

Risk and Threat Perception in the Indo-Pacific

The Philippines

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THE PHILIPPINES

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of any entity the author represents.

I. Philippine National Security Concerns

1.1 Strategic Outlook

The Philippines is situated in a complex geographical context that poses both opportunities and concerns from the north (Japan, China, Taiwan, and the Korean Peninsula), west (the South China Sea [SCS] and land-based ASEAN), south (Australia and New Zealand), and east (the Philippine Rise, the US, and Pacific Island Nations). Manila strategically sits between two important bodies of water that separate the two principal actors in the region, China and the US. Over the span of at least eight years bridging two presidential administrations (Duterte and Marcos Jr.), foreign policy in the Philippines has taken center stage. Philippine foreign policy has taken overt features over the last decade and been implemented in various formats. However, the cursory interpretation remains the same. The interpretation of Philippine foreign policy revolves around two important concepts: national interests and threat perceptions—two sides of the same coin.



Figure 1. Top 10 national security concerns, Philippines. Taken from: 2023 National Security Survey, Amador Research Services.

Over the years, the Philippines has maintained eagle-eyed observations of security developments, which are primarily geopolitical and domestic, with complications emanating from one or the other. In a national security survey^[1]

[1] Amador Research Services, “2023 National Security Survey.”

conducted locally across the Filipino security elite sector,^[2] the Philippines' top three national security concerns (Figure 1) arise from 1) the West Philippine Sea (WPS)/SCS dispute, 2) cybersecurity and technological development, and 3) domestic terrorism.

1.2 Strategic Rationale

The WPS dispute is a long-standing territorial maritime conflict between the Philippines and China. This revolved around the determination of sovereignty and control over various maritime features of the SCS within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Despite the Arbitral Award handed out in 2016, the dispute persists to this day because of China's insistence on historical rights, primarily through its controversial nine-dashed line. This maritime dispute involves various issues beyond territorial integrity concerns, including freedom of navigation, regional instability, military build-up, and environmental concerns.

Cybersecurity, data privacy, and artificial intelligence (AI) ranked second among the issues concerning Manila. Technological developments have had both positive and damaging implications for national security. Despite the advances and benefits of digital transformation in the Philippines, internal risks continue to weigh heavily on policymakers. There is now pronounced emphasis on the increasing importance of protecting critical infrastructure, sensitive information, and individual privacy. Similarly, despite the wide range of AI benefits, its adoption poses significant risks to national security. The misuse of AI defeats the purposes of defense, intelligence, and law enforcement. The Philippines has grappled with this technology through the pervasive dissemination of false information that has manipulated public opinion in various instances. Cybercrime involving AI is also becoming prevalent in the Philippines, as many cases of identity theft and online fraud have begun to mount. Military personnel and government officials are both equally susceptible to misuse and malpractice. Furthermore, the widespread use of AI bots and AI-generated photos and videos on social media undermines democratic processes and significantly increases political stability, social development, and natural security risks.

Finally, terrorism and violent extremism continued to be high among the Philippines' perceived threats. The threat of terrorism destabilizes society and weakens governments, rendering citizens vulnerable to human rights violations. Terrorist groups such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), New People's Army (NPA), and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) continue to pose threats to people's safety and national security. Terrorist attacks result in the loss of many innocent lives and harm and damage to communities and infrastructure. These attacks instilled fear and insecurity within the community, depriving them of freedom and safety. Terrorist attacks and other

[2] The survey sample garnered 600+ participants, all national security elites (purposive sampling). The survey measured sentiments and attitudes toward important national security concerns emerging from geopolitical sources. These elites are chiefly concerned with national security in law enforcement, policymaking, observers, and academics.

violent extremism—by terrorist groups or institutions—further weaken the state’s ability to provide governance and essential services to its citizens, hindering their attempts to maintain public order and uphold the rule of law. In addition to local implications, terrorism, and violent extremism transcend national borders, as they also pose national threats to other countries’ economies and national security.

II. Deep Dive into National Security Concerns

The Philippines’ renewed external posture is evident in the security threats with which it is concerned. The first two threat perceptions—1) the WPS and 2) cybersecurity and technological modernization—demonstrate a country with keen attention to external stimuli, with the last repercussions for internal security. Last, it is also concerned with 3) terrorism and political violence, which is still largely prevalent in pockets of Luzon and certain areas throughout the Visayas and Mindanao sub-archipelagos.

Table 1. Popular opinion, risk assessment, and project of top three national security concerns, Philippines.

	West Philippine Sea	Cybersecurity and Technological Modernization	Terrorism and Political Violence
POPULAR OPINION <i>How much attention does the topic receive in politics, media, and popular debate?</i>	VERY HIGH POPULARITY	HIGH POPULARITY	HIGH POPULARITY
RISK ASSESSMENT <i>How and when has the perception and/or level of attention changed over time? Do risk perceptions differ between sectors?</i>	HIGH RISK	VERY HIGH RISK	HIGH RISK
PROJECTION <i>Is the risk/threat posed by this issue likely to remain, increase, or decrease?</i>	INCREASING	INCREASING	REMAIN

2.1 The West Philippine Sea

The WPS, an expanse of the maritime area, covers the entire breadth of the Philippines’ EEZs^[3] in the western seaboard and is part of a wider regional concern arising from China’s assertive posturing. The WPS is a region west of the Philippines and a subsection of the greater SCS. The expansive body of water, dotted with numerous land features that have long been used by traditional Filipino fisher people, is afforded by the UNCLOS.

The Philippine maritime claims to the WPS include the Scarborough Shoal (also claimed by China and Taiwan) and select features of the Spratly Group of Islands (with disputes from China, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Malaysia), including

[3] The EEZ is an area of the ocean within the 200 nautical mile (230 miles) delimitation beyond a nation’s territorial sea. The term is defined and upheld in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Flat Island, Lankiam Cay, Loatia Cay, Loatia Island, Nanshan Island, Northeast Cay, Thitu Island, West York Island, Commodore Reef, Irving Reef, and Second Thomas Reef.

A timeline of events concerning the WPS is presented below.

Table 2. Timeline of the West Philippine Sea, 1991–present.

DATE	DEVELOPMENT	IMPACT
1991–1992	The Philippine Senate did not renew the US Bases Agreement after a majority vote.	The US Bases Agreement had long been revised to include a provision allowing renegotiations.
1993	The last American troops/assets officially left Philippine soil.	The Philippine Senate had voted against the renewal of the US Bases Agreement. US regional presence was diminished, which it had enjoyed since the end of the 2nd World War.
1995	The Philippine government announced in early 1995 that it had detected Chinese occupation of the Mischief (Panganiban) Reef, an elevation in the eastern part of the Kalayaan Island Group (Spratly Islands).	Initially conveyed by the Chinese Government as fisher people seeking shelter from inclement weather at sea, it has now become a full-blown installation short of a military base. The Chinese Government had initially denied the existence of structures.
1996	The Philippine government prompted the modernization of the Armed Forces of the Philippines.	The 1995–1996 AFP Modernization Law was the first attempt to modernize the Philippine armed forces. It allotted a 15-year timeline to develop its army.
2000–2006	No significant coverage of the SCS.	China had minimal resolve in the SCS.
2007	China began implementing non-military coercion at sea.	The US turn to East Asia spotlighted China’s activities at sea. Speculations of China’s militarization of the Mischief Reef arise.
2012	Scarborough Shoal stand-off.	A stand-off between China’s and the Philippines’ Naval and Coast Guard assets

2012	Scarborough Shoal stand-off.	resulted in Manila's de facto control of the feature.
2012	China announced its nine-dash line claim.	China announces an expansive "nine-dashed" claim across the SCS, drawing the ire of all maritime disputants/claimants including the Philippines.
2013	The Philippine government announced the Revised AFP Modernization Law in late 2013.	After assessing the limitations and failures that came with the first iteration of the modernization thrust, the second version sought to rectify the backlogs with a keen focus on maritime security.
2013-2016	China upped its maritime assertiveness and illegal activities at the height of proceedings in The Hague.	On numerous occasions, China questioned the merit and validity of The Hague's proceedings with Manila. The arbitration court ruled it has jurisdiction on the matter.
July 12, 2016	The Hague handed down the Arbitral Award in favor of the Philippines.	While not necessarily ruling on substantive aspects of territorial and sovereign inquiries, the Arbitral Award ruled with finality on 1) the illegality of China's activity, 2) the incompatibility of China's historic claims and nine-dash line claim with UNCLOS, and 3) affirmed the Filipino fisherfolks indigenous rights to fish in areas China had blockaded.
July 12, 2016	The Hague handed down the Arbitral Award in favor of the Philippines.	While not necessarily ruling on substantive aspects of territorial and sovereign inquiries, the Arbitral Award ruled with finality on 1) the illegality of China's activity, 2) the incompatibility of China's historic claims and nine-dash line claim with UNCLOS, and 3) affirmed the Filipino fisherfolks indigenous rights to fish in areas China had blockaded. The Award likewise ruled on the illegality of China's activities as the proceedings were undergoing. The Philippine Delegation requested the arbitration's interpretations to properly define, with finality, the kind of maritime regimes applicable to the disputed features.

