FEATURE

Redesigning the United States–Philippines Security Partnership

A Nodal Defense Approach to the Indo-Pacific

CDR Marie Angelica De Castro Sisican, Philippine Navy

Abstract

In the pursuit of a free Indo-Pacific, collaborative efforts between the US and the Philippines are indispensable. Strengthening their enduring security pact holds paramount importance. This article delves into their innovative approach through nodal defense, enhancing strategic posture, fostering resilience, and fortifying regional bonds. The hybrid strategy aligns adeptly with the evolving dynamics of East Asian security, emphasizing strengths amid inevitable challenges.

Implementing the nodal defense concept presents inherent political and military obstacles, with potential implications for the Philippines in terms of US aid reliance and sovereignty considerations. Overcoming these hurdles necessitates resolute actions on the parts of both Washington and Manila. Amid the backdrop of the 'China threat' and shifting regional paradigms, the nodal defense approach garners momentum, nurturing shared interests and ensuring consistent foreign policy amid transitions in leadership. The significance of both allies in safeguarding a stable Indo-Pacific cannot be overstated.

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President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s swift action upon taking office in 2022 surpassed the expectations of the Biden administration, propelling the Philippines' longstanding alliance with the United States into a historic modernization phase.[1] In February of this year, both nations announced the expansion of the long-delayed Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), signaling the return of limited American troop presence on Philippine soil. This rapid transformation shines as a beacon of hope amid the challenges that the alliance still confronts.[2]

[1] Gregory B. Poling, "The Transformation of the U.S.-Philippines Alliance," *TNStalk*, 2 February 2023, https://www.csis.org/.

[2] "Philippines, U.S. Announce Four New EDCA Sites"(press release, US Department of Defense, 1 February 2023, https://www.defense.gov/.

For more than 70 years, the US–Philippines alliance has been pivotal to both countries' foreign policies and the Indo-Pacific dynamics. Initiated in 1951 by Presidents Harry Truman and Elpidio Quirino, the alliance aimed for Pacific peace and brotherhood.[3] Although the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) endured, its initial purpose evolved over time. Closure of American bases in 1992 and the Duterte presidency in 2016 further shaped the alliance's trajectory.

Significantly, the alliance faced a substantial setback during the Duterte administration as it gravitated toward Beijing. This diversionary stance hindered the opportunity to bolster US–Philippines security ties in the face of China's escalating coercion, imperiling the alliance's core foundations for a five-year span. While the US strengthened defense bonds with Japan and Australia, augmenting capabilities and fostering interoperability for a networked security architecture, it distanced itself from Southeast Asian allies, particularly the Philippines.[4] This shift in US commitment and doubts about the Philippines' role as an ally cast shadows over the decades-old alliance.

China's forceful stance and influence in the West Philippine Sea surged, amplifying the alliance's struggles to adequately counter gray-zone situations. The Scarborough Shoal incident in 2012 and the harassment at Pag-asa Island (Thitu Island) since 2014 underscored these challenges. This escalating conflict raises pertinent queries about the alliance's efficacy in addressing the persistent demands of great-power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific.

Regional challenges demand a fresh approach to the alliance between the United States and the Philippines, particularly due to China's assertive behavior in challenging neighboring countries' waters and flouting international laws and sea norms. Within the context of shared national interests and great-power competition across peacetime and defense planning spectrums, the US–Philippines alliance must transform into a mutually advantageous partnership.[5] As the United States strives for a free and open Indo-Pacific, the Philippines assumes a critical role in upholding the rules-based order in the face of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) escalating challenges. Considering the evolving regional security

[3] Quirino Elpidio, "Impromptu Remarks of President Quirino on Exchange of Ratifications of the Mutual Defense Treaty," *Official Gazette*, 27 August 1952, https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph.

[4] Gregory B., Poling, Andreyka Natalegawa, and Simon Tran Hudes, *Alliances in Need of Upkeep: Strengthening the US-Philippines and US-Thailand Partnerships* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 1 August 2021), 1, https://www.jstor.org/.

[5] Poling, Hudes and Natalegawa, *Alliances in Need of Upkeep*.

landscape, the US–Philippines alliance should adopt a nodal defense approach to maximize its effectiveness over the long term.

By offering an alternate structure rooted in the individual strengths of each ally, the nodal defense approach can contribute to bolstering domestic resilience and facilitating a networked regional alliance. While the US–Philippines alliance boasts a history of collaboration, it has yet to establish a distinct framework highlighting respective strengths and roles—a core component of nodal defense. Policy makers and defense communities in both nations should pursue a transition to nodal defense to address security gaps in the Philippines' surrounding region.

This article contends that adopting a new US–Philippine approach through nodal defense holds substantial potential for elevating the alliance's strategic posture to confront present and future challenges. The discussion will encompass the introduction of nodal defense and its merits, redefining alliance roles based on their relative advantages, enhancing domestic resilience through a more focused implementation of the 1947 Military Assistance Agreement, as well as the Philippines' defense and military capability development initiatives like the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Modernization Program and Self-Reliant Defense Posture Program. Additionally, the article will explore the hurdles of transitioning to a nodal alliance, including the risk of fostering dependency on US military aid, sovereignty concerns, and the potential economic burdens of nodal alliance requirements for both allies.

