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Summary

August bore witness to the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban, rippling throughout the Indo-Pacific and [the Philippines](#). The event risks eroding confidence in the US in other parts of the world and has stoked concerns of emboldening its enemies around the world. In the same month, the Philippines and the United States also celebrated the 70th anniversary of the Mutual Defense Treaty, a bedrock of national and regional security.

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The Afghanistan Debacle and the Taiwan Question

China has capitalized on the [fall of Kabul in Afghanistan](#) to smear and discredit the United States. A few days after the Taliban seized control of Kabul, Chinese state-sponsored newspaper the Global Times pushed the notion that the US failure of a withdrawal from Afghanistan would be [repeated in Taiwan](#). The newspaper called on Taiwan to act politically to keep the peace instead of being a "[strategic pawn](#)" of the United States. Chinese propaganda has [described the debacle](#) as having "deeply damaged the image of the United States as a hegemon." It does not help that the American pullout was messy and chaotic, which increased suspicions that the US was not ready and was caught off-guard.

Such accusations sparked extensive discussion of US reliability. Many analysts have begun to ponder the US withdrawal's effect on the situation with Taiwan. [One argument](#) is that the failure of the Biden administration in Afghanistan has provided China with incentive to invade Taiwan "sooner rather than later" as well as deterring allies from joining future US-led military action. Indeed, another argument pointed out that US support of Taiwan is [significantly dependent](#) on the will of the American people and it is incumbent upon Taiwan to "inspire others to commit" to its own defense. Others have noted that the Biden administration's argument of refocusing its attention in the Indo-Pacific is greatly [undermined](#) by its "hasty withdrawal" from Afghanistan.

The situation is under serious consideration in Taiwan. [President Tsai Ing-wen](#) said that "*Taiwan's only option is to make itself stronger, more united and more determined to defend itself.*" The US has [pushed back](#) against Chinese propaganda and reassured its commitment to uphold its obligations with Taiwan.

With the US struggling with the international effects of the debacle, US Vice President Kamala Harris proceeded on her [scheduled trip](#) to Southeast Asia with a primary goal of countering Chinese influence in the region. This means that she had the [additional task](#) of reassuring allies of US commitment to their security. However, many countries share Taiwan's misgivings. Former Vietnamese ambassador to the US, Amb. Pham Quang Vinh, pondered if the US will be able to [retain its focus](#) in the region. The [speculation](#) of the US' long-term strategy in Asia remains an open-ended question.

Status Quo in the South China Sea: The Allies

Amidst the political events in Afghanistan, the Indo-Pacific region saw the continuation and slight escalation of trends that have come to define most of the COVID-19 pandemic era.

Early in the month, ASEAN participated in the [11th East Asia Summit \(EAS\) Foreign Ministers' Meeting](#). The Meeting reaffirmed several regional goals: synergize various ASEAN mechanisms for maritime cooperation, uphold the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), address negative environmental impacts such as Illegal Unreported Unregulated fishing, support for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and the establishment of a Code of Conduct. The [US State Department](#) expressed its support of the EAS and the shared vision of a "free and open Indo-Pacific". The EAS has also [reaffirmed](#) the 2016 Arbitration Award, to which the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) was grateful for.

Complementary to all this, [New Zealand](#) released a note verbale to the UN in support for UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitration Award. Meanwhile, the [Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative](#) revealed that two countries (Russia and Syria) have joined China in its rejection and two others (Germany and the UK) joined the Philippines in its explicit call to be respected and upheld.

Alongside the political affirmations were tangible steps by Indo-Pacific states and their allies to strengthen security, even as ASEAN states continue to [balance their policies](#) between the US and China. The US and Indonesia held a [strategic dialogue](#), India began to [assert its presence](#) in the region, Japan installed [new missiles](#) in the Ryukyu Islands, and Malaysia carried out a "[rare demonstration](#)" of its naval power. Many states, including the Philippines, participated in the 20th US-led [Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training exercise](#). These were complemented by the [announcement of Germany](#) sending a naval presence to the region, expected to arrive mid-December.

A display of the resolve of the region's allies has also been seen as American and British aircraft carriers [assembled](#) around Okinawa and again in the [Philippine Sea](#).

Status Quo in the South China Sea: China

China has been interpreted to be building an [Anti-US bloc](#) as it reaches out to foreign political parties. In the UN Security Council, China [claimed](#) that the US was not "[qualified to make irresponsible remarks on the issue of the South China Sea](#)" and concluded by saying that the biggest threat to the peace and stability in the region is the United States itself.

Chinese focus on Taiwan has only magnified since the fall of Kabul. Taiwan continues to be [harassed](#) by Chinese aerial forces. China held [assault drills](#) near Taiwan which took place between its mainland and Pratas Islands. China claimed that these were caused by "[provocations](#)" from Taiwan's independence movement. However, [Michael Cole](#) a senior fellow at the Canadian Macdonald-Laurier Institute argued that these exercises were a part of psychological

warfare, “*their significance upped by state media and officials in order to send a signal.*” China also vocally opposed any diplomatic exchanges with Taiwan when a [report](#) ventured for a potential Japan-Taiwan security meeting. Japan [ignored](#) China’s opposition.