2018	China began renaming maritime features in the SCS called the “Four Sha.” ^[4]	
2019	China upped its maritime coercion following the sinking of a Filipino commercial vessel.	The Reed Bank incident is the first collision between the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) and a Filipino commercial vessel (FV Gem Ver). ^[5]
2020	China announced the annual self-imposition of fishing moratoria. ^[6]	China’s fishing ban extends within Scarborough Shoal, part of the Philippines’ EEZ. China continues these fishing moratoria to this day, impacting economic activities at sea, often with counter-protests from the Philippine government. ^[7]
2021	China enacted the Coast Guard Law.	China’s Coast Guard underwent significant militarization thanks to its law. The law effectively sanctioned the weaponization and militarization of its Coast Guard.
2023	China revised nine-dash line to ten-dash line. ^[8]	
2024–Present	China normalizes assertive behaviors at sea and inland.	China has used water cannons, military lasers, and intentional collisions to deter the Philippines. Chinese propaganda has likewise ramped up in recent years. The Chinese embassy in Manila has released faulty legal justifications for its position and continues disregarding the 2016 Arbitral Award.
	The Philippines enact a transparency initiative.	Although useful initially, this has only galvanized China to be more assertive in the region. The interim transparency strategy has yet to be subsumed under a broader strategy in the WPS. G7 economies released their statement in support of the Philippines.

[4] Julian Ku and Chris Mirasola, “The South China Sea and China’s ‘Four Sha’ Claim: New Legal Theory, Same Bad Argument,” *Lawfare*, September 25, 2017. <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/south-china-sea-and-chinas-four-sha-claim-new-legal-theory-same-bad-argument>

[5] Rambo Talabong and Paterno Esmaquel II, “TIMELINE: Sinking of Filipino boat in West PH Sea by Chinese ship,” *Rappler*, 19 June 2019. <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/233394-timeline-chinese-sinking-filipino-boat-gem-ver-west-philippine-sea/>

[6] Ocean, “China engages in fishing ban PR stunt,” August 10, 2023. <https://oceana.org/press-releases/china-engages-in-fishing-ban-pr-stunt/>

[7] Ramon Royandoyan, “Philippines protests China’s unilateral South China Sea fishing ban,” *Nikkei Asia*, May 27, 2024. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/South-China-Sea/Philippines-protests-China-s-unilateral-South-China-Sea-fishing-ban>

[8] Colin Clark, “New Chinese 10-Dash map sparks furor across Indo-Pacific: Vietnam, India, Philippines, Malaysia,” *Breaking Defense*, September 01, 2023. <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/09/new-chinese-10-dash-map-sparks-furor-across-indo-pacific-vietnam-india-philippines-malaysia/>

The WPS is a vital national security issue worldwide. Coverage has expanded extensively since the Philippine government’s transparency thrust was spearheaded by the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG).

During the early years of the Duterte administration (2016–2018), coverage of the WPS had been general, covering developments on the larger SCS. This was consistent with the government's thrust to normalize relations with China at the time at the expense of an Arbitral Award. From 2019 onward, following the Reed Bank incident with the Filipino fisher vessel MV Gem-Ver, coverage of China's illegal activities at sea spurred wide media coverage with viewpoints from experts and analysts, the Philippine government, and, interestingly, the Chinese embassy.

Following the Marcos Jr. administration's renewed conviction over maritime claims and more critically, the enactment of a transparency thrust spearheaded by the PCG, media coverage of the WPS almost always goes on air every few days. The PCG began with the release of ground footage of China's illegal activities such as water cannoning, military laser pointing, and intentional ramming, confirming speculations of China's abhorrent violation of the Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (COLREGs), and more broadly, free navigation and seafaring norms. Media journalists, both local and international, can join the PCG in areas the CCG often guards.

Today, the WPS is a widely covered subject matter, eliciting a few minutes of segments in nightly news reports covering PCG footage, Philippine government policy pronouncements, and Chinese embassy and foreign ministry statements. China has also bolstered its false views of the SCS, rebuffing the Philippine government at every turn. The WPS has a very high volatility risk. The status quo of maritime stand-offs between the CCG and Filipino civilian vessels is no longer the norm, and the PCG actively patrols waters where China is a common site. As a transparent approach by the Philippines, it has mobilized public support to conduct civilian missions at sea to supplement the Filipino forces in the BRP Sierra Madre, which is stationed/moored on the Second Thomas Shoal, a radical development unseen in the last decade. However, this has galvanized China.

Due to China's failure to move the Philippines away from its maritime claims, it has increased its offensive behaviors at sea, conducting activities in direct violation of COLREGs, such as ramming, unsafe maneuvering, unilateral imposition of a fishing moratorium inconsistent with international law, and even the conduct of dangerous provocations such as the use of water cannons and military-grade lasers. These have long been the capabilities of the CCG, thanks in part to its militarization when China's Coast Guard Law was passed in 2020.

The Philippines is now unanimous in its antagonism towards China. Despite efforts to compartmentalize the SCS issue from broader bilateral relations, China continues to register poor popularity ratings among Filipinos.^[9]

[9] Sofia Tomacruz, "Filipinos' trust in China falls to 'bad' as US keeps 'good' rating," Rappler, July 21, 2020. <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/filipinos-trust-ratings-china-us-sws-survey-july-2020/>

While the WPS had primarily been framed as a territorial dispute, there are broader implications of the national security issue in other equally important areas, many of which involve China in one form or another. For instance, the Arbitral Award highlighted China's environmental destruction of marine ecosystems in the EEZs of the Philippines. The Philippines government is now contemplating submitting a new arbitral case against China for destroying marine biodiversity. China continues to conduct illegal fishing activities and marine scientific expeditions within the Philippine EEZ without the government's consent or approval.

The wider south is also an important facet of digital security through subsea cables. Many subsea cables traversing the region pass through the SCS and WPS. The volatility of bilateral relations and broader geopolitical stability of the region undermine the Philippines' digital security.

The Philippines is also on the cusp of formalizing oil and gas exploration. However, it could not move forward because of China's illegal intervention. The initial push for oil and gas exploration was envisioned as the joint thrust between Beijing and Manila. However, because bilateral relations are fraught with China's provocative advances, joint efforts have not passed.

These points highlight the Philippines' vulnerabilities along with food and energy security and the security of its critical resources and infrastructure.

The threat risk is likely to increase over time. Much of the tension in the WPS stems from the upending status quo that both sides arrived at following the 2012 Scarborough Shoal stand-off. Currently, Manila is more vocal about its maritime claims against Beijing, and Beijing is more provocative against the former. The Philippines' maritime border disputes with other littoral ASEAN states have not been as pronounced as those with China.

The projected risks associated with the WPS are considered to be the normalization of Beijing's aggressive approach to countering Manila. More than a decade ago, patrols and net and buoy barriers dominated China's strategy in the seas. The turning point in the SCS dynamics was China's enactment of its Coast Guard Law in 2020, where according to observers, the CCG was empowered with militarized capabilities. In 2019, the Reed Bank incident erupted, stranding Filipino fisher people at sea after their ship capsized following intense ramming by the CCG.

Today, China is normalizing more provocative measures at sea, including light ramming, water cannons, and provocations not previously done. With Manila's foray into conducting civilian missions to the BRP Sierra Madre stationed in the Second Thomas Shoal, Beijing has taken measures to prevent

the Philippines from accessing its military post, including verbal warnings through its Embassy^[10] and Foreign Ministry^[11] and dangerous maneuvers at sea by the CCG.^[12]

2.2 Cybersecurity and Technological Modernization

Recently, government agencies and institutions in the Philippines have been exposed to a high risk of cyberattacks and security breaches including data leakage, ransomware attacks, hacking, and compromised websites. According to the Philippine Digital Justice Initiative (2021), “the Philippines is one of the early colonial countries in the Asia Pacific to obtain and use early digitized technologies; the foreign-dependent economic model under its colonial masters and neoliberalism-oriented leaders hampered the industrialization of the country most notably in the 1960s–70s.^[13]” However, this caused the Philippines to become dependent on the service industry, negatively impacting the pace of current digitalization.