Introducing Nodal Defense

Nodal defense delineates a more robust strategic paradigm for the US–Philippines alliance, establishing a structured framework for roles and activities grounded in each ally's relative strengths. This novel approach embodies "a hybrid alliance system in which allies are connected through variable geometries of defense cooperation organized around specific functional roles to tackle different threats."[6] This model introduces a third structural design to the US-led alliance systems in Europe and Asia, combining attributes of the widely recognized multilateralism and 'hub-and-spokes' structures.

In Europe, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) epitomizes the archetype of multilateralism (refer to fig. 1), while in East Asia, alliances are emblematic of the hub-and-spokes pattern. This entails deep bilateral strategic affili-

[6] Luis Simón, Alexander Lanoszka, and Meijer, Hugo, "Nodal Defence: The Changing Structure of US Alliance Systems in Europe and East Asia," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 3 (2021): 360–88, https://doi.org/.

ations with Washington (the hub) yet lacks substantial interconnections with other US allies (the spokes) in the region (see fig. 2).[7]

Amid the distinctions between these alliance systems, a shared factor that facilitates the nodal defense approach is a certain degree of fragmentation among allies in terms of their threat assessments and tasks. This divergence, evident in both Europe and East Asia, is not purely a drawback. Whether driven by concerns over the United States' dependability as the primary NATO ally or due to the structural nature of hub-and-spokes configurations in East Asia, this fragmentation has spurred allies to collaborate more closely with like-minded partners. This collaborative approach addresses the issues and tasks of mutual significance.[8]

In practice, the evolving nodal nature of alliance systems offers the US an opportunity to capitalize on its allies' strategic positions and capabilities to collectively address common security challenges.[9] These allies can strategically position themselves to contribute significantly to shared security interests. By specializing in particular roles, these partners not only avoid redundant efforts but also prevent the proliferation of under-equipped military forces.[10] A case in point is the conversion of a former Soviet air base in Romania by the US into a vital hub in the Black Sea Region. Romania's transformation into a "launching pad," marked by improvements at Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base and ongoing upgrades at Câmpia Turzii, exemplifies the potential of this approach.[11]

[7] Simón, Lanoszka, and Meijer, "Nodal Defence," 7–8.

[8] Alexander Lanoszka, "Nodal Defence in Europe and Its Implications for Poland," *Analizy Międzynarodowe* 22 (2021), 36, https://www.ecpp.org.pl/.

[9] Lanoszka, "Nodal Defence in Europe," 36.

[10] Cited in Lanoszka, "Nodal Defence in Europe," 36.

[11] Simón, Lanoszka, and Meijer, "Nodal Defence," 8.

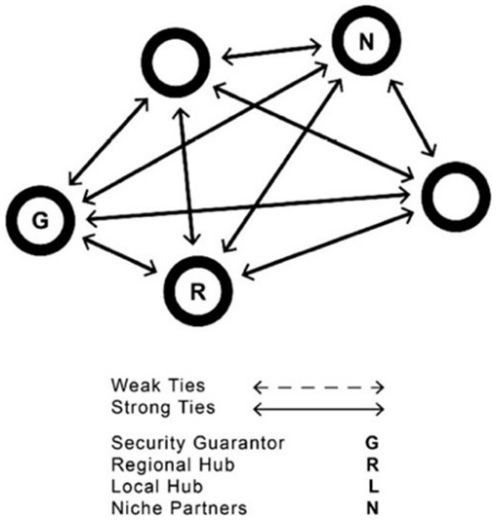

Figure 1. Multilateral alliance systems—i.e., NAT. (Source: Simón, Lanoszka, and Meijer, "Nodal Defense," 7.)

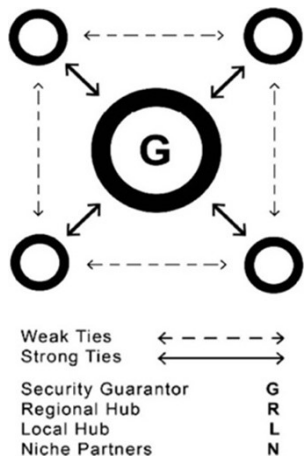

Figure 2. Hub-and-spokes—i.e., East Asia alliances. (Source: Simón, Lanoszka, and Meijer, "Nodal Defense," 9.)

