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Summary

The Indo-Pacific remains to be confronted by security concerns specifically on the buildup of nuclear armaments. As Russia's invasion continues to be stalled by Ukraine's staunch defense, Russia amped its talk of nuclear weapons to deter the international community from interfering. China and North Korea took similar stances for their respective agendas.

Meanwhile, eyes turn toward the Philippines as it approaches the 2022 national elections – a potential game changer in regional dynamics. The Philippines also mourns the loss of its envoy to China, Ambassador Jose Santiago "Chito" Sta. Romana, whose tenure facilitated the flourishing of relations between the two countries.

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Priority: The Philippines

As the Philippines approaches its May 9 elections, China has called its [relations](#) with the archipelago a "priority". The sentiment of cordial relations is [reciprocated](#) by the outgoing Duterte administration. Both states [reaffirmed](#) this. Yet China has maintained that these relations will remain status quo provided that the two "[remove disturbances](#)" (i.e., Chinese incursions in Philippine territory) from their dialogue. Indeed,

China stressed that the conflict in Ukraine has shown the folly of security [blocs](#), and expressed hope that the next Philippine administration will [continue](#) the current “friendly policy.”

These statements were shared even as [reports](#) came of Chinese ships having shadowed Filipino researchers in late March, as well as [concerns](#) of foreign electoral interference. Chinese actions have pushed the issue of national security as among the top election issues. An example is how a [group of fishermen](#) who were rammed by the Chinese in 2019 made an official endorsement to Presidential candidate Vice President Leni Robredo. Senatorial candidate [Loren Legarda](#) called on all candidates to present their national security plans, arguing of its importance to sustainable peace. A few days beforehand, the issue of addressing Chinese activities was presented at a [presidential debate](#), which included the [use](#) of the 2016 Arbitration Award. Many Presidential candidates agreed the Philippines must have a [leadership role](#) in the crafting of the long-negotiated Code of Conduct. But not all candidates are in concert. Former Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Ernesto Abella and labor leader Leody De Guzman expressed [opposition](#) to participation in Balikatan exercises, arguing that relations with the United States (US) can be detrimental to Philippine security.

Meanwhile, the Philippines has taken many steps in protecting its sovereignty and its resources: It has [banned](#) any depiction of China’s nine-dash line as legitimate and has called for more [collaboration](#) with partners on fisheries. But above all, it has kept the pace of modernization and deepening relations. The Philippine Coast Guard, the [primary](#) line of civil maritime defense at this time, continues to [grow](#), with another ship scheduled to be officially acquired in May. The US and the Philippines also [concluded](#) in early April the largest Balikatan exercises so far ([reportedly](#) 3,800 Filipino participants and 5,100 US participants) and established the first [Maritime Dialogue](#). The Philippines has also reaffirmed ties with [Indonesia](#). The Philippines and [Japan](#) held the first Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting (2+2), described as a “critical instrument” in advancing security and defense cooperation. Joint exercises on a [similar](#) scale as Balikatan are being considered. In the area of military modernization, The Philippines is [seen](#) as a “*growing market in the area of defense*”. Japan pledged to export [air defense radars](#) in 2023, [India](#) has agreed to train the Philippines on the use of the BrahMos missile systems, and Finance Secretary Carlos Dominguez III [praised](#) the takeover of Subic shipyard to the US company Cerberus Frontier, citing a “win-win” for the Filipino people, especially for the military and the private sector. The Philippine Air Force also inaugurated a [training center](#) for the Israeli SPYDER missile system.

Nuclear Debate

Russia tested the [Sarmat](#), a nuclear capable intercontinental ballistic missile, in late April. This came nearly a week after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy [warned](#) the international community that Russia was willing to use unconventional warfare in Ukraine.

Russia is not alone.