During the early development of digital modernization, the Philippines began adopting digital technologies, marking the initial phase of the Internet and computerization in the public and private sectors, primarily for office and administrative operations such as record-keeping, word processing, improved services, and data management. The adoption of the Internet and computerization during this time enabled businesses and other government agencies to efficiently manage all their records and documents and reach other vulnerable sectors to ensure access to essential government pronouncements and policies. As such, in the early 2000s, the E-Commerce Act (Republic Act No. 8792) was enacted to facilitate electronic transactions and combat cybercrimes such as unauthorized access, hacking, and data interference in different sectors and government agencies,^[14] but despite this, reports regarding cybercrimes and cyberattacks against individuals, private and public institutions, and the government continued to increase. Hence, Congress passed the Cybercrime Prevention Act (Republic Act No. 10175), marking a significant phase in addressing various cybercrimes in the Philippines,^[15] alongside the creation of the Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT), focusing on centralizing efforts to manage the country’s information and communications technology development.^[16] However, as cyber threats and cybercrime became more sophisticated and prevalent, the Cybercrime Investigation and Coordination Center (CICC) was created with the approval of the Republic Act 10175 or the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012, which served as the primary agency responsible for coordinating and implementing efforts to combat cybercrime across various government agencies in the country.^[17]

As part of its policy measures, the Philippines government launched the National

[10] BenarNews, “Philippines probes alleged Chinese disinformation campaign over South China Sea,” May 13, 2024. <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/philippines-china-disinformation-campaign-05132024120805.html>

[11] Reuters, “China accuses PH of ‘continuously’ intensifying conflict in South China Sea,” ABS-CBN, June 04, 2024. <https://news.abs-cbn.com/world/2024/6/4/china-accuses-ph-of-continuously-intensifying-conflict-in-south-china-sea-1756>

[12] Bea Cupin, “China tried to block evacuation of sick Filipino personnel in West Philippine Sea – PCG,” Rappler, 07 June 2024. <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/coast-guard-says-china-harassed-medical-evacuation-team-west-sea-june-2024/>

[13] Philippine Digital Justice Initiative, “History of Philippine Digitalization,” 2021. <https://digitaljustice.cp-union.com/assets/pdf/History-of-Phil-Digitalization.pdf>

[14] LawPhil, “Republic Act No. 8792,” 2000. https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2000/ra_8792_2000.html

[15] LawPhil, “Republic Act No. 10175,” 2012. https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2012/ra_10175_2012.html

[16] Senate of the Philippines, “Republic Act No. 10844,” <https://issuances-library.senate.gov.ph/subject/department-of-information-and-communications-technology-act-of-2015>

[17] Cyber Security Intelligence, “Cybercrime Investigation & Coordinating Center (CICC),” <https://www.cybersecurityintelligence.com/cybercrime-investigation-and-coordinating-center-cicc-4732.html>

Cybersecurity Plan (NCSP) 2022, outlining strategies to protect the Philippines' critical information infrastructure, government, businesses, and individuals from cybercrime and cyber threats. Subsequently, it created the Cybersecurity Bureau under the DICT to focus on cybersecurity policies, strategies, and operations and the first Philippine National Public Key Infrastructure to enhance security in digital transactions.^[18] In the first few years of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021), the digital transformation of sectors accelerated, negatively impacting the security of vulnerable sectors and other socioeconomic aspects. With the shift to online work in private, government, and academic sectors, the DICT and other legislative bodies have increased their efforts to enhance cybersecurity measures to effectively address healthcare, security, and education issues. The current Marcos administration ordered the implementation and adoption of the updated NCSP 2023–2028 to strengthen the security and resilience of Philippine cyberspace against emerging threats such as supply chain attacks, ransomware, and the importance of public-private partnerships.^[19] This enables the Philippines to participate in numerous international cybersecurity exercises and agreements, strengthening regional cooperation with ASEAN and other international partners to combat cybercrime and/or cyber threats.

As technology has become an integral part of people's daily lives, cybersecurity has become a pressing concern for individuals, governments, and various public and private institutions in the Philippines. A Pulse Asia survey conducted in March 2024 revealed that 86.75 million Filipinos used social media for multiple aspects of their lives, from banking and consumer transactions to work, healthcare, and academia.^[20] Unfortunately, some users have become cybercrime targets as scammers and cybercriminals have proliferated.

Recently, Congress expressed concerns about the increasing incidence of cybersecurity breaches and hacking by various government agencies including the Philippine National Police (PNP), Special Action Force (SAF), National Bureau of Investigation, Bureau of Internal Revenue, Bureau of Customs (BOC), Philippine Statistics Authority, Philippine Health Insurance Corporation, Department of Science and Technology (DOST), the Senate of the Philippines, and Department of Social Welfare and Development.^[21] Philippine lawmakers have further stated that cybersecurity issues center on high-profile cyberattacks and data breaches, directly impacting large-scale businesses, government agencies, and individuals.

Furthermore, cybersecurity issues in the Philippines have drawn significant attention from the public as confidential and personal information is at risk of being used in illegal transactions, negatively impacting national security, politics, and the economy. Cybersecurity issues have also become popular

[18] DICT, "DICT Cybersecurity Bureau," <https://www.youtube.com/DICTCybersecurity>

[19] Ruth Abbey Gita-Carlos, "Marcos orders adoption of Nat'l Cybersecurity Plan 2023–2028," Philippine News Agency, April 06, 2024. <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1222170#:~:text=MANILA%20%E2%80%93%20President%20Ferdinand%20R.,and%20resilience%20of%20Philippine%20cyberspace>

[20] Dindo Manhit, "Cybersecurity is not just an IT matter," Philippine Daily Inquirer, June 05, 2024. <https://opinion.inquirer.net/174202/cybersecurity-is-not-just-an-it-matter>

[21] Llanesca T. Panti, "House probe on hacking, data breach at govt agencies sought," GMA News Online, February 29, 2024. <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/899044/house-probe-on-hacking-data-breach-at-govt-agencies-sought/story/>

debate topics regarding better cybersecurity strategies and partnerships. From a political perspective, the Philippine government's response to growing cybercrime and cyber threats is the enactment of various laws such as the E-Commerce Act, Cybercrime Prevention Act, and Data Privacy Act, and the establishment of specialized agencies such as the DICT and CICC, to address cybersecurity issues. The launch of the NCSP reflected the government's continuous efforts to protect the country's national interests and safety. Additionally, the Marcos administration worked on various international collaborations to combat cybersecurity, namely partnerships with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA),^[22] Philippines-US alliance on cybersecurity,^[23] and Philippines-Australia Cybersecurity Cooperation.^[24] Cybersecurity issues in the Philippines have developed significantly over the past few years. During the early 1990s, technological and digital modernization focused on improving administrative efficiency and enabling better record-keeping and data management in the public and private sectors, including different government offices. However, technology and other media platforms have caused a significant shift from positive development to threats to national security and the economy. Today, Filipinos see these cybersecurity issues as the top cause of anxiety among individuals and threats to the national economy.

Recently, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many students, educators, and labor workers suffered from the negative impacts of cybersecurity issues in their fields. The emergence of AI and other technological advances has created a significant divide between different sectors. The emergence of cybersecurity issues such as hacking, identity theft, ransomware, and unauthorized access to personal and confidential information has brought fear and concerns not only to individuals but also to businesses and the government. These cybersecurity issues are now considered the driving force behind implementing the E-Commerce Act, Cybersecurity Prevention Act, and Data Privacy Act to prevent their continuous prevalence and mitigate their negative impact on the Philippines' economy and national interest. Today, as cyber threats have grown in sophistication and frequency, attention dedicated to cybersecurity has increased substantially. By the early 2000s, reports of cybercrime skyrocketed, prompting the Philippine Congress to pass the 2012 Cybercrime Prevention Act and establish the CICC. This marked a significant phase in systematically addressing various cybercrimes. The government's efforts culminated in the launch of the NCSP, which outlined comprehensive strategies to protect critical information infrastructure and reflected a heightened and ongoing commitment to securing Philippine cyberspace.