Understanding Hub-and-Spoke Nodal Defense Roles

Within the current East Asia hub-and-spoke alliance framework, a notable absence of coordination and planning is observed among the various spokes during regional contingencies.12 Unlike the multilateral structure of NATO, traditional functional roles in East Asia are less emphasized. In the context of the US–Philippines alliance, while the US is designated as the *security guarantor*, the Philippines' functional role remains unclear, along with its relations with the US and other regional allies. However, in the context of a nodal defense structure, leveraging the Philippines' geostrategic importance and comparative advantages could position it as a *niche specialist*. This role would be particularly relevant as a linchpin in the US efforts to enhance maritime domain awareness in the South China Sea concerning PRC activities.13

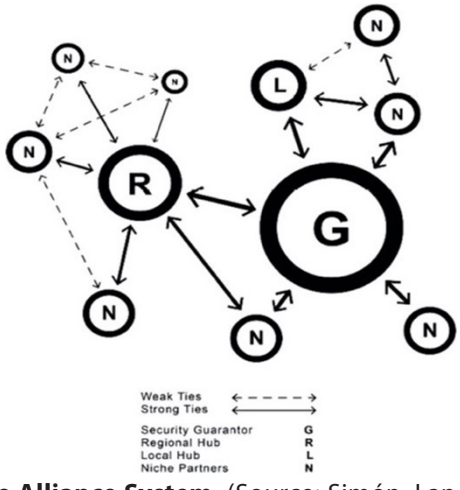

Figure 3. Nodal Defense Alliance System. (Source: Simón, Lanoszka, and Meijer, "Nodal Defense," 10.)

As certain US policy makers lament security "free-riders" in various regions, the Philippines has the potential to establish itself as a pivotal nodal element in the United States' strategic vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific. In alliance contexts, niche specialists are modestly armed smaller states that undertake specific tasks to effectively support their allies' endeavors to counter particular threats.14 Identifying the Philippines as a niche specialist, or in a suitable role, within the

12 Simón, Lanoszka, and Meijer, "Nodal Defense," 10.
13 Simón, Lanoszka, and Meijer, "Nodal Defense," 22.
14 Lanoszka, and Meijer, "Nodal Defense," 16.

alliance system is both pragmatic and strategic. The former acknowledges constraints while seeking out the specialist's strengths that align with the system's objectives. The latter underscores its strategic utility by offering flexibility, allowing major powers to assign specific responsibilities or tasks to local hubs or niche specialists, thereby lightening the load on the hub.

For instance, the United States could delegate missions to regional hubs like Japan or Australia, while relying on the Philippines, as a niche specialist, to perform specific tasks. In this context, nodal defense contributes to a more resilient and adaptable strategic stance for the East Asian alliance system. Figure 3 illustrates well-defined linkages and diversified interactions among allies and partners.

By delineating explicit roles and specific missions, the alliance gains enhanced preparedness to confront gray-zone crises in the West Philippine Sea, as opposed to its previous ambiguous responses. This characteristic of nodal defense tackles the previously unresolved vulnerability of the security pact, enabling allies to precisely define "what they want, why they want it, and how they plan to achieve it" from the outset.15 Consequently, this fosters clearer commitments, well-defined expectations, and optimal resource allocation. Well-defined roles facilitate seamless operational integration within the alliance system, fostering shared operating protocols, interoperable equipment and systems, and coherent command and control arrangements.

Presently, joint exercises between US and Philippine military forces lack consideration of their specific alliance operational roles. Additionally, formulated tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) have yet to align with these roles. The critical capability to access a shared operational overview during naval exercises, a pivotal element ensuring smooth interoperability vital in gray-zone situations or any contingency response, remains unaddressed. In this context, US planners should evaluate the ARP's military capabilities with a focus on identifying areas where the AFP excels compared to the US military. This approach should be complemented by bolstering more potent military capabilities, including airpower and logistics.

Implementing Nodal Defense in the Indo-Pacific

In addressing the "China threat," a nodal approach in the Indo-Pacific takes form through the strategic nodes and pivotal players, along with their interrelations within the region, as depicted in figure 4. This approach becomes evident

[15] Julio S. Amador, III, "Mind the Gaps, Fill the Needs: A Strategic Outlook for the Philippine-US Alliance," *Fulcrum*, 17 December 2021, https://fulcrum.sg/.

when assessing potential campaigns against the PRC's encroachments in the South China Sea and potential escalation of airspace and maritime access denials.

