



## **POLITICAL ANALYSIS PAPER**

**March 2025 / Published 03 April 2025**

**Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG)**

## **FORMER PRESIDENT DUTERTE BROUGHT TO ICC PRISON; MARCOS-US DEFENSE TIES DEEPEN AS MARITIME TENSIONS WITH CHINA ESCALATE**

Justice prevails as ex-President Duterte was brought to the ICC to stand trial for crimes against humanity. If convicted he may yet spend life imprisonment. Economic indicators in the Philippines remain bleak as poverty and hunger hit more families. Under Marcos, Jr. treaty alliance with the U.S. has deepened as new missile systems are deployed in the country thus heightening tensions between the Philippines and China - a clear target. As before, diplomacy takes a backseat as the Marcos government ties its hip with the U.S. allowing itself as a cannon fodder in a U.S. war with China.

### **I. NATIONAL POLITICS**

**A**mid the acrimonious and divisive Philippine politics, the country's mid-term elections will be held on May 12 this year with senatorial candidates under President Marcos, Jr.'s ruling coalition Alyansa para sa Bagong Pilipinas (Alliance for a New Philippines) expected to walk away with nine of the 12 Senate seats, based on latest surveys.

The latest Social Weather Stations (SWS) survey shows that majority of the "Magic 12" are made up of senatorial candidates endorsed by President Marcos. SWS said nine of the top 12 senatorial candidates belong to the administration-backed Alyansa Para sa Bagong Pilipinas coalition. The nine are ACT-CIS Rep. Erwin Tulfo; Senators Lito Lapid, Pia Cayetano and Ramon "Bong" Revilla; former Senators Panfilo Lacson, Tito Sotto, and boxing legend Manny Pacquiao, Makati Mayor Abby Binay and Las Piñas Rep. Camille Villar. Down 2 percent was Sen. Ronald "Bato" dela Rosa, the ninth placer with 30-percent support.

In 10th place was TV host Willie Revillame, who at 28 percent kept the same spot despite a slight dip from his previous 30-percent support. Tied for the 11th to 13th spots were Binay, Pacquiao and Villar, who each had 27 percent.



Former Senators Kiko Pangilinan and Bam Aquino remain just outside the Top 12, coming in at 14th place with 24 percent and 15th with 21 percent, respectively.

Sen. Imee Marcos, the president's sister, suffered one of the biggest declines—by 5-percent—with her 19-percent support putting her in 16th place.

Pulse Asia, in a separate survey, said the May 12 mid-term elections will see many reelectionist senators winning. Re-electionist Sen. Christopher Go, former chief of staff of ex-President Rodrigo R. Duterte when he was Davao City mayor, and ACT-CIS Party-List Rep. Erwin Tulfo emerged as the top preferred Senate candidates.

Many of the senatorial candidates come from political families, hence, have better chances of winning. Typical of the country's personality or dynasty-driven politics, senatorial hopefuls considered popular not necessarily because of performance but are household names are expected to win hands down.

The same pattern will define the local elections.

However, for the longest time, questions have also been asked about election surveys—most questions focusing on the credibility, reliability, and accuracy of these.

## **POLITICAL FEUD**

In the country's intractable politics, families are riven by political differences. President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr.'s sister, Sen. Imee Marcos, has withdrawn from the administration-backed Alyansa Para sa Bagong Pilipinas. The senator's withdrawal came days after the arrest by the International Criminal Court (ICC) of her close friend and ally former President Rodrigo Duterte. In a statement the senator said she can no longer stand on the same platform with the rest of the Alyansa senatorial candidates. As reported, the Marcos government allowed Duterte's arrest by the Interpol as the latter deplaned from Hong Kong and was made to board another plane on its way to the Netherlands. The former president was brought to a prison to await his trial.

Marcos, who was previously allied with Duterte's elder daughter Sara, the country's vice-president, had in the past refused to cooperate with the ICC investigation. However, his stance shifted after the two families became embroiled in a feud.

Marcos said the arrest came at the request of the ICC. "I am confident the arrest was proper, correct and followed all necessary legal procedures," he said after Duterte's departure. "We did not help the International Criminal Court in any way. The arrest was made in compliance with Interpol."

Similarly, there is a growing narrative among some observers that President Marcos Jr. may have strategically leveraged Duterte's legal troubles to weaken the political clout of the Duterte dynasty ahead of the 2028 elections.