There are differences in the risk perception of cybersecurity in the Philippines by sector, as these effects vary according to their status and line of work. For instance, in response to the threats of cybersecurity issues to the country, the government prioritized the development of comprehensive cybersecurity policies and partnerships with different public and private

[22] Japan International Cooperation Agency, "JICA and DICT team up to make cyberspace safe for Filipinos," February 08, 2024. https://www.jica.go.jp/english/overseas/philippine/information/press/2023/1530968_16864.html

[23] Department of National Defense, "Philippines, US discuss cooperation on cyber security and defense," October 26, 2023. <https://www.dnd.gov.ph/Release/2023-10-26/2034/Philippines-US-discuss-cooperation-on-cyber-security-and-defense/>

[24] Luzviminda N. Ventura, "An Overview of Australia and the Philippines' Cybersecurity Landscape: Exploring Areas for Cooperation," Center for International Relations & Strategic Studies, May 2023. <https://fsi.gov.ph/2023/06/02/an-overview-of-australia-and-the-philippines-cybersecurity-landscape-exploring-areas-for-cooperation/>

institutions, as well as international cooperation. In general, the government recognizes the critical importance of cybersecurity for national security and economic stability. National leaders including the Philippines' lawmakers acted on the prevalent and ongoing reports on cybercrime and cyber threats by creating specialized agencies such as DICT and CICC and enacting laws such as the Cybercrime Prevention Act, E-Commerce Act, and Data Privacy Act. As such, in recent reports, most of the country's political leaders emphasized the need for robust cybersecurity measures to safeguard sensitive and confidential government and personal data. Second, as reflected in the surveys, public opinion shows that many Filipinos are concerned about the negative impacts of unaddressed cybersecurity issues and emerging schemes by cybercriminals on various social media or media platforms.

These concerns have grown significantly over the past few years as technology has become integral to daily life. The widespread use of social media and online services in the Philippines has increased individual awareness of cyber risk. Today, society sees cybersecurity as integral to protecting personal data, privacy, and other daily activities such as healthcare, education, and banking. Finally, security experts' primary focus on cybersecurity is its technical and strategic aspects. Their perceptions are primarily shaped by increasing and emerging cyber threat, including supply chain attacks, hacking, and ransomware, which primarily target large-scale businesses, government agency websites, and high-profile individual accounts. Today, most security experts advocate advanced security measures, continuous monitoring, and international collaboration to combat cybercrime and threats effectively.

Recently, reports of cyberattacks and data breaches infringing on personal and privacy rights have increased. These activities are considered phishing through text messages or emails, whereby cybercriminals introduce themselves as members or representatives of an established company or agency to defraud individuals for their personal information, leading them to access the personal accounts of the victims and use them for illegal transactions or activities. In addition, other concerns regarding this are that aggressive cybersecurity policies such as Mandatory SIM Registration might infringe on individual privacy. Critics of these laws raise concerns about the record-keeping and data management of personal information in SIM card registrations. Questions include: "How can we be sure that our personal information in the SIM registration is protected if government agencies are also being victimized by cybercrime or hacking?" Economic costs regarding cybersecurity measures are a topic of debate because businesses, especially SMEs, are particularly vulnerable to cybercrime, resulting in significant financial losses. Included as well in the debate are "how cybersecurity measures may protect economic interests and how these measures can be adopted by businesses and other institutions to bolster cybersecurity defenses effectively" and "how the government could provide or assist these

businesses and institutions to kick start their cybersecurity defenses and measures through financial, technological, or resource support.”

Moreover, debates on cybersecurity have focused on the effectiveness of existing cybersecurity laws and need for new regulations to address the evolving cyber threats in the Philippines. Some have suggested enhancing the Cybercrime Prevention Act through stricter implementation and monitoring mechanisms. Therefore, significant debate exists on the need for more comprehensive cybersecurity training and education programs. Critics have asserted that the Philippine government must invest more in education and training programs to equip individuals with the necessary skills to address cybersecurity issues. Debates also include suggestions for the government to incorporate cybersecurity into school curricula and offer specialized training programs to young and other professionals. Raising public awareness of cybersecurity risks and adequate practices is another topic of debate. Effective public education campaigns, which are commonly observed through advocates from NGOs and other civil society organizations, are essential for reducing the vulnerability of individuals and organizations to cybercrimes and cyber threats.

The risks/threats posed by cybersecurity issues in the Philippines will likely increase soon as the Philippines undergoes rapid digital transformation accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has increased online activities across various sectors including education, healthcare, and commerce. The sudden shift from traditional to online work and classes has heightened cybercriminals’ illegal digital activities, affecting almost all aspects of the Philippine economy and security. Cyber threats are increasingly being reported, targeting ordinary citizens, small- and large-scale businesses, and government agencies and institutions. Today, cybercriminals employ more advanced techniques such as targeted phishing, ransomware, hacking, and supply chain attacks.

Moreover, as the Philippine economy grows and becomes more interconnected with the global economy, it has become an attractive target for cybercriminals. Current reports involve scamming and phishing campaigns using the names of big conglomerates or businesses such as BDO, BPI, PayPal, Google, Microsoft, Netflix, and Apple. Most illegal cyber activities involve financial banking, financial transactions, or insurance. As the Philippine market becomes more diverse, many cybercriminals have adopted advanced mechanisms to acquire financing from individuals and other institutions. Further, the country’s increased international trade and investment can introduce new cybersecurity vulnerabilities through complex supply chains and digital ecosystems. In addition, the region’s current geopolitical and maritime disputes such as the SCS/WPS dispute have contributed to increased cyber threats to national security. Recently, there have also been reports of cyber threats from Chinese citizens.

In addition, the Philippines still needs a solid and effective mechanism to secure critical infrastructure sectors; hence, cyber threats and attacks will be inevitable in the coming years unless the government can invest in them.

Cyber threats are not just a problem in the Philippines; they are also a global issue, and international collaboration is essential to combat them effectively. Although the Philippines has engaged in numerous international cybersecurity exercises and agreements with JICA, the US, and Australia, maintaining and strengthening these partnerships is critical for addressing cross-border cyber threats. The country needs to implement advanced and improved cybersecurity measures immediately because if cybercrimes and cyber threats cannot be stopped now, what about in the next few years? Crimes committed by cybercriminals will only worsen, and their impact on the Philippines' economy and security will become even more significant. The evolution of these threats means that more than traditional security measures are needed, and the Philippines now needs advanced and adaptive cybersecurity mechanisms to ensure national interest.

2.3 Terrorism and Political Violence

Political violence and terrorism have long plagued the Philippines. Centuries of resistance to colonial powers and the authoritarian rule of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. laid the groundwork for ongoing separatist movements and political instability. The 1983 assassination of opposition leader Senator Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino Jr. serves as a stark example of this period's volatility, sparking public outrage and contributing to Marcos Sr.'s downfall. However, against the background of political dissent and revolution from the early 1970s to 1990s, Asia's longest-running communist insurgency was waged by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP); its armed wing the NPA, and its political front the National Democratic Front (NDF). During the same period, The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and its breakaway faction the MILF played a major role in Mindanao's decades-long struggle for an independent Muslim state or autonomous region.

Meanwhile, the political landscape of the Philippines drastically changed when following the September 11 attacks, the Philippines allied with the US in the global "War on Terror." This involved increased military cooperation and intelligence sharing to address emerging threats such as the ASG. This Islamist extremist group gained notoriety in the 1990s for kidnapping, bombing, and violent activities. Their emergence marked a shift towards terror tactics in the Philippines. Moving on, in the 2010s, several terrorist attack events occurred. A prominent incident was the Mamasapano clash in 2015, in which 44 SAF troops were killed in an anti-terrorism operation in Maguindanao, highlighting the continued challenges of peace talks and counter-terrorism efforts.

Finally, recent developments denote both significant progress and fallbacks towards curbing political violence and terrorism in the Philippines under Duterte's administration. Former President Duterte's administration saw the Maute Group's siege of Marawi City in 2017, which marked a major escalation in terrorist activity, requiring a large-scale military response. Additionally, Duterte focused heavily on a violent drug war campaign, leading to a significant number of human rights violations and concerns and paving the way for new emergent channels for political violence.