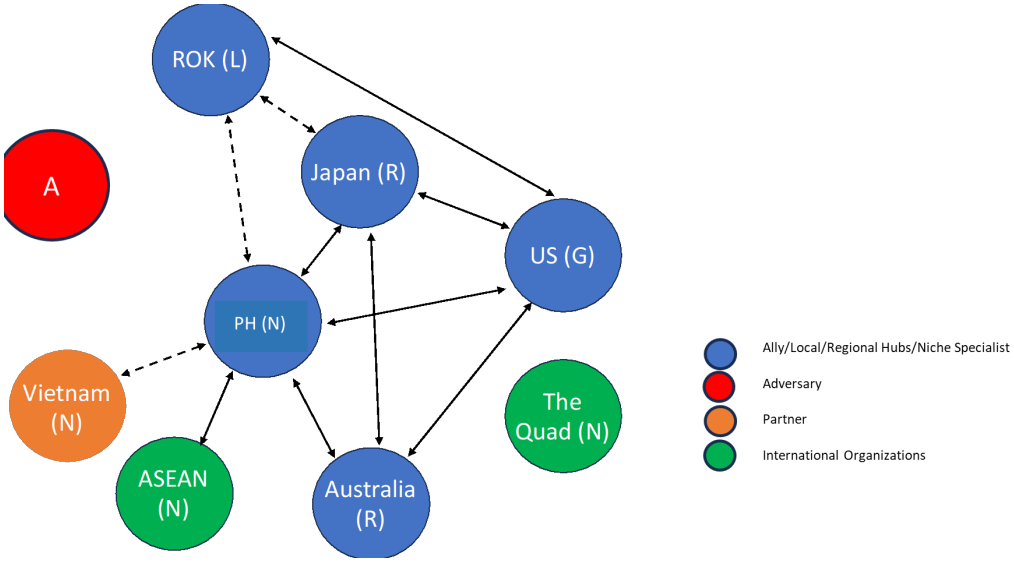

Figure 4. Nodal Defense in the Indo-Pacific. (Michael Glass, "Implementing Nodal Defense: The Preferred Partner in a Multi-Polar World" (final exercise presentation, NSDM Seminar 7, US Naval War College, 2 June 2023.)

Characteristic of the nodal approach, strategists would analyze the multinational landscape by honing in on core functions. This approach aims to harness the competitive strengths of all participants and optimize the United States' dominant advantage in power projection.16 The evaluation would reveal that while the Philippines possesses the capability for localized sea control, security, and territorial defense, as well as supporting a US expeditionary force, the AFP still lack proficiency in projecting air superiority, executing suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD), and conducting sophisticated intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance in the South China Sea Thus, nodal defense principles would guide the formulation of a campaign centered around US air and naval assets "operating from within the Philippines to contest and compete against the PRC while supplying critical functions such as SEAD and air superiority."17

[16] Michael Glass, "Implementing Nodal Defense: The Preferred Partner in a Multi-Polar World" (final exercise presentation, NSDM Seminar 7, US Naval War College, 2 June 2023.

[17] Glass, "Implementing Nodal Defense."

In contrast to relying solely on US forces, which would result in a larger footprint, nodal defense entrusts the primary function of protection and certain sustenance aspects to the AFP and even to regional hub forces like those of Japan or Australia. This approach leverages the collective capacity of the United States, Philippines, Japan, and other regional powers to execute a nodal campaign, conveying to the PRC that such behavior within the South China Sea is met with mutual opposition. This display of solidarity could potentially deter similar actions in the future or in other geographical domains.

Nodal defense campaigns necessitate substantial yet indispensable investments in bolstering the capabilities of hubs and niche players like the Philippines. Such efforts encompass infrastructure development for airports and seaports, along with targeted engagements to substantiate deterrent capabilities and overall domestic resilience of the military.

Promoting Domestic Resilience through Nodal Defense

Nodal defense can play a pivotal role in bolstering domestic resilience by directing focused attention toward the development of the Philippines' military and self-reliant defense capacities. This approach concurrently facilitates alignment with the roles and capabilities of the United States, other allies, and partners within a cohesive security framework. Historically, the United States has been a significant contributor to the Philippines' military capability enhancement initiatives, notably through the 1947 Military Assistance Agreement (MAA) and its mechanisms such as Foreign Military Financing (FMF), International Military Education and Training (IMET), Foreign Military Sales (FMS), and Excess Defense Articles (EDA) as part of the AFP's modernization program.[18]

However, since 1991, when the bases treaty renewal faltered, the MAA's functionality ceased, even in the absence of formal abrogation.[19] Although the agreement's effectiveness has been perpetually extended since 1953, it has undergone limited adjustments despite its outdated provisions.[20] Concurrently, the downgrade of the Joint US Military Assistance Group–Philippines (JUSMAG–P) established under the same decision to supervise US military aid to the Philippines, coupled with the United States' minimal attention to the MAA, dilutes the essence of the agreement and hampers its practical implementation.

[18] Joseph Franco, "Military Assistance: Bane or Boon," *Office of Strategic Studies Digest* 2 (2007), 10, https://www.academia.edu/.

[19] Cited in Franco, "Military Assistance."

[20] Office N5, *Primer on RP-US Bilateral Relations* (Manila: Philippine Navy, n.d.)

The optimization of EDA transfers, for instance, remains unattained. While instrumental in modernizing the AFP, this program has been critiqued for being a unilateral US effort that offers equipment of limited quality and technology transfer, coupled with hidden costs. Moreover, these mechanisms, including the MAA, are susceptible to fluctuations in US–Philippines relations, beyond the AFP's control despite implementing the Philippines' military modernization law.[21]

In the realm of the Philippines' modernization endeavors, challenges in procurement and politics have predominantly steered efforts toward internal security operations (ISO) aimed at counterterrorism and insurgency. The imperative to overhaul the AFP's external defense capabilities only became evident during the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff with China.[22] Arguably, the steady yet problematic execution of the MAA may have led military and civilian policy makers to mistakenly believe that the AFP was either modernizing or sustaining an equipment status quo at minimal cost through this program.[23]