North Korea said that South Korea would face an “*unimaginably terrible disaster*” in the form of [nuclear retaliation](#) if the latter chose military confrontation in the Peninsula. On the 11th, North Korea [celebrated](#) 10 years of Kim Jong-un rule as party leader, who has overseen 4 of 6 of his country’s nuclear tests. Later

in the month, **boasted** that the country had “*gained invincible power*” and, as North Korea celebrated the 90th anniversary of its army’s founding, Chairman Kim **declared** his intention to upgrade the country’s nuclear arsenal at the “*highest possible speed*”. North Korean statements in recent months have caused a **debate** among South Koreans on the issue of acquiring their own nuclear capabilities, wherein 71% of those polled are in favor.

With Russia’s threat of nuclear weapons successfully forestalling greater interference in Ukraine, it is speculated that China will mimic the strategy and upgrade its **nuclear arsenal** to deter the international community from interfering in Taiwan. China had previously threatened **Japan in 2021** on the same grounds.

China’s Reach

Yet the threat of nuclear weapons is only one stratagem that China is utilizing. China continues its gray-zone operations by sending the **J-20 fighter jet**, its most advanced fighter aircraft, to patrol the East and South China Seas. China has **championed** for a “global security initiative” – wherein no state would strengthen its security at the expense of the security of another state. It has also **criticized** the West’s commitment to the Indo-Pacific, likening it to one of Russia’s justifications of provocative NATO expansion.

China has also notably exploited economic actors and relations to further its security umbrella in the Pacific, **similar** to the olden British East India Company. Australia sounded the alarm over China’s security **deal** with the Solomon Islands government, which would effectively grant Chinese military access to that part of the region. While both parties involved **deny** the building of a Chinese naval base, an unverified leaked Chinese document **contradicts** this. Regardless, Australian **Senator Rex Patrick** has stressed the need to ensure that other Pacific states do not turn to the Chinese. Australian **Defence Minister Peter Dutton** announced that the AUKUS arranged nuclear submarines could arrive sooner, declaring a \$3.5 billion increase to fast-track weapons systems.

The concern for Taiwan remains at the forefront. China remains sensitive to any interaction of Taiwan with the rest of the world, treating it as a violation of sovereignty. An example is when China’s Defense Ministry **condemned** US arm sales to Taiwan. Meanwhile, a planned visit by the US House Speaker to Taiwan in early April was met with fierce **opposition** by China’s Foreign Ministry. China **reiterated** in late April that Taiwan was its province.

For the **first time**, Taiwan’s military released a **survival handbook** in preparation for a potential Chinese invasion. While a conflict in Taiwan may see a direct annexation of **outlying islands** rather than an invasion of Taiwan proper, any escalation could have **repercussions** across Southeast Asia.

Former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott **labeled** the “*march of the dictatorships*” of Russia and China as the “*biggest global challenge*”, and **warned** that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine could embolden China to take over Taiwan. However, others argue that China’s actions in **Hong Kong** present a better understanding of what Chinese President Xi Jinping may do next.

However, China's actions are not without consequences. Its relations with the wider world, particularly with [Europe](#), are "deteriorating" as resistance to its actions grows.

Analysis: A New Framework

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has [reminded](#) the Indo-Pacific of the importance of hard power. AUKUS announced [new cooperation](#) in various fields apart from the nuclear submarines. The US has [noted](#) that the "*potential for significant international conflict is increasing, not decreasing.*" Indeed, Russia is [determined](#) to achieve some success in the war in time for Victory Day on May 9. These actions provide for the Indo-Pacific a glimpse into how China may act should it proceed with an invasion of Taiwan. Some make a deeper connection: Defeating Russia would undermine China, that opposition to Russia is a [necessary](#) component to combating China. But others [caution](#) that the US and its allies must not be overly focused on Russia at the expense of neglecting China. The US is expected to [revise](#) its Indo-Pacific framework as early as May.

This month prior to elections, China has been an active, significant player in the international stage concerning Russia and Ukraine, Taiwan, North Korea and its calls for a global security initiative. Its statements reveal that it would continue a strong stance with regards to One China Policy and disputes over the West Philippine Sea. The next administration would be wise to listen to the lessons of the late Amb. Jose Santiago "Chito" Sta. Romana when it comes to dealing with the Asian power. Knowing