Political violence and terrorism in the Philippines have received substantial attention in politics, media, and popular debates, highlighting the complexities of these issues. Beginning with political discourse and activities, the activities of separatist groups such as the ASG, MILF, and MNLF were central to national security discussions. The Mamasapano clash led to extensive investigations and Congressional hearings. This incident highlights operational lapses and strained peace negotiations in Mindanao. Similarly, the siege of Marawi by the Maute group prompted the declaration of martial law in Mindanao and initiated extensive political debates regarding rehabilitation efforts and counter-terrorism strategies. As for recent developments, the Duterte administration's war on drugs has been a core policy focus, drawing both substantial political support and criticism and even attracting considerable scrutiny from international human rights organizations. This prompted the Duterte administration to withdraw the Philippines from the International Criminal Court, which expressed plans to probe the war on drugs. This probe is underway, with President Marcos Jr.'s administration remaining passive in cooperating therein and reiterating its capabilities to investigate violations.^[25]

Conversely, media coverage has been extensive, often sensationalizing violent activities such as bombings and kidnappings perpetrated by these groups. State media has been extensive and polarized, presenting these activities as battles against "terrorists" and as directly threatening civilian safety, thereby legitimizing strong military responses.^[26] Reports on incidents such as the Mamasapano clash and Marawi siege have focused on casualties, destruction, operational failures, and the impact on peace processes and rehabilitation efforts. This narrative differs from that of the independent media, which often present more critical views, scrutinize government actions, and highlight potential human rights violations.

Finally, amidst recorded incidents of political violence and terrorism, public awareness and concern are heightened due to frequent and vivid media reports and political rhetoric. Debates focus on the effectiveness and human rights implications of the government's counter-terrorism measures, reflecting divided public opinion on the balance between security and civil liberties. Moreover, prominent public concern and debate are centered on the stringent military response and its long-term implications for Mindanao.

[25] "House Panel Ready to Probe into Anti-drug War, Extra-judicial Killings." INQUIRER.Net. May 17, 2024. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1941344/house-panel-ready-to-probe-into-anti-drug-war-extra-judicial-killings>

[26] Montiel, Cristina J., Erwine S. Dela Paz, and Jose S. Medriano. 2022. "Narrative expansion and 'terrorist' labeling: Discursive conflict escalation by state media." *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 10(2): 518-35. <https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.5577>

Discussions include the effectiveness of martial law and adequacy of the government's rehabilitation efforts. Regarding recent events, public debate continues on the effectiveness and implications of government strategies, specifically with new cases of activists (many youth) red-tagged as terrorists by the Anti-Terror Council and the National Task Force To End Local Communist Armed Conflict, eventually reported as killed,^[27] and the deadly bombing of a Catholic church in Marawi by ISIS-affiliated militants.^[28] Political violence in the Philippines has been shaped by long-standing internal insurgencies and the increasing influence of international terrorism. There has been a transition from traditional forms of warfare to modern terrorism, in which violence is primarily directed against non-combatants. Attacks have shifted towards smaller, covert terrorist units that engage in high-impact attacks for political and propaganda purposes. The 2017 Marawi siege marked a significant turning point, exemplifying the global reach of terrorism and underscoring the need for international cooperation. Government responses include increased militarization, peace negotiations, and counter-terrorism legislation such as the Human Security Act, Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) aimed at addressing the root causes of the Moro conflict,^[29] and the most recent Anti-Terrorism Act, which has received much public opposition given the possible implications for the silencing of dissent and press and speech freedom.^[30] Additionally, the Manila Declaration and ASEAN Comprehensive Plan of Action on Counter-Terrorism have served as steps towards regional collaboration against terrorism.

Data from the Global Terrorism Database indicate a profound 57% decline in major attacks from 2015 to 2020; however, low-level violence persists, particularly in restive regions.^[31] Additionally, National Risk Assessment reports assess money laundering and terrorist financing (TF) risks in the country. These reports indicate high terrorism financing vulnerability, with terrorist groups employing both illegal methods such as kidnapping and extortion, and legitimate avenues such as non-profit organizations and business fronts to raise funds.^[32] Despite the significant threats posed by these groups, the prosecution and reporting of suspicious transactions remain minimal.

Several key risk factors exacerbate the threat of political violence and terrorism in the Philippines. Underdevelopment and inequality fuel grievances that provide fertile grounds for recruitment by extremist groups. Ungovernable areas offer safe havens for armed groups and facilitate the flow of weapons and illicit materials. The proliferation of small arms contributes to violence and criminal activities, while online and offline propaganda targeting vulnerable populations leads to radicalization and recruitment into violent extremist organizations.

Finally, stakeholder perceptions varied significantly, reflecting different priorities and roles. The Philippine government prioritizes national security

[27] "Philippines: Harassment and Criminalisation of Activists Persist Despite Concerns Raised by UN Rights Experts - Civicus Monitor." n.d. Civicus Monitor. <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/philippines-harassment-and-criminalisation-of-activists-persist-despite-concerns-raised-by-un-rights-experts/>

[28] Simonette, By Joel Guinto and Virma. 2023. "Mindanao: Four Killed in Explosion at Catholic Mass in Philippines." December 3, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67604592>

[29] The Permanent Mission of the Republic of the Philippines to the United Nations. 2020. "Measures Undertaken by the Philippine Government to Eliminate International Terrorism." United Nations - Office of Counter-Terrorism. https://www.un.org/en/ga/sixth/75/int_terrorism/philippines_e.pdf

[30] Mendoza, Ronald U. et al. "Counterterrorism in the Philippines: Review of Key Issues." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15(1) (2021): 49-64. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26984797>

[31] National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, "Global Terrorism Database," <https://www.start.umd.edu/data-tools/GTD>

[32] "The Philippines Second National Risk Assessment on Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing." 2017. Anti-Money Laundering Council | Republic of the Philippines. <http://www.amlc.gov.ph/images/PDFs/NRAReport20152016.pdf>

and stability by focusing on legal enforcement and military action. Civil society emphasizes human rights, poverty reduction, and peaceful conflict resolution strategies. Political parties' approaches vary based on ideology and regional interests, with some advocating stronger military responses and others more inclusive peace processes. Security experts recommend a balanced approach combining immediate security measures with long-term strategies to address the root causes of terrorism.

Several key debates have defined the current approach to addressing political violence and terrorism in the Philippines. The first focuses on the optimal balance among security, upholding human rights, and development. The government's counter-terrorism strategies, particularly those involving stringent military responses and the implementation of martial law in Mindanao, have been criticized for potential human rights abuses. Activists and civil society groups argue that these measures often lead to the infringement of civil liberties, unlawful detention, and extrajudicial killings. Moreover, critics have highlighted that militarization alone does not address the underlying socioeconomic issues that contribute to radicalization and insurgency. Issues such as poverty, inequality, and a lack of education are critical drivers of terrorism and insurgency. Proponents of this view advocate a more comprehensive approach: development programs, education, and economic opportunities as long-term solutions to prevent radicalization and build resilient communities.^[33]

The other debate revolves around peace negotiations. While many view them as essential to achieving lasting peace, questions remain about their inclusivity and effectiveness. Implementing the BOL and establishing the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) are steps towards addressing historical grievances. However, major obstacles are being faced, such as budget constraints and resistance from phased-out BARMM employees, slow implementation of the normalization track, and incomplete decommissioning of MILF combatants. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has delayed key programs and effective communication with communities remains difficult despite efforts to engage civil society organizations and improve outreach.^[34]

Conversely, the debate on autonomy and federalism is pertinent to the broader discussion of political violence and terrorism. Advocates of the Federal Constitution argue that the current unitary system alienates the Bangsamoro people and other ethnic communities, fostering neglect and discrimination against the Christian Filipino majority. They believe this system enables political warlords and corruption, exacerbating conflicts such as the Moro rebellion. Proponents suggest that federal and parliamentary governments could address these issues by improving governance, strengthening the rule of law, and holding leaders accountable, thus reducing corruption and displacing local warlords.^[35]

[33] Mendoza, Ronald U. et al., "Counterterrorism in the Philippines," 54-61.

[34] "The Philippines' Bangsamoro Transition Authority's Expectation Management Challenge." July 2022. United States Institute of Peace. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/07/philippines-bangsamoro-transition-authoritys-expectation-management-challenge>

[35] Buat, Mohd. Musib. n.d. "Federalism as a Bangsamoro option." Office of The Ombudsman. <https://www.ombudsman.gov.ph/UNDP4/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Federalism-Option.pdf>

However, there are concerns about the potential for increased regionalism and ability of local governments to effectively manage increased autonomy without exacerbating conflicts.