Marcos also denied any political motives and stated that his predecessor's capture was simply a matter of the Philippines meeting its international obligations. The presidential office confirmed that a meeting took place between Marcos and his Cabinet officials solely to address rumors surrounding Duterte's arrest, but not to plan it.

The split reaction has deepened existing divisions. Families of the victims, alongside opposition figures, have called on the Marcos administration to demonstrate transparency by rejoining the ICC and committing fully to an impartial judicial process. They view that the Marcos government's distancing from its cooperation on Duterte's arrest only questions Marcos Jr.'s sincerity in ensuring that justice is truly served for drug war victims.

Beyond the elite political struggle, grassroots movements have also gained momentum. Duterte's ICC indictment was hailed as a victory by human rights advocates, while labor and agrarian movements achieved significant gains. A three-day strike by Nexperia workers resulted in the reinstatement of union leaders and wage increases, and Central Luzon farmers launched a protest caravan against land-use conversion and land-grabbing. Additionally, the Supreme Court has begun oral arguments on citizen-filed petitions questioning irregular PhilHealth fund transfers, highlighting the broader climate of political and economic contestation.

As the Marcos-Duterte rivalry escalates, the political landscape remains volatile, shaped by power plays at the highest levels and growing resistance from below. The months ahead will test the resilience of both camps, with implications not just for the 2028 elections but for the country's democratic trajectory.

## **ICC – foreign interference?**

"Misleading and flawed," is how Ian Vincent C. Manticajon, an international law lecturer at the University of the Philippines (UP) Cebu, described the attempts to discredit the International Criminal Court (ICC) on the issue of Duterte's arrest. Those critical of the ICC have called the arrest of the former president as "foreign interference."

"The ICC process should be seen, in fact, as an opportunity for our people to learn about foundational principles of international law including the Rome Statute, and our domestic laws as well, like RA 9851," explained Manticajon. Manticajon said that while states have absolute control over their internal affairs, states also have obligations to humanity. He cites the Philippine Act on Crimes Against International Humanitarian Law, Genocide, and Other Crimes Against Humanity, which adopts the complementarity principle in the Rome Statute, i.e., the ICC does not particularly replace the Philippine justice system but supports it. "The ICC referral shows our country's commitment to accountability and acknowledges that international law complements domestic justice," he said.



## **Sara Duterte impeachment**

### House prosecution team in Sara Duterte impeachment trial 80% ready

The House of Representatives' prosecution panel is 80 percent ready for the impeachment trial of Vice President Sara Duterte, team member and Iloilo 3rd District Rep. Lorenz Defensor said late February. At the Senate, Sen. Aquilino "Koko" Pimentel said the impeachment trial against the vice president can start by March.

Defensor admitted it was not easy to prepare for the impeachment trial while managing an election campaign. He said preparations will be made shortly after the beginning of the campaign period for the local polls last March 28.

On February 5, the lower House impeached Duterte after 215 lawmakers filed and verified a fourth impeachment complaint. The complaint was hinged on several issues, among them the alleged misuse of confidential funds lodged within her offices; physical threats to ranking officials, including President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.; and conduct unbecoming of a vice president. The Articles of Impeachment were immediately transmitted to the Senate for trial. The Constitution requires a trial to start "forthwith" if at least one-third of all House members — in this case, 102 out of 306 — have signed and endorsed the petition. Under the Constitution, the Senate will act as an impeachment court, with senators sitting as judges.

With the impeachment catching up with Sara Duterte, questions have arisen whether the vice president, if convicted, will be on the way out at a time when her father, former President Rodrigo R. Duterte, faces possible life imprisonment if convicted by the Den Haag-based International Criminal Court (ICC).

However, Duterte's incarceration in The Hague may not disenfranchise the entire Duterte family from political rule. Assuming her impeachment will drag on, Vice President Sara Duterte is expected to take a shot at the presidency in 2028. Brother Paolo Duterte is a House representative while another, Baste, is the incumbent city mayor of Davao. Their roots deeply rooted in Philippine politics, family dynasties like the Dutertes are resilient. Dynasties remain in power and continue to grow vertically and horizontally as they occupy the highest seats of power - exemplified by the Macapagal-Arroyos (Gloria's father, Diosdado Macapagal, was president and daughter Gloria M. Arroyo would do the same as president, 2001-2010; as do the Aquinos – Corazon C. Aquino and son, Benigno III; Ferdinand Marcos and son, Ferdinand Jr.; and if the trail remains unbroken, Sara Duterte might yet succeed her father as president in 2028).