Enhancing Defense Capabilities through Nodal Defense

As the alliance experiences a positive shift under President Marcos, prioritizing the review and enhancement of the MAA becomes imperative, particularly given the expanding EDCA meant to complement the AFP's modernization initiative. Nodal defense introduces an elevated strategic foundation for the MAA by accentuating comparative strengths and a nuanced, expansive alliance network. Within a nodal defense framework, leveraging its geostrategic advantage, the Philippines emerges as a pivotal participant in US endeavors to amplify maritime domain awareness in the South China Sea amid Chinese activities. This aligns with a broader US vision aimed at upholding a free and open Indo-Pacific.[24]

The Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ) serves as a vital surveillance area, teeming with natural resources and ensnared in ongoing territorial disputes. China's persistent exploitation (and violation) of EEZs across the region, coupled with US inaction, undermines the rules-based order, rendering the idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific a mere slogan in the eyes of regional capitals. In this context, given the Philippines' specialized role, the United States could concentrate

[21] Franco, "Military Assistance," 12.

[22] "EDCA Refocus: Eyes on the AFP's Modernization Program," *CSIS Commentary*, 5 February 2016, https://www.csis.org/.

[23] Franco, "Military Assistance," 12.

[24] Simón, Lanoszka, and Meijer, "Nodal Defence," 22.

its military assistance on augmenting the AFP's maritime domain awareness capabilities, which currently remain deficient in addressing gray-zone challenges.25

For example, collaborative advancement of space technology would significantly benefit the alliance. This endeavor would facilitate monitoring Chinese and other entities' activities in the West Philippine Sea, while aiding in devising and executing varying response levels. This could involve establishing ground-based receiving stations within EDCA provisions or pursuing the development of small satellites and big data (SSBD) under the AFP's modernization initiative. Intelligence sharing, technology transfer, and training related to space reconnaissance, surveillance, and remote sensing can be seamlessly facilitated through regular joint military exercises between US and Philippine forces.

These measures are of paramount importance, given that Chinese vessels in the region frequently disable their Automatic Identification System (AIS) trackers, engage in questionable activities, and intimidate both civilian and military ships. In a comprehensive view, meeting these demands fulfills the objectives of both allies: enhancing the Philippines' capacity to safeguard its territorial integrity and sovereignty, while enabling the United States to project maritime power and ensure stability and unhindered navigation within the region.

Building Effective Self-Reliance through Nodal Defense and Comparative Advantages

The establishment of a self-reliant defense posture represents a critical albeit less conspicuous facet of the AFP's modernization endeavor. Achieving this objective hinges on the Philippines institutionalizing a local defense industry. However, while self-reliance should parallel acquisition activities, the MAA has largely overlooked avenues that could establish a "local capability for the production, servicing, assembly, and development of defense equipment, weapons, materials, and systems." This oversight persists despite the fact that the Philippines' pursuit of self-reliance holds substantial implications for national security and economic interests, particularly in realizing alliance objectives.26

Recent years have witnessed several government initiatives aimed at revitalizing the Philippines' self-reliant defense posture (SRDP) program that was initiated in 1974 but subsequently languished into ineffectiveness. These initiatives encompass legislative endeavors to pass the Philippine Defense Industry Devel-

25 Poling , Natalegawa, and Hudes, *Alliances in Need of Upkeep*, 16.

26 Moira G. Gallaga, "AFP Modernization: The Case for Establishing a Local Defense Industry," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 11 August 2022, https://opinion.inquirer.net/.

opment Act of 2019, the establishment of defense industrial zones in collaboration with the Philippine Economic Zone Authority, and the military's limited partnerships with entities such as the Department of Trade and Industries (DTI), Philippine Space Agency, and other governmental and technological institutions. A nodal defense approach would complement these endeavors by delineating the AFP's defense priorities, thereby addressing areas such as the lack of integration within the current national industrial planning efforts of the DTI.27

Furthermore, the nodal defense concept facilitates the pursuit of "selective sufficiency," a more fitting objective for the Philippines in shaping its SRDP. Instead of aspiring to achieve complete autonomy or full self-reliance, selective sufficiency, aligned with a niche specialist's role, supports the expansion of the industrial and technological foundation. This is achieved by identifying and producing specific defense systems or equipment that cater to the military's requisites and hold potential for future "backward and forward linkages to other industries."28 Adopting a nodal approach also enables the AFP to signal its intent to the broader defense industrial ecosystem through the alliance, a crucial step in nurturing the local industry.

Noteworthy opportunities for selective sufficiency collaboration between the United States and the Philippines alliance arise from the Philippines' strengths in electronics and shipbuilding. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) underscores the Philippines' comparative advantage in exporting from high-technology sectors encompassing electronic integrated circuits, semiconductor devices, storage units, and digital automatic data processing.29 In defense industry terms, these align with electronic components or segments of weaponry systems and subsystems. In view of a niche specialist role, the Philippines could prioritize defense electronics, serving as a launching pad for wider industry growth. The United States could channel investments in a similar vein, be it through military-to-military engagements, public-private partnerships, escalated research and development, or other initiatives aimed at transitioning from low-value-added components to high-value-added products while fostering local firms.30 These

27 Erick Nelson C. Javier, "Opportunities and Challenges facing Philippine Defense Industrial Development," National Defense College of the Philippines, 6 May 2023, https://www.ndcp.edu.ph/ .