Looking ahead, the future trends in terrorism and political violence in the Philippines present a complex landscape. In the Southern Philippines, the Moro-Islamist insurgency could potentially see a reduction in violence if negotiations between the MILF-led Bangsamoro Transition Authority and non-IS-affiliated Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters factions succeed. However, challenges persist with the ASG in the Sulu Archipelago, likely leading to continued military confrontations. Moreover, the influence of ISIS and its evolving tactics, as demonstrated during the 2017 Marawi Siege, poses ongoing challenges to security forces. Conversely, the current administration's hardened stance and increased surveillance against the CPP-NPA-NDF may escalate tensions, potentially resulting in the revival of urban assassinations and targeted violence in major cities.^[36] Amidst these complexities, enhancing international cooperation and interagency coordination, continuous evaluation, and adaptation of counter-terrorism strategies remain pivotal for effectively addressing the persistent threat of terrorism and political violence to achieve sustainable and lasting peace in the Philippines.

[36] Alifandi, Anton. 2021. "Terrorism in the Philippines: Examining the data and what to expect in the coming years." S&P Global. S&P Global Market Intelligence. <https://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/mi/research-analysis/terrorism-philippines-examining-data.html>

III. Strategic Assessment

The Philippines’ national security policies may be challenging to track because of political undercurrents. Much like advanced liberal democracies, the Philippines is still beholden to the dynamics between internal and external challenges. However, there are important policy documents on which observers can always fall back to better understand the Philippines despite the political quagmire. Once the political cycle renews every six years, the new administration develops a policy document that lays out its vision of the Philippines, its place in the regional and international theater, and the perceived threats that could impact national interests.

The National Security Policy (NSP),^[37] the first of two important documents of the Philippines, lays out the new administration’s vision of the country and identifies the threats it perceives in the region, the world, and among members of the international community. It broadly covers national security across various sectors including defense, environment, foreign affairs, society, culture, and the economy. The NSP is issued once every six years and is drafted by the National Security Council, a coordinating and advisory body for the President’s Office. The Aquino III, Duterte, and Marcos Jr. governments issued their respective NSPs.

The second of two important documents is a National Security Strategy (NSS). The NSS operationalized the first document in concrete steps for government agencies to follow and adapt. It steers and directs the government—both national and local—in the way it should and must ideally uphold national security. The Aquino III and Duterte administrations issued their versions of the NSS, but the Marcos Jr administration has yet to issue its own.

Table 3. Level of policy development, strategic measures, and institutions addressing the top three national security concerns, Philippines.

ISSUE AREAS	Policy	Strategic Measures	Institutions and Actors
West Philippine Sea	Developed	Robust	Robust
Cybersecurity	Developing	Developing	Developing
Terrorism and Political Violence	Developed	Robust	Developed

All government actions, initiatives, and undertakings emerge from these two important policy documents. Guided by the NSP and NSS, the Philippine government employs a comprehensive framework of policies that instruct

[37] National Security Council, “National Security Policy 2023–2028,” 2023. https://nsc.gov.ph/images/NSS_NSP/National_Security_Policy_Manual_FINAL_E-COPY_with_WATERMARK_140823.pdf

national and local government instruments regarding its national security responsibilities. The outlined issue areas hint at the government's unique process of prioritization and securitization, so the set of policies developed to respond to national security issues likewise belies the extent to which these policies are developed.

3.1 The West Philippine Sea

The Philippines has two lines of defense against WPS issues: coordination and enforcement. Together, the two fronts draw upon both domestic and international laws to enforce maritime claims in the WPS and broadly to all maritime domain spaces.

The Office of the President spearheads the coordinating front as the foremost authority on Philippine foreign policy, whose efforts are supplemented, upheld, and bolstered by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). All matters in international affairs are coordinated through the DFA. Subsequent government agencies followed the president's foreign policy directives, including the Department of Justice for submitting international cases, National Security Council, and National Task Force on the WPS (NTF-WPS).

The enforcement front is divided into two main groups and deployed depending on the situational context: civilian, non-military, and military. Civilian or non-military enforcers play a significant role in law enforcement during times of peace. This includes the PCG (under the Department of Transportation), Maritime Group of the PNP (under the Department of the Interior and Local Government), and Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (under the Department of Environment and Natural Resources). Military forces are deployed during wartime scenarios, and their roles in peacetime operations are limited (usually humanitarian assistance and disaster relief). This mainly involves assets and forces from the Philippines' armed forces including the Philippine Navy, Philippine Air Force, and Philippine Marine Corps.

The authority intervening between the coordination and enforcement fronts is managed by the Presidential Office for Maritime Concerns (POMC; Executive Order No. 57),^[38] initially called the National Coast Watch System. The POMC focuses on maritime domain awareness, intelligence, and coordination across all government agencies. The Philippines' emphasis on maritime characteristics has only developed in the last decade following the 2012 Scarborough Shoal. Since then, the Philippines has placed a premium on policy pronouncements from the national government.

[38] LawPhil, "Executive Order No. 57," https://lawphil.net/executive/execord/eo2024/eo_57_2024.html

Manila is constitutionally bound to pursue an independent foreign policy subservient to national interests, and the country's interest is to preserve its maritime domain.

In mid-2012, during the Aquino III administration, Manila enacted Administrative Order 29, formally designating the EEZ of the Philippines as WPS.^[39] The same initiative was formalized with the Philippine Rise (formerly the Benham Rise) in 2017 under the Duterte administration through Executive Order No. 25.^[40] Consistent with its 2016 Arbitral Award, which was won through the dispute mechanism of international law, the Philippines is bound by UNCLOS.

Thus far, all national government efforts have harmonized the domestic laws governing maritime interests with international law. The Philippine government is in the process of signing a landmark bill that would unify and reconcile Philippine Treaty Limits with UNCLOS through the Maritime Zones Act.^[41] Similarly, the Department of National Defense has taken measures to uphold the country's maritime interests. The agency developed the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept^[42] to bolster national forces for defensive measures against sea disruptions.

To supplement the Philippines' domestic thrusts, it has become a party to international treaties. Ensuring the maintenance of international law bolsters claims and invites international support. Manila was party to the 1982 UNCLOS,^[43] affording it access to the dispute mechanism that led to the 2016 Arbitral Award^[44] it won against the illegality of China's claims and activities within its EEZs. Prior to UNCLOS, Manila ensured its commitment to earlier maritime treaties such as the 1972 COLREGs;^[45] 1973 International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL);^[46] 1974 International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea;^[47] and 1978 International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping for Seafarers.^[48]

The Philippines is party to many ASEAN maritime security initiatives. The foremost document outlining maritime security in the context of the Indo-Pacific was the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). UNCLOS is foremost in the AOIP and well-embedded in the Philippine consciousness. Consistent with the UN Charter, UNCLOS, and Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, the Philippines is party to the finalization and conclusion of the Code of Conduct of Parties in the SCS,^[49] which China has long been accused of stalling.^[50] Similarly, the Philippines is party to the Convention on Biological Diversity.^[51] Expanding its maritime domain is part of its blue economy thrusts, where its population relies on food, energy, and economic security.

Support and positive development from the international community also

[39] LawPhil, "Administrative Order No. 29," https://lawphil.net/executive/ao/ao2012/ao_29_2012.html

[40] Jur, "Executive Order No. 25," <https://jur.ph/laws/summary/changing-the-name-of-benham-rise-to-philippine-rise-and-for-other-purposes#>

[41] Camille Elemia, "Philippine congress approves bill establishing maritime zones around archipelago," BenarNews, 2024. <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/maritime-zones-02262024143118.html>

[42] Rej Cortez Torrecampo, "A Paradigm Shift in the Philippines' Defense Strategy," The Diplomat, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/a-paradigm-shift-in-the-philippines-defense-strategy/>

[43] United Nations, "United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea," 1982. https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/UNCLOS-TOC.htm

[44] Permanent Court of Arbitration, "The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines v. The People's Republic of China)," 2016. <https://pca-cpa.org/en/cases/7/>

[45] International Maritime Organization, "Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea," <https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/COLREG.aspx>

[46] International Maritime Organization, "International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships," [https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-for-the-Prevention-of-Pollution-from-Ships-\(MARPOL\).aspx](https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-for-the-Prevention-of-Pollution-from-Ships-(MARPOL).aspx)

[47] International Maritime Organization, "International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea," [https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-for-the-Safety-of-Life-at-Sea-\(SOLAS\)-1974.aspx](https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-for-the-Safety-of-Life-at-Sea-(SOLAS)-1974.aspx)

[48] International Maritime Organization, "International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers," [https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-on-Standards-of-Training-Certification-and-Watchkeeping-for-Seafarers-\(STCW\).aspx](https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-on-Standards-of-Training-Certification-and-Watchkeeping-for-Seafarers-(STCW).aspx)

played a role in Manila's strategic calculations for the WPS. For instance, the trilateral summit between the Philippines, US, and Japan on April 11, 2024, shows a converging regional threat perception and mounting interest to deter economic coercion. The US promises to support the development of the Philippines' semiconductor industry, which is consistent with its CHIPS and Science Act. The broad strategic aim is to reduce overreliance on one major supplier, diversify semiconductor production, and jointly protect and develop critical technologies across the three countries.^[52] On the other hand, Japan promises a new slate of Official Security Assistance for the Philippines' maritime domain and its ambitious push to finalize a Reciprocal Access Agreement with Manila.^[53] The trilateral summit's ambit of concern now includes the East China Sea.

