "any departure from the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea framework and its spirit will be null and void."<sup>135</sup>

Ultimately, Beijing-Manila ties would reach their lowest point following Lai Cheng-te's election in Taiwan, wherein Marcos Jr sent congratulations. China's foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning responded: "We suggest President Marcos read more to develop a proper understanding of the ins and outs of the Taiwan question and come to a right conclusion."<sup>136</sup> The Philippines' Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr counted, "It is unfortunate that the [Chinese] ministry of foreign affairs spokesperson stooped to such low and gutter-level talk—resorting to insulting our president and the Filipino nation, and further debasing

<sup>130</sup> De Castro, "The Marcos Administration's Foreign Policy towards the Great Powers," p. 112.

<sup>131</sup> The White House, "Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese of Australia in Joint Press conference," 25 October 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/25/remarks-by-president-biden-and-prime-minister-anthony-albanese-of-australia-in-joint-press-conference/>.

<sup>132</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on 26 October 2023," 26 October 2023, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/202310/t20231026\\_11168937.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202310/t20231026_11168937.html).

<sup>133</sup> Republic of the Philippines Department of Foreign Relations, "Joint Press Statement on the Outcome of the Visit of Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio to the Philippines," 3 November 2023, <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/statements-and-advisories/update/33615-joint-press-statement-on-the-outcome-of-the-visit-of-japanese-prime-minister-kishida-fumio-to-the-philippines>.

<sup>134</sup> Sebastian Strangio, "Philippines Drops Chinese Funding for Three Railway Projects," *The Diplomat*, 27 October 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/philippines-drops-chinese-funding-for-three-railway-projects/>.

<sup>135</sup> Nian Peng, "Marcos' New Code of Conduct for the South China Sea Is a Non-Starter," *East Asia Forum*, 2 January 2024, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/01/02/marcos-new-code-of-conduct-for-the-south-china-sea-is-a-non-starter/>.

<sup>136</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on 16 January 2024," 16 January 2024, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/202401/t20240116\\_11225146.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202401/t20240116_11225146.html).

herself, the ministry, and [the] party she represents in the process,” highlighting the debased condition of bilateral relations.<sup>137</sup>

Duterte and Marcos Jr’s respective oscillations, initially leaning toward Beijing then veering back toward Washington, reflect the Philippines’ shifts amid the competing influences of China, and the US Duterte’s tenure presented a missed opportunity for Beijing to capitalize on concerns over US alliance reliability, given his willingness to signal alignment with China. However, Marcos Jr’s early attempts to reach out to China were briskly deemed untenable as tensions in the SCS escalated, highlighting the Philippines’ kingmaker’s role in Beijing’s concerns regarding the Taiwan Strait and broader regional dynamics, particularly underscoring the potential for a dual–trilateral security framework led by the USA. These escalations have limited Manila’s ability to hedge, despite early signals that zigzagged between the great powers, and have pushed the Philippines into the Kingmaker’s role wherein the trajectory toward Washington for security appears poised to persist.

### Linchpins and the Kingmaker’s Role

The empirical findings suggest that with the intensifying strategic competition between China and the USA in the Asia–Pacific, secondary states, specifically those with geopolitical significance that are recognized as linchpins, such as South Korea and the Philippines, find themselves amid a shrinking space to hedge, requiring policy recalibrations. While Duterte initially attempted to lean on Beijing, his presidency resulted in a range of ambiguous strategic oscillations and at times contradictory signals, followed by Marcos Jr’s early outreach toward Beijing becoming overshadowed by security concerns and thus more consistent signaling behavior in favor of Washington. Yoon, as opposed to his moderate predecessor Moon Jae-in, has demonstrated his alignment preference toward the USA throughout his presidency, chiefly in light of skepticism toward Beijing’s regional intentions and bygone failed attempts to work with China to rein in North Korea’s missile and nuclear weapons program. Although Seoul and Manila simultaneously still maintain close trade relations with China, both are also confronted with the latter’s assertiveness as the THAAD debacle and the territorial disputes in the SCS among other instances remarkably demonstrated increased threat perceptions from Beijing. Consequently, Beijing has arguably provided an impetus for South Korea and the Philippines to tack harder toward Washington in an attempt to reconsolidate the Transpacific alignments under friend-shoring, including prospects of dual trilateralism (US–South Korea–Japan and US–the Philippines–Japan) to further restrain China across the first island chain. Accordingly, South Korea and the Philippines have stabilized their signaling behavior and, considering an increasing tendency to securitize trade, are downplaying efforts to maintain a balance between economic relations with China in favor of security cooperation with the USA.

Seoul and Manila’s alignment preferences in favor of the USA and against China have therefore tremendous geostrategic implications for the foreseeable future and their roles as kingmakers. China hardly practices bilateral, let alone multilateral alignments in the security domain and, coupled with its assertive foreign policy toward the adjacent Asia–Pacific states, is unable to win a sufficient influence over regional linchpins. As such, the USA may well be able to secure its preponderance across the Pacific through the use of consolidated partnerships with South Korea, the Philippines as well as Japan as the cornerstone, pending the outcome of how the geostrategic competition between Beijing and Washington is further unfolding. The regional linchpins, while pressured to make a final alignment choice amid the intensifying competition and seeking additional security reassurances from

<sup>137</sup> “South China Sea: Philippines Defence Minister Calls out China for ‘Gutter-Level Talk’, Says to Ramp up Military Ties,” *South China Morning Post*, 17 January 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3248808/south-china-sea-philippines-ramp-military-ties-defence-minister-calls-out-china-official-gutter>.

Washington to cope with China's aggressive signals and actions, can therefore signal to the USA that it could essentially be crowned a king in the regional strategic competition over the Asia-Pacific region if the US government is able to supply the necessary restraining means to insulate them from Beijing's assertiveness. As such, Beijing is facing a deteriorating geopolitical environment, as linchpins are tilting the regional balance of power in favor of Washington, and thus has underestimated Washington's efforts to foster alignment cohesion. Likewise, other regional secondary states facing a shrinking space to hedge such as Australia, Singapore, Thailand, and New Zealand are also beginning to face up to their respective kingmaker's role.<sup>138</sup>

Therefore, when a great power competition is intensifying and increasingly pressures secondary states into making a final alignment choice, the space to hedge begins to shrink and, accordingly, hedging will come to an end. The bipolar structure of the Asia-Pacific theater here functions as a catalyst for increasing systemic pressures on the secondary states. When the *status quo* becomes unstable to the degree that they cannot uphold a hedging posture due to alignment pressures, they forego hedging, desist from ambiguous signaling, and seek alignment with the established power or the rising power instead. As this paper has revealed, getting the geopolitical upper hand in a strategic competition is very much about winning influence over linchpins and their essential alignment choices to act as force multipliers, symbolizing kingmakers and their significant roles as holders of the regional balance of power and thus the overlooked power of the weak paradox as *cui adhaereo praeest*.

*Conflict of interest statement.* None declared.

<sup>138</sup> He and Feng, *After Hedging*, p. 4.