28 Javier, "Opportunities and Challenges."

29 Eugenio Cerutti et al., "Philippines: Selected Issues," International Monetary Fund Country Repo*rt* 2020, no. 37 (6 February 2020), https://doi.org/.

30 Adnan Awan et al., *Philippines Electronics Manufacturing: Steps to Regain Competitiveness* (Cambridge, MA: Institute for Strategy and Competitiveness, 2017), https://www.isc.hbs.edu/.

investments would not solely bolster military modernization but would also enhance the competitive edge of the overarching Philippine electronics sector, potentially yielding economic benefits for both nations.

Shipbuilding stands as another significant advantage. In recent years, the Philippines has made substantial progress in the shipbuilding industry, positioning itself as one of the world's top-four shipbuilding nations.31 Consequently, an exceptional opportunity arises through the exploration of rehabilitating the Hanjin shipyard in Subic Bay, aligning with the current alliance endeavors under the EDCA within a nodal defense framework. Currently managed by US private equity group Cerberus Capital Management and serving as a Philippine Navy base, Hanjin presents a unique prospect. The envisioned project could materialize as one of the largest public-private partnerships within the alliance, encompassing shipbuilding and repair operations for US Navy vessels, commercial crafts, and Philippine ships. Beyond invigorating the local economy, the initiative could generate between 5,000 to 10,000 jobs, a number reminiscent of the workforce displaced when Hanjin ceased operations in 2019.32

The aforementioned positive outcomes hold the potential to address the adverse perceptions linked to the employment of Subic as an initially envisaged key node under the EDCA. Despite its strategic importance and its capacity to serve as a logistics anchor akin to Singapore's role within a nodal approach, Subic Bay was omitted from the roster of EDCA sites due to political sensitivities in the Philippines.33 Moreover, avenues for enhanced investments akin to the Israel–Philippines acquisition activity under the AFP modernization program can be pursued. The recent collaboration with Israel Shipyards Inc. underscores this trajectory, aligning with both acquisition and self-reliance aspirations. Beyond platform delivery, the initiative encompasses the revitalization of the Philippine Navy's shipbuilding center and the transfer of technology enabling the Philippines to independently construct missile-capable fast attack intermediate craft.34

31 "Southeast Asia Shipbuilding Industry Research Report 2022-2032: Analysis of Singapore, Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Brunei, Laos, & Cambodia," *Businesswire*, 19 January 2023, https://www.businesswire.com/.

32 Cliff Venzon, "China tensions boost defense industry at Philippines' Subic Bay," *Nikkei Asia*, 21 February 2023, https://asia.nikkei.com/.

33 Martin Sadongdong, "Fifth EDCA site not approved due to 'political sensitivities' – Galvez," *Manila Bulletin News*, 4 April 2023, https://mb.com.ph/.

34 Priam Nepomuceno, "PH Navy Christens 2 Newly-acquired Israeli Missile Boats," *Philippine News Agency*, 8 May 2023, https://www.pna.gov.ph/.

Supporting a Stronger Regional Alliance through Nodal Defense

Nodal defense provides essential backing for the development of a more interconnected regional alliance. Following the Cold War and up until recent times, China's ascent has gradually evolved into a looming threat across the entire region, prompting considerable unease among East Asian nations.[35] The conventional hub-and-spokes system characterizing East Asian alliances is showing signs of insufficiency, as regional stakeholders increasingly opt for a spoke-to-spoke approach, favoring overlapping bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral initiatives over exclusive reliance on a central hub.[36]

An illustrative example is Japan's heightened role as a regional hub, underscored by its deepening ties with the Philippines. In a pivotal move, leaders from both nations inked an agreement in February, granting the Japanese Self-Defense Forces the mandate to engage in operations within the Philippines for humanitarian assistance and natural disaster contingencies, while also envisaging collaborative military training down the line.[37] Japan, with its defense export ban lifted, exhibited keen interest in addressing the Philippines' concerns within the West Philippine Sea. In active support of the Philippines' modernization agenda, Japan promptly transferred two TC90 aircraft, in 2017, and an additional three in 2018, employing a lease arrangement pending a formal EDA agreement.[38] Observing a tangible presence, Japan has partaken as an observer in US–Philippines military exercises and training undertakings in recent years. Additionally, Japan's technological institutions have actively contributed to the Philippines' space program, furnishing training and resources for the local development of nano cube satellites, as demonstrated by the successful launch of the Diwata-1 satellite into space in 2016.