The statement of the G7 Apulia Leaders' Communiqué issued in mid-June 2024^[54] is a remarkable development in bringing the maritime dispute into international prominence, citing the G7 economies' strong opposition to any unilateral attempt to shift the status quo in the SCS. More importantly, on July 12, 2016, the Arbitral Award on the SCS was recognized as a milestone for the corpus of international law, reaffirming the legally binding nature of the Award to both the Philippines and China.

3.2 Cybersecurity and Technological Modernization

The Philippine government's prominent actors in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector stem from the DICT and its agencies. All measures taken by the DICT were aimed at reinforcing the Philippines' digital infrastructure, propelling the country's digital transformation, and protecting the digital architecture. DICT has undertaken important digital initiatives in the government, including the creation of Digital Transformation Centers where Filipinos can be upskilled, sustainment of free and accessible Wi-Fi connections in public spaces, Electronic Business Permits and Licensing System (e-PBLS) that enables local governments to issue permits and licenses through digitized processes, and Philippine Business Hub-Central Business Portal (PBH-CBP) to preserve the ease of doing business. Many DICT initiatives cut across all layers of administration and their intervention at every step is vital to the day-to-day operations of the government.

DOST is a government research and development wing. DOST spearheads the testing, research, development, and innovation of certain technologies conceptualized by the national government, including DICT. DOST and its agencies specialize in various research thrusts such as atmospheric, meteorological, and seismological monitoring; advanced sciences; emerging technologies such as AI, cloud, and quantum computing; food and nutrition; industrial technology; the metal industry; and nuclear research.

[49] ASEAN, "Priority Areas of Cooperation," <https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/peaceful-secure-and-stable-region/situation-in-the-south-china-sea/priority-areas-of-cooperation/>

[50] Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, "PRC still dragging its feet on South China Sea code of conduct," 2023. <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2023/10/prc-still-dragging-its-feet-on-south-china-sea-code-of-conduct/>

[51] Convention on Biological Diversity, "Text of the Convention," <https://www.cbd.int/convention/text>

[52] The White House, "Joint Vision Statement from the Leaders of Japan, the Philippines, and the United States," April 11, 2024. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/11/joint-vision-statement-from-the-leaders-of-japan-the-philippines-and-the-united-states/>

[53] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-U.S.-Philippines Summit," April 11, 2024. https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sea2/ph/pageite_000001_00267.html

[54] The White House, "G7 Apulia Leaders' Communiqué," June 14, 2024. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/06/14/g7-leaders-statement-8/#:~:text=We%20call%20for%20a%20peaceful,quo%20by%20force%20or%20coercion>

Other government instruments include the Department of Trade and Industry spearheading initiatives that invite economic activities from the IT and ICT industries and the Department of Education by adopting and upskilling new talent in an increasingly digitized society. Cybersecurity in the Philippines has been rife with delays. The securitization of the issue took hold only once Manila saw security vulnerabilities in the government's ICT infrastructure as more of its operations and the economic activities of the public and private sectors slowly moved towards the digital domain. To supplement its cybersecurity thrust, the past three administrations, Aquino III, Duterte, and Marcos Jr., have taken measures to digitize the country to combat corruption and ease business processes.^[55]

Very early during the Aquino III administration, the Philippines passed the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (RA 10173)^[56] to boost investments. Privacy law was largely patterned after best practices were instituted by the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation.^[57] The implementation of rules and regulations for privacy law was finalized in 2016 under the Duterte administration.^[58] Towards the end of the Aquino III administration, the law (RA 10844) mandating the creation of a ministry specific to ICT matters was passed in 2015.^[59] It would come to life under the Duterte administration of the DICT.

Under the Duterte and Marcos Jr. administrations, the DICT made urgent strides in Philippine cybersecurity, albeit nascent and organizational. Subsequent plans have been developed to secure the Philippines' digitalization, such as the 2017 National Connectivity and Broadband Development Plan and^[60] 2022 E-Government Master Plan.^[61] Under the Marcos Jr. administration, DICT began formulating broader and longer-term strategies for the Philippines' digital transformation. The DICT released its NCSP 2023–2028^[62] and its Philippine Digital Strategy, the two cruxes of the Philippines' digital transformation, to tackle security and economic growth, respectively.

Although cognizant of development, there is not yet a robust debate on the ground. The DOST has developed a roadmap for AI and ICT.^[63]

Much of what the Philippines is doing is patterned after initiatives by ASEAN, including the ASEAN ICT Master Plan 2020^[64] and more recently, the ASEAN Digital Master Plan 2025^[65] and Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025.^[66] These cover broad aspects of sectoral cooperation and the upskilling of ASEAN's ICT industry, such as connectivity and infrastructure, digital transformation, policies, standardizations, and regulations.

The Philippines also welcomes development assistance to improve its ICT industry through capacity building, confidence building, and knowledge and

[55] Julio Amador III and Deryk Baladjay, "When China's Digital Silk Road meets Philippines' digital transformation," Philippine Star, May 8, 2024. <https://qa.philstar.com/opinion/2024/05/08/2353499/when-chinas-digital-silk-road-meets-philippines-digital-transformation>

[56] National Privacy Commission, "Republic Act 10173: Data Privacy Act of 2012," <https://privacy.gov.ph/data-privacy-act/#:~:text=%5BREPUBLIC%20ACT%20NO.,COMMISSION%2C%20AND%20FOR%20OTHER%20PURPOSES>

[57] Intersoft Consulting, "General Data Protection Regulation," <https://gdpr-info.eu>

[58] Official Gazette, "Implementing Rules and Regulations of Republic Act No. 10173, known as the 'Data Privacy Act of 2012,'" 2016. <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/images/uploads/20160825-IRR-RA-10173-data-privacy.pdf>

[59] Senate of the Philippines, "Republic Act No. 10844."

[60] DICT, "National Broadband Plan," <https://cms-cdn.e.gov.ph/DICT/pdf/2017.08.09-National-Broadband-Plan.pdf>

[61] DICT, "E-Government Masterplan 2022," <https://dig.watch/resource/philippines-e-government-masterplan-2022>

[62] Digital Watch Observatory, "Philippines' National Cybersecurity Plan (NCSP) 2023-2028," <https://dig.watch/resource/philippines-national-cybersecurity-plan-ncsp-2023-2028>

[63] DOST-PCIEERD, "Artificial Intelligence and Information & Communications Technology: Roadmapping Executive Report," 2021. https://pcieerd.dost.gov.ph/images/pdf/2021/roadmaps/sectoral_roadmaps_division/etdd/Draft-1_AI-ICT-Roadmap-as-24.3.2021.pdf

[64] SEAN, "The ASEAN ICT Masterplan 2020," https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/November/ICT/15b%20-%20AIM%202020_Publication_Final.pdf

technology transfers from partner countries such as the US (through the US Agency for International Development), Japan (JICA), South Korea (Korea International Cooperation Agency), Australia (Asia Foundation), and the European Union.

Similarly, external developments have been beneficial for Manila. The Philippines-US-Japan trilateral summit also expressed the intent to develop an alternative ICT ecosystem for the Philippines through Open Radio Access Network field trials that cost USD 8 million.^[67] The three countries are expected to hold separate trilateral summits on Cyber and Digital Dialogue for further cooperation in the digital domain.

3.3 Terrorism and Political Violence

The Philippines has a dedicated line of government agencies that respond directly to terrorism and political violence. Apart from a robust legal community, the government corps of actors includes the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) and its chief enforcement agency, the PNP. Both the DILG and PNP are responsible for securing the safety of lives in the domestic context.