In the country's intractable politics, President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr.'s sister, Sen. Imee Marcos, has withdrawn from the administration-backed Alyansa Para sa Bagong Pilipinas. The senator said she can no longer stand on the same platform with the rest of the Alyansa senatorial candidates. As reported, the Marcos government allowed Duterte's arrest by the Interpol as the latter deplaned from Hong Kong and was made to



board another plane enroute to the Netherlands. The former president was brought to a prison to await his trial.

## **Surveys – unreliable?**

Related to the May 2022 presidential race, the University of the Philippines (UP) School of Statistics warned the public against private and unreliable presidential surveys, amid the release of several “kalye” (street) surveys online, which are statistically unreliable.

These surveys, according to the statement, are usually presented with unclear methodologies.

The school’s faculty said they saw these practices, including surveys not based on random sampling, such as videos of “kalye surveys” being done by some vloggers and suspicious online surveys, especially on Twitter and Facebook”. “We are dismayed by their cavalier disregard for the principles of data gathering,” they concluded.

## **Hybrid election system**

Meantime, the think tank organization, Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG), called on the Commission on Elections (Comelec) to implement a hybrid election system (HES) that upholds the fundamental principles of democracy: private voting and public counting. The secrecy of the ballot must be safeguarded, while the transparency of vote tabulation should be restored to ensure public trust in the electoral process. CenPEG said.

The Philippine experience has shown that reliance on fully automated elections, controlled by foreign technology providers, has diminished public oversight and increased vulnerabilities to fraud and technical errors. To guarantee fair and credible elections, think tank CenPEG urged the Comelec, a constitutional commission tasked with administering elections, to prioritize a hybrid system that combines the efficiency of automation with the transparency of manual counting at the precinct level.

## **Red-tagging**

As in past elections, candidates for Congress belonging to the Makabayan Bloc are being tagged as Leftist. The act by state authorities, said Kontra Daya and other poll watchdogs, constitutes campaign violations and is against human rights. The groups said in their initial report on March 14 that of the 94 cases of poll violations they collated since the campaign period started on Feb. 12 up to March 14, a total of 60 cases or 63.8 percent involved Red-tagging.





Past violations gave state authorities a carte blanche to victimize Leftist targets along with organizers through extra-judicial executions where majority of the cases remain unsolved to this day.

## **Duterte in The Hague after ICC arrest**

After his arrest on March 11, Duterte was surrendered to the custody of the International Criminal Court (ICC or “the Court”). He was arrested by Philippine authorities in accordance with an arrest warrant issued by the ICC’s Pre-Trial Chamber I (“the Chamber”) for charges of murder as a crime against humanity.

Duterte was brought to The Hague Penitentiary Institution or the Scheveningen Prison.

Earlier on Feb. 10, 2025, the Office of the Prosecutor of the ICC (“the Prosecution”) applied for an arrest warrant against Duterte for the crimes against humanity of murder, torture and rape. The Chamber, composed of Presiding Judge Iulia Antoanella Motoc and Judges Reine Adélaïde Sophie Alapini-Gansou and María del Socorro Flores Liera, assessed the material submitted by the Prosecution and found reasonable grounds to believe that Duterte is individually responsible as an indirect co-perpetrator for the crime against humanity of murder, allegedly committed in the Philippines between November 1, 2011 and March 16, 2019. (The complaint was filed by Philippine-based rights groups, lawyers, and families of victims of extra-judicial executions.)

The Chamber found that there was an attack directed against a civilian population pursuant to an organizational policy while Duterte was the head of the Davao Death Squad (DDS), and pursuant to a State policy while he was the President of the Philippines. Moreover, there are reasonable grounds to believe that this attack was both widespread and systematic: the alleged attack took place over a period of several years and resulted in thousands of deaths. In the arrest warrant, the Chamber focused on a sample of alleged incidents to facilitate its analysis.

A hearing will be scheduled in due course for Duterte’s initial appearance before the Court. During this hearing, the Chamber will confirm the identity of the suspect and the language in which Duterte is able to follow the proceedings. The Chamber will also satisfy itself that Duterte has been informed of the crime which he is alleged to have committed, and of his rights under the Rome Statute (“the Statute”), which is the Court’s founding treaty.