Chinese focus on Taiwan has included the use of [civilian ferries](#) in exercises to plan a large-scale amphibious assault. Additionally, China seeks to build a multi-million-dollar [airport in Pingtan](#), the closest point between mainland China and Taiwan.

The Philippines: Advancing in the Middle

The Philippines, as well as the rest of ASEAN, remains wedged in the US-China rivalry and continues to balance its policies between the two powers. An [example](#) of this is the reinstatement of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) wherein analysts claim that the reinstatement did not come as a surprise to China and that the security establishment of the Duterte administration did not wholly support the pivot to China.

Indeed, AFP Chief Lt. Gen. Jose Faustino Jr. expressed [gratitude](#) for the VFA’s retention at a meeting with the US Indo-Pacific Command, commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Mutual Defense Treaty. Throughout the Duterte administration, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Department of National Defense have steadily continued military modernization. The AFP Chief [reported](#) that the Philippines is “*slowly developing credible defense*”.

The Philippines has many supporters when it comes to its balancing policy through political affirmations or contributions to military modernization. Vice Admiral Adeluis Bordado, Flag Officer-in-Command of the Philippine Navy, acknowledged the [contribution of South Korea and of India](#) to the Navy. India went a step further and conducted a [naval exercise](#) with the Philippines. The Philippine Navy has been consistent in carrying out exercises and capacity-building, especially for its [reserves](#). The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) also reported the [acquisition](#) of new assets to bolster maritime security.

Analysis

The fall of Afghanistan and its subsequent implications for US credibility or [reputation](#) further highlighted the need for the Philippines to become self-reliant, as quickly and as efficiently as possible. With long-standing allies of the United States, such as [South Korea](#), wondering if something similar to Kabul will occur, it is incumbent upon the Philippines to be prepared.

In its claims in the West Philippine Sea, the Philippines is well-armed with [diplomatic and political mechanisms](#) such as the 2016 Arbitration Award and the [norms of UNCLOS](#), which remains a primary tool in complementing security measures. Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin said that the disputes in the South China Sea must be [resolved](#) through the use of and adherence to UNCLOS. [Senator Risa Hontiveros](#) underscored that the DFA must take the lead in establishing a unified front among ASEAN states against Chinese incursions. The senator remarked that, “*If the Philippines loses this diplomatic battle against China, the ASEAN loses, too.*” This sentiment was shared during a webinar by the EU Delegation to the Philippines, [calling](#) on both the EU and ASEAN to further cooperation and uphold the rules-based order in the South China Sea.

Other than these mechanisms and based on the abovementioned reports by the Philippine defense establishment, the military modernization is proceeding smoothly. This would not be possible without the close ties that Philippines

shares with its neighbors and partners. A [recent session](#) of the 2021 Philippines-Australia Dialogue highlighted this. Indeed, the Philippines was among the [biggest beneficiaries](#) of Australian trade and investment among the ASEAN states. Additionally, the PCG's photographing of Chinese vessels during the Julian Felipe incident has inspired a [new strategy](#) to deter Chinese incursions.

All in all, the Philippines would do well to continue and improve its current trajectory of political balance and cooperation with neighboring countries, while simultaneously upgrading its defensive capabilities. This falls in line with the US call to an ["integrated deterrence posture"](#), as the [US](#) and [Taiwan](#) are also upgrading its capabilities. Learning from its neighbors, the Philippines should continue to invest in its own defense, [like Taiwan](#), and to continue its military exercises, [like Malaysia](#).

Analysts predict that the invasion of Taiwan would need to be an ultra-mega scale and [defy human comprehension](#). This month, while we see China gearing up to make reunification a reality, [several active factors](#) deter it from proceeding: First, China still doubts it can secure military victory. Second, a war with Taiwan would considerably damage its reputation and standing in the world. Finally, Chinese leaders still believe that there is time to "peacefully reunify" and continue to modernize its military in the interim.

What China and the US will do next remains to be the largest question in the region. We can expect China to constantly use Afghanistan's fallout to remind the world about the inconsistency and uncertainty of US security commitments. China and its supporters will also seize this opportunity to exploit this seed of doubt and strengthen its influence to various countries depending on the US as a security guarantor. On the far end of the spectrum, the fall of Afghanistan will continue to be the [pins and needles](#) between the US and its Western allies in NATO in the longue durée.

The United States will be hard-pressed to prove its commitment and support to the security and stability of the region but it must [double-down](#) on its Afghan policy as well as its Indo-Pacific strategy, lest it risk its Asian partners thinking the event in Kabul as "the new normal rather than the exception". Taiwan and the South China Sea will remain to be at the center and focus of discussions and actions. Despite the [current challenges](#), the [best strategy](#) that the US and its allies can do is continue deepening its cooperative network and build-up their defense capabilities.

US withdrawal in Afghanistan will have security implications not just in major power rivalry but also on non-traditional challenges such as terrorism. For small countries like the Philippines who will come under the pressure of both, working together with its trusted allies with similar interests, coupled with fast-paced defense modernization will be the best way forward.