Other government agencies responsible for detecting and coordinating with the PNP include the Bureau of Immigration, the BOC, and Anti-Money Laundering Council. The National Security Council, National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, and other pertinent government offices mentioned above also comprise the Anti-Terrorism Council. All these agencies have enforcement capabilities primarily operated and spearheaded by the PNP. For instances where additional firepower and human resources are needed, the Philippine Army of the Armed Forces of the Philippines may be involved. The Philippines has a lengthy history, first with political violence caused by the NPA, a communist faction of revolutionaries labeled a terrorist group for its dangerous activities nationwide, and subsequently with terrorist groups after the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). During the Macapagal-Arroyo administration, the Human Security Act of 2007 (RA 9372)^[68] was passed to protect the liberty, life, and property of Filipinos and allay the fear of terrorism at the time. It also defined terrorism in the context of fear and pre-existing laws such as articles against mutiny, rebellion, insurrection, coup d'état, murder, and serious illegal detention in the Revised Penal Code, the Law on Arson (PD 1613), Anti-Hijacking Law (RA 6235), Anti-Piracy and Anti-Highway Robbery Law (PD 532), and Anti-Wire Tapping Law (RA 4200), and provided commensurate penalties for violations thereof.

[65] ASEAN, "ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025," <https://asean.org/book/asean-digital-masterplan-2025/>

[66] ASEAN, "ASEAN Plan on ASEAN Connectivity," https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/8_compressed.pdf

[67] The White House, "Joint Vision Statement."

[68] Philippine Senate, "Republic Act No. 9372," http://legacy.senate.gov.ph/republic_acts/ra%209372.pdf

Similarly, Manila developed measures to curtail and deter TF. It passed the Anti-Money Laundering Act of 2001 (RA 9160)^[69] primarily to deter government corruption, and in 2012, the Terrorism Financing Prevention and Suppression Act (RA 10168),^[70] more specifically against terrorist groups. Under the Duterte administration, the 2020 Anti-Terrorism Act^[71] was passed and expanded under the 2007 Human Security Act. This was prompted by the Marawi crisis of 2017 when ISIL-affiliated groups upended the peace of Marawi City in Mindanao.

The Philippines likewise passed legislation expanding its intervention in strategic trade activities to insulate the country from dangerous trade exchanges from various countries. The Strategic Trade Management Act of 2015 (RA 10697),^[72] passed in the latter years of the Aquino III administration, sought to ensure that strategic materials coming in, out, and/or passing through the Philippines' borders were tracked and observed. It observes a strict list of items called the National Strategic Goods List, especially those coming from and for (through transshipments) pariah states such as North Korea and Iran.

Manila is party to international conventions that ensure human security including the 1970 Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Seizure of Aircraft,^[73] 1971 Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Civil Aviation,^[74] 1973 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Crimes against Internationally Protected Persons including Diplomatic Agents,^[75] 1979 International Convention against the Taking of Hostages,^[76] 1980 Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material,^[77] 1988 Protocol for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts of Violence at Airports Serving International Civil Aviation,^[78] 1988 Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation,^[79] 1988 Protocol for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Fixed Platforms located on the Continental Shelf,^[80] and 1997 International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings. The Philippines adopted all these in conjunction with multilateral interests to preserve human security in the air, land, and sea.

Likewise, the Philippines shares the ASEAN vision for a rule-based community of nations. Manila patterns many of its efforts with the 2009 ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint^[81] to harmonize political-security relations with the rest of the region and foster coordination in important issue areas such as the free flow of information and intelligence, strategies for the rule of law, judicial systems, legal infrastructure, good governance, human rights, anti-corruption, democracy, peace, stability, and norm shaping and sharing. The blueprint espouses important initiatives to achieve harmonization among ASEAN Member States, including confidence-building measures, transparency, defense and security cooperation, upholding territorial integrity, avenues for conflict resolution and dispute

[69] AMLC, "Republic Act No. 9160," <http://www.amlc.gov.ph/laws/money-laundering/2015-10-16-02-50-56/republic-act-9160>

[70] AMLC, "Republic Act No. 10168," <http://www.amlc.gov.ph/laws/terrorism-financing/2015-10-16-02-51-58>

[71] LawPhil, "Republic Act No. 11479," https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2020/pdf/ra_11479_2020.pdf

[72] LawPhil, "Republic Act No. 10697," https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2015/ra_10697_2015.html

[73] UN Treaty Collection, "Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Seizure of Aircraft," <https://treaties.un.org/doc/db/Terrorism/Conv2-english.pdf>

[74] UN Treaty Collection, "Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Civil Aviation," <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20974/volume-974-I-14118-english.pdf>

[75] UN Treaty Collection, "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Crimes against Internationally Protected Persons, including Diplomatic Agents," https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9_4_1973.pdf

[76] UN Treaty Collection, "International Convention against the Taking of Hostages," <https://treaties.un.org/doc/db/terrorism/english-18-5.pdf>

[77] UN Treaty Collection, "Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material," <https://treaties.un.org/doc/db/terrorism/conv6-english.pdf>

[78] UN Treaty Collection, "Protocol for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts of Violence at Airports Serving International Civil Aviation," <https://treaties.un.org/doc/db/terrorism/conv7-english.pdf>

[79] UN Treaty Collection, "Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation," <https://treaties.un.org/doc/db/terrorism/conv8-english.pdf>

[80] UN Treaty Collection, "Protocol for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Fixed Platforms located on the Continental Shelf," <https://treaties.un.org/doc/db/Terrorism/Conv9-english.pdf>

settlement, and peacebuilding activities.

Finally, Manila is party to important ASEAN initiatives that complement the political-security blueprint, such as the ASEAN Plan of Action in Combating Transnational Crime 2016–2025;^[82] ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children^[83] and subsequent declarations and plans of action;^[84] ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism^[85] and subsequent declarations and plans of action;^[86] and subsequent declarations and work plans.^[87]

[81] ASEAN, “ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint,” 2009. https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/APSC_BluePrint.pdf

[82] ASEAN, “ASEAN Plan of Action in Combating Transnational Crime (2016–2025),” 2017. https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Plan-of-Action-in-Combating-TC_Adopted-by-11th-AMMTC-on-20Sept17-1.pdf

[83] ASEAN, “ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children,” 2015. <https://asean.org/asean-convention-against-trafficking-in-persons-especially-women-and-children/>

[84] ASEAN, “Irregular Movement of People, People Smuggling, and Trafficking in Persons,” <https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/peaceful-secure-and-stable-region/irregular-movement-of-people-people-smuggling-and-trafficking-in-persons/>

[85] ASEAN, “ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism,” 2007. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ACCT.pdf>

[86] ASEAN, “Counter Terrorism,” <https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/peaceful-secure-and-stable-region/counter-terrorism/>

[87] ASEAN, “Illicit Drugs,” <https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/peaceful-secure-and-stable-region/illicit-drugs/>

IV. Conclusion

The Philippines is aware of vulnerabilities arising from its natural position and geopolitical (both economic and security) learning. These vulnerabilities predominantly arise from internal and external security concerns, and the government has set policy measures and strategies to outline its vision on how to best tackle and address these issues. More importantly, the above national security challenges require a comprehensive and multifaceted approach. The ongoing territorial disputes in the WPS-SCS remain a top concern, as they threaten Manila's sovereignty and pose potential economic and military risks. China's exponential presence within the Philippine EEZ has muddled bilateral relations with Beijing. The Philippines is leveraging the presence of its ally (the US) and security partners to ensure robust maritime defense, robust diplomatic relations, and sufficient international support to safeguard its territorial integrity and maritime interests.

Cybersecurity and technological modernization have emerged as other critical areas, with increasing cybersecurity threats targeting government hardware infrastructure, businesses, and critical infrastructure. Manila's rapid digitalization of services and its growing reliance on digital platforms underscore the urgency of enhancing cyber defense. The Philippines continues to suffer from online fraud due in part to digital illiteracy and the rapid growth of fraud hubs within the country. Law enforcement agencies also need to be upskilled to deter illicit activities effectively. The government must invest in advanced cybersecurity technologies, promote public-private partnerships in establishing digital infrastructure, and develop a more skilled digital workforce to ensure the resilience of Manila's budding digitally powered economy.

Finally, terrorism and political violence continue to disrupt the social stability and economic progress of the southern and mid-northern Philippines. The persistence of insurgent groups and continuing radicalization demand a proactive and holistic counter-terrorism strategy. Although the Armed Forces of the Philippines have delegated relatively lower concerns for security, economic growth and stability continue to elude affected communities. To mitigate this, it is imperative for the government to not only strengthen military and law enforcement capabilities but also address the broader causes of extremism through salient socioeconomic development, education, and community engagement.

These national security concerns are foremost in Philippine security policymaking circles. They are tied to many economic and sociocultural challenges and are widely rooted in national consciousness. Therefore, the government's priorities focus on these major concerns.