Moreover, the alliance system is undergoing a natural evolution along nodal lines. Notably, the Philippines and Japan are actively engaged in discussions concerning a joint defense agreement with the United States. Likewise, Japan and South Korea are actively exploring avenues for collaboration, marking a departure from their historical avoidance of each other. Concurrently, Filipinos are displaying a preference for engagements with other regional actors, including fellow members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and participants in the

[35] Cited in Simón, Lanoszka, and Meijer, "Nodal Defence."

[36] Simón, Lanoszka, and Meijer, "Nodal Defence," 3.

[37] Derek Grossman, "The Philippines Is America's New Star Ally in Asia," *Foreign Policy*, 21 February 2023, https://foreignpolicy.com/.

[38] "Philippine Navy Receives 2 TC-90 Patrol Planes from Japan," *CGTN Politics*, 28 June 2018, https://news.cgtn.com/.

Australia–United Kingdom–United States (AUKUS) security pact (refer to table 1).39 Australia, India, and South Korea have lately been participating in the AFP's modernization program through various acquisition and cooperation activities. These developments and perceptions suggest the plausibility and necessity of nodal defense in the region.

Challenges of Transitioning to a Nodal Defense Approach

The development and implementation of nodal defense in the Indo-Pacific might face political and military challenges. Given its novelty, nodal defense could carry implications for the alliance in terms of potential risk escalation, regional tensions, fragmentation, and the broader scope of operational execution. While certain apprehensions necessitate further examination, they do not appear insurmountable, provided there is political determination in both Washington and Manila. With respect to contemporary relations, crucial concerns within this discourse encompass potential overreliance of a niche specialist on the security guarantor (or even local or regional hubs), sovereignty issues like those faced by the Philippines, and the economic implications for both allies.

Table 1. Preferred security-partner countries. (Source: Amador, "Mind the Gaps, Fill the Needs.")

In your opinion, which countries should the Philippines forge security partnerships with in order to improve its national security? Choose as many options as you like:								
US	**China**	**Russia**	**Australia**	**Japan**	**India**	**Malaysia**	**Vietnam**	**Indonesia**
85.20%	27.60%	37.10%	80.20%	91.10%	52.20%	42.40%	48.70%	53.80%

Source: National Security Priorities and Agenda of the Philippines: Perceptions from the Filipino Strategic Community survey.

Dependence on US Military Assistance

Consistent support, in any form, from a central hub can lead a niche specialist with limited capabilities to become complacent in their development efforts. This inclination is particularly evident in the Philippines, given its historical reliance on the United States. This tendency is further exacerbated if the United States offers improved MAA arrangements this time around. Consequently, policymakers in both the military and civilian sectors might once again fall into the trap of assuming that the AFP's capability development is adequately progressing

39 Amador, "Mind the Gaps, Fill the Needs."

through US assistance, which could potentially hinder the pace of the modernization program.

Nevertheless, while certain enhancements are required, the Philippines' defense institutions and infrastructure have made substantial progress in professionalizing its military ranks and enhancing its capabilities. Recent public approval and trust ratings of the Department of Defense have remained consistently high, indicating the positive effects of significant past reforms and the commitment to avoid major missteps. In early 2022, the AFP, in particular, garnered the highest approval and trust ratings among government agencies, with ratings of 67.4 percent and 53.4 percent, respectively.40 The modest modernization program has achieved noteworthy advancements over the past decade, following a well-defined strategy and systematic implementation approach. It has successfully navigated political shifts under divergent presidencies, including the current one led by President Marcos. The program has received consistent backing and funding across different administrations throughout its three five-year phases, commencing in 2013, with an estimated cost exceeding 40 billion dollars.41 Furthermore, the SRDP program has also been realizing an upward push with the ongoing legislative and collaborative efforts of Philippine government agencies and relevant institutions together with the AFP.

Furthermore, the recognition of the past overreliance on US military assistance and support played a pivotal role in driving the AFP's push to modernize and rejuvenate self-reliant defense in the 1990s. Consequently, nodal defense can be regarded merely as a supplementary element to the Philippine military's development endeavors. Given that it assigns a specific role for the Philippines within the alliance structure, the planning and implementation of modern military and defense capabilities through the MAA mechanisms would receive prioritized attention, thus conveying a more distinct direction and enhanced efficiency. This novel framework champions domestic reliance, underscoring the importance of cultivating an ally's self-reliant capabilities. Embracing a nodal approach not only offers the Philippines a strategic orientation as a valued ally but also nurtures a sense of self-assuredness, particularly a form of national prestige known as *techno nationalism*. This perspective highlights the country's comparative advantages and its substantial contribution to the alliance and the broader international community.42 By doing so, it can dispel the notion of historical asymmetry and counter the

40 Martin Sadongdong, "AFP Most Trusted, Approved Government Agency – Survey," *Manila Bulletin*, 13 April 2022, https://mb.com.ph/.

41 Gallaga, "AFP Modernization."

42 Javier, "Opportunities and Challenges."

perception that the Philippines solely benefits passively from the security pact, offering limited utility as an ally.