Upon instructions of then President Duterte, the Philippines, an ICC State Party since November 2011, unilaterally withdrew from the Statute in March 2018 which took effect the following year. Nevertheless, the ICC retained jurisdiction over crimes allegedly committed in the Philippines while the country was a State Party to the Statute.



## **Public opinion on Duterte's ICC arrest**

More than half of Filipinos believe that former President Duterte should be held accountable for the extrajudicial killings that happened during his administration's bloody campaign against illegal drugs, the Social Weather Stations (SWS) said. The pollster said 51 percent of the respondents held Duterte answerable for the killings related to his war on drugs. Upon reflection, the response by the majority eclipses a previous public perception that Duterte was right in initiating the extra-judicial execution of suspected drug users.

On the other hand, 25 percent disagreed, 14 percent were undecided, and 10 percent said they didn't know enough to give an opinion.

The survey should put into closure complaints on the former president's arrest – with some arguing that Duterte was denied the due process of law and that he should have been arraigned in a Philippine court first. Others stressed that the arrest infringed on Philippine sovereignty.

In this context, Senate President Francis "Chiz" Escudero, a lawyer, maintains that Philippine sovereignty was not compromised following the arrest and eventual "surrender" of former President Rodrigo Duterte to the International Criminal Court (ICC). Escudero emphasized that under existing laws, individuals accused of crimes against humanity can be brought before the international court.

## **II. NATIONAL ECONOMY**

Philippine debt balloons to P16.63 trillion in February

The Philippines' sovereign debt further increased to P16.63 trillion at the end of February, according to the Bureau of Treasury. The figure was PhP319.26 billion, or 1.96 percent higher compared to the end of January, as the government borrowed more money to support more public programs and projects.

In the first two months of the year, the country's debt had grown by PhP589.73 billion or 3.62 percent. In terms of share, domestic debt accounted for 67.5 percent of the total obligations, while foreign debt made up 32.5 percent of the total.

Since the late 1980s, the size of the Philippine economy has increased in per person terms by 40 per cent. Whilst the percentage of people living in poverty, as defined by the World Bank, has fallen slightly, the number of people living on less than \$2 a day has increased from 33 million in 1988 to 38 million in 2009. In contrast, in the whole of East Asia the number of people living on less than \$2 a day has almost halved in the same time, from \$1,200 million to \$640 million.

Today, the Philippines government on some measures continues to be one of the most indebted in the world. It currently spends almost 30 per cent of government



revenue on debt payments each year, more than is spent on public health and education combined. National income per person is currently \$3,360.28 (PhP192,331.49).

Likewise, the country's creeping economy continues to yield chronic poverty. The annual average of SWS' self-rated poverty shows constancy with 48% in 2018, 46% in 2021 and 48% in 2023. The economic think tank IBON Foundation said looking at both self-rated poor and borderline rates for a broader measure of poverty and vulnerability is even more disturbing – 76% in 2018, 80% in 2021 and 79% in 2023.

While the Philippines has made progress in reducing poverty, it still faces a higher poverty rate and slower reduction compared to some other Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia and Thailand.

Increased poverty rates in the Philippines have contributed to hunger at 27.2 percent – the highest since the Covid pandemic, based on SWS' March 2025 survey. The pollster said the number of Filipino families who experienced involuntary hunger at least once in the past three months increased to 27.2%. The latest figure is higher than the 25.9% recorded in December, 2024 and is the highest since the record high of 30.7% during the Covid-19 pandemic in September 2020.

Involuntary hunger means "being hungry and not having anything to eat." The highest hunger percentage was recorded in the Visayas (central Philippines) at 33.7%.

With unemployment and inflationary prices of basic commodities soaring hopes remain elusive that most Filipino families' quality of life will improve.

## **Duterte asylum**

On a side note, the Chinese foreign ministry denied that the former Philippine president sought asylum in Hong Kong, a special administrative region (SAR) of China, and that it was rejected. As president, Duterte was deemed "friendly" to China as he sought their cooperation on investments and infrastructures in the Philippines.

## **III. INTERNATIONAL ISSUES**

### **U.S. trade war against China**

America's trade war on China, which traces its roots under Trump 1.0, is heating up under Trump 2.0. U.S. President Donald Trump recently announced to ramp up high tariffs on America's trading partners including Canada, Mexico and China, its leading trade partner. (The Trump government has also slapped 17 percent tariffs on Philippine exports to the U.S.) The nascent trade war between the U.S. and China will likely





escalate. Trump has long railed against the gaping trade deficit between the world's two largest economies as he once threatened upward of 60 percent duties on Chinese goods. But China is prepared with countermeasures including diversifying its trade away from the U.S, in favor of Eurasia and other regions. It has, in fact, been preparing for this in recent years. As a Chinese caveat would put it, the world is big enough for the two major economies.

American economists extrapolate that China's economy will be 81 percent bigger than that of the U.S. by 2030 or five years from now. Insofar as the U.S. is concerned, the mix of slower population growth and unfettered spending will also lead to weaker economic growth over the next three decades. Lower birthrates also mean that the United States is becoming more dependent on immigrants working to sustain growth. "Without immigration, the U.S. population would begin to shrink in 2033," the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) said in a report. Like a self-inflicted wound, Trump has once again foiled a deluge of immigrants coming from Latin American countries like Mexico and Venezuela further endangering economic growth.

## **Marcos gets "iron-clad" support once more**

"United States Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth underscored the importance of deterrence amid threats in the South China Sea." The U.S. defense chief made the remark as he paid a courtesy call on President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. in the presidential palace.

On the same day, the United States, Japan and the Philippines held naval drills in the South China Sea.

Meanwhile, China's military said it had conducted a patrol in the South China Sea the day Hegseth reaffirmed Washington's defense commitment to Marcos. In response, a spokesman for China's Southern Theatre Command of the People's Liberation Army said that the Philippines frequently enlisted foreign countries to organize "joint patrols" and "disseminated illegal claims" in the region, destabilizing the area. (China, through its Eastern China Command, concluded two-day war games around Taiwan in which it held long-range, live-fire drills in the East China Sea, marking an escalation of exercises around the island.)

Now, Marcos is oblivious to the fact that the U.S. defense support is meant to secure its own national security interests while at the same it uses the Philippines as a cannon fodder against alleged Chinese aggression. America's security goals are chiefly to ensure its regional as well as global hegemony. Marcos also glosses over the fact regarding the ascendancy of new powers in the realm of a multipolar order amid the decline of American power.

Related to this, the Marcos government is eyeing Subic Bay islands for South China Sea security by converting two strategically located islands in Subic Bay into military



reservations in a bid to fortify its position in the SCS amid growing security concerns and external threats. One of them, Grande Island, offers “a strategic vantage point with a clear view of key sea lanes in the West Philippine Sea, including Bajo de Masinloc (Scarborough Shoal or Huangyan Dao (黄岩岛),” the defense department said. Grande and Chiquita Islands are located at the entrance of Subic Bay, a natural harbor on the west coast of Luzon, around 100km (62 miles) northwest of Manila.

## **After Unleashing Typhon, U.S. to Bolster Philippines with NMESIS Missile System in Strategic Power Move**

In a strategic show of force and alliance solidarity, the United States will deploy its cutting-edge Navy/Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS) to the Philippines as part of the highly-anticipated Balikatan 2025 joint military exercise.

The announcement, made by the U.S. Department of Defense, comes at a time of mounting geopolitical friction in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the contested South China Sea.

In truth, the deployment was finalized during U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth’s visit to Manila, underscoring Washington’s commitment to “accelerating defense interoperability and combat readiness with its oldest treaty ally in Southeast Asia”.

The Balikatan (shoulder-to-shoulder) war exercise has evolved into one of the Indo-Pacific’s most complex bilateral military drills, focused not just on joint training but on deterring potential adversaries in a maritime flashpoint.

Hegseth also issued a stern rebuke on what he claims China’s increasingly provocative actions in the region, highlighting the growing concerns among U.S. allies about Beijing’s militarization of artificial islands and assertive naval posturing.

This latest deployment forms part of a broader American strategy to forward-position high-lethality systems across the first island chain—a key geographical buffer against Chinese power projection in the western Pacific. It follows last year’s landmark delivery of the U.S. Army’s Mid-Range Capability (MRC), also known as the Typhon missile system, to the Philippines, marking a significant expansion of American long-range strike assets in the region. The Typhon system is capable of launching both SM-6 multi-role missiles and long-range Tomahawk cruise missiles. From positions in northern Luzon, the Tomahawk-equipped Typhon can potentially target Chinese airfields, naval bases, and radar installations on militarized reefs in the SCS.