Sovereignty Concerns

Critics might contend that pursuing the alliance with the United States in a broader sense inherently erodes the Philippines' sovereignty due to the potential increase in American influence within the country. This concern could be exacerbated if the alliance is configured using a strategic framework that rigidly defines the roles and contributions of each ally. Conversely, advocating for a more refined strategy to execute the alliance portrays the Philippines as asserting its sovereignty. When the Philippines willingly chooses to assume a specific role within the alliance structure, enhancing its strategic approach toward its standing alliance with the United States signifies that, as a sovereign state, it actively shapes how it wishes to exercise its defense and military capabilities, especially in addressing China's assertiveness in the West Philippine Sea. Regarding the extent of US influence over the Philippines, the new structure promotes limited influence on the Philippines, as this approach considers the country's relationships with other regional powers, including Japan (as a regional hub). Furthermore, given that both nations are currently experiencing a positive recovery from strains in their relations, it becomes more likely that both the United States and the Philippines will exercise caution to avoid missteps that might compromise an ally's autonomy in decision-making.

Economic Costs

Embracing a nodal defense approach could entail substantial costs for each partner, as establishing a new structure would demand significant investments in infrastructure, specialized defense equipment, technology, and personnel. These costs may carry a heavier burden, especially for smaller nations or niche specialists like the Philippines, which possess limited resources. Nonetheless, implementing the nodal defense structure presents a more cost-effective strategy for both nations in the long term. Through well-defined roles assigned to each partner, military assistance and capability development will be tailored to their specific missions within the alliance. Consequently, partners can allocate additional resources toward other national priorities. Existing alliance mechanisms, coordinating bodies like JUSMAG–P, established activities such as the Balikatan exercises, and relevant capabilities have already been operational for some time, requiring only minor adjustments and resources.

Although larger initial investments in self-reliant defense and military capability might be necessary, the Philippines would gradually expand its research and development (R&D) capacity and local industry capabilities. The United States, in turn, could eventually rely on its niche specialist's capabilities, either directly or through other regional or local hubs. This approach can lead to a more cost-effective investment trajectory in the long run. Investments in defense industries such as electronics and shipbuilding, or those directly linked to specific missions, could yield economic gains and job opportunities for both nations. Consequently, this collaboration would demonstrate positive engagement to both domestic and international audiences. This approach fosters clear commitments and signals, diversifies capabilities, and effectively distributes the burden across partners.

Tough but Necessary: A US–Philippine Nodal Defense Partnership

The United States alone cannot achieve a free and open Indo-Pacific. The US–Philippines alliance must modernize and leverage both nations' individual strengths and capabilities. A novel approach to the alliance, based on nodal defense, presents significant potential for enhancing the alliance's strategic posture, domestic resilience, and regional network. Nodal defense offers a more comprehensive strategic focus for the MAA and the AFP's modernization and SRDP programs. This approach underscores comparative advantages and selective sufficiency while aligning with alliance roles and the evolving relationships within the East Asian system. Therefore, nodal defense could positively influence broader US and Philippine foreign policy objectives in the Indo-Pacific region by expanding defense capabilities, bolstering regional deterrence, and adapting to evolving threats.

It could be argued that a fundamentally US-led alliance system adopting a nodal defense structure might lead to the Philippines becoming dependent on US military assistance and support, raise sovereignty concerns, and incur economic costs for both nations. However, given the growing threat from China in the region, significant developments within the East Asian alliance system advocate for a nodal defense approach. The Philippines, in step with the evolving alliance, is steadily modernizing. The United States has demonstrated a willingness to invest more in its East Asian alliances, especially the Philippines, as evident in the recent enhancement of US–Philippine relations. Notable trends include spoke-to-spoke interactions and collaborations among non-allied actors in the region. Countries like Japan and South Korea now favor cooperation against the China threat instead of their historical avoidance of each other, expanding their partnerships beyond the US hub. Both East Asian powers and Southeast Asian partners are

strengthening defense and security relations with the Philippines, signaling a preference for closer partnerships.

With the revitalized US–Philippines alliance, nodal defense could serve as a bridge to achieving mutually beneficial national interests and solidifying an enduring foreign policy framework that transcends changes in leadership. Nevertheless, the responsibility lies with the two allies to foster continuous trust and confidence, uphold commitments, and further enhance their capabilities to accomplish shared objectives. The alliance stands as a critical structure in the regional dynamics, contributing to security and stability. As long as the pursuit of mutual interests and the improvement of the well-being of their peoples remain successful, the value of the US–Philippines alliance will endure and yield substantial dividends in the foreseeable future. In the face of an ascendant China, genuine safety and security of the region depend on the collaboration between the United States and the Philippines, making a free and open Indo-Pacific a tangible reality. ✪

CDR Marie Angelica De Castro Sisican, Philippine Navy

Commander Sisican is a commissioned officer of the Philippine Navy and previously served as the deputy director of the Philippine Navy Modernization Office at the Headquarters Philippine Navy in Manila. She obtained a Master of National Security and Strategic Studies and Naval Command College Diploma from the United States Naval War College. She completed her Bachelor of Science degree from the Philippine Military Academy in 2004.