The prepositioning of new missile systems in the Philippines targeting China is expected to heighten maritime tensions in the South China Sea while tightening America’s grip on the Philippine armed forces thus confirming yet again the country’s role as an expendable force for the U.S.’ singular war on China.



China has issued warnings to the Philippines to refrain from being used to start a conflict in the South China Sea with U.S. support.

To recall, the United States has maintained an active military presence in the South China Sea and frequently carries out provocative activities near China throughout 2024. A Beijing think tank said, "In 2024, the US military intensified its military deterrence against China by maintaining high-intensity operations in the South China Sea and surrounding areas, including close-in reconnaissance, transits through the Taiwan Strait, forward deployment, strategic patrols, combat exercises and battlefield preparations." The well-documented report said the U.S. conducted 1,000 sorties of close-in aerial reconnaissance using large aircraft, while ocean surveillance and survey ships logged 706 ship-days of operations — a significant increase compared to 2023." The report was released in 2024 by the Beijing-based think tank South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative.

## **Trump's foreign policy on China**

Continuity with the Biden administration

Economic tensions between the United States and China have escalated since February 2025, with Trump raising or slapping tariffs on a variety of Chinese imports and China retaliating with duties of its own. To many, these volleys look very much like the prelude to an all-out trade war, but the broader outlines of Trump's China strategy remain unclear.

Where tariffs are concerned, China is thus far just one target among many, America's partners and allies included. China will need to see how it fits into the bigger picture in order to calibrate its own response. This is doubtless one reason Beijing's reaction has been relatively muted so far. The Chinese were also better prepared for what was coming this time around. From Trump 1.0, Beijing was well acquainted with the president's focus on tariffs and emphasis on energy and food. His swift personnel decisions helped put Beijing on notice as well.

Clearly, tariffs and trade are just one aspect of Washington's China policy. On the foreign-policy and security front, Trump's leadership team includes such confirmed China hawks as Secretary of State Marco Rubio, National Security Advisor Mike Waltz, and Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Eldridge Colby. From a Trumpian perspective, they would doubtless be characterized as heirs to hardliners like Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Deputy National Security Advisor Matt Pottinger from the second half of the first Trump administration. But they also inherit the Biden administration's policies vis-a-vis economic security and Taiwan. Here again, Beijing has reacted with relative equanimity in the face of developments consistent with its previous experience and expectations.



## **China strategy remains murky?**

How will Trump's China policy diverge from Biden's? The biggest difference is likely to be in the basic policy framework.

Under Joe Biden, both Washington and Beijing viewed the relationship as a tough, long-term strategic rivalry but supported direct dialogue to manage a complex relationship, avoiding outright clashes while pursuing cooperation where possible. And in fact, although ties between the two countries remained strained, direct dialogue continued, and a certain level of cooperation was seen in such areas as climate change.

The second Trump administration (Trump 2.0) also views China as a strategic competitor, but apart from this perception, Biden's policy framework is unlikely to survive. While it remains to be seen what sort of coherent China policy, if any, emerges from the module of Trump's mercantilist / protectionist impulses and the ideological hard line of his foreign-policy team, bilateral cooperation seems much less likely.

## **Deterring China – secret Pentagon memo**

A recent Pentagon internal guidance memo from U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth focuses on "deterring China's seizure of Taiwan" and shoring up U.S. homeland defense. A Chinese expert said that the memo, "Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance," once again underscores Washington's positioning of comprehensive strategic competition with China as a core priority. However, the memo's contradiction with current U.S. administration's America First doctrine means there could be policy inconsistency in implementation, the expert also said. Taiwan is an island province of China and is also recognized by the U.S. under the "One China Policy" which both countries adhere to. But Taiwan, toughened by U.S. military support, has threatened to declare independence – an act which will predictably draw Chinese military response leading to an armed invasion of Taiwan. Jitters continue along the Taiwan Straits.

Since the first term of the U.S. President Donald Trump, the U.S. has identified comprehensive strategic competition with China as an enduring core agenda, regarding China as the principal challenge to its global dominance. This position has been reaffirmed in this secret internal guidance memo, with the latest guidance particularly emphasizing confrontational competition with China.

A newspaper report also said, "China is the (defense) department's sole pacing threat, and denial of a Chinese fait accompli seizure of Taiwan - while simultaneously defending the U.S. homeland is the Department's sole pacing scenario," the memo claimed, while "leaving the threat from Moscow largely attended by European allies".

This demonstrates that the U.S. continues to place its alliance system as a core strategic asset. Despite the Trump administration's seemingly "distancing from allies" on



Europe, the fundamental logic of U.S. defense strategy remains unchanged - achieving strategic objectives through alliance cultivation, manipulation, and exploitation.

Washington's repeated demands for European allies to assume greater responsibilities in Europe also reveal U.S.'s intention to sacrifice European interests to maintain its perceived strategic superiority - revealing the underlying purpose of Hegseth's Asia-Pacific tour which is to forge dubious alignments with the Philippines and Japan.

## **China strategy**

In the months since Donald Trump won the U.S. presidential election in November, policymakers in Beijing have been looking to the next four years of U.S.-Chinese relations with trepidation. Beijing has been expecting the Trump administration to pursue tough policies toward China, potentially escalating the two countries' trade war, tech war, and confrontation over Taiwan. The prevailing wisdom is that China must prepare for storms ahead in its dealings with the United States.

## **China in the Global Context**

As noted above, Beijing may need to assess the bigger picture of foreign policy under Trump 2.0, including U.S. diplomacy toward Russia, Ukraine, and the Middle East. Taking a bird's-eye view of U.S. foreign policy, one can probably surmise that the Trump administration will concentrate initially on Europe and the Middle East before turning its attention to East Asia particularly China. How he will handle the tectonic shifts in the world considering that the U.S. is deeply embroiled in several flashpoints such as Ukraine, the Middle East and Yemen needs to be seen.

## **Balikatan 2025 to showcase major missile systems**

Furthermore, the United States military will deploy its Navy-Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System or NMESIS anti-ship missile system for next month's Balikatan exercises. Hegseth said the missile deployments build on an ongoing \$500-million commitment in foreign military financing and other security assistance to support the Philippines' military modernization.

For his part, Philippine President Marcos acclaimed the U.S. as the "greatest force" for peace in Indo-Pacific particularly in the SCS.

Came, however, the admonition from Beijing for "outside forces" not to meddle in the South China Sea adding that disputes should be resolved through direct negotiations.





“The South China Sea issue must be resolved without external interference and should not be exploited by outside forces. Those who willingly become pawns will inevitably be discarded,” Chen Xiaodong, China’s vice-minister of foreign affairs said at the Boao Forum for Asia – an annual gathering of high-level officials, academics and business executives in southern China’s Hainan island province. China’s standing principles are based on a 2017 bilateral agreement forged by Philippine President Duterte and his counterpart, Chinese President Xi Jinping. The pact called for resolving maritime issues through a bilateral dialogue mechanism through which both sides will meet regularly. The dialogue appears to be working as talks have been held at the ministerial level in Shanghai and Manila.

Meantime, the Philippine Army (PA) and the United States Army Pacific (USARPAC) kicked off on March 24 the Salaknib and Balikatan Exercises (SABAK) 2025, aimed at enhancing land defense capabilities. Some 5,000 soldiers --3,000 from the PA and 2,000 from the USARPAC-- are participating in the 'Salaknib' portion of the exercise. The war drills will end on April 11.

## **CenPEG’s stand on deepening US-PH military ties; calls for Independent foreign policy**

As this developed, the think tank Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG) expressed its deep concern over the recent visit of U.S. Defense Chief Hegseth to the Philippines on March 28. The visit, focused on defense cooperation and regional security, was met with a warm response from President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., signaling a deepening military alignment with the United States. This development raises critical questions about national sovereignty, regional stability, and the implications for the Filipino people.

"The deepening military alignment with the United States risks compromising our sovereignty and entangling the Philippines in superpower conflicts. We must prioritize an independent foreign policy that safeguards our national interests and promotes genuine peace and development for the Filipino people," CenPEG said.

President Marcos’ warm reception and the reaffirmation of commitments under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) and Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) reflect a continuation of policies that have historically tied the Philippines’ defense posture to U.S. interests. While strategic partnerships are essential, an uncritical alignment risks entangling the Philippines in superpower rivalries, compromising the country’s independent foreign policy and constitutional mandate to pursue peace, CenPEG said.

The think tank reiterated its call for an independent foreign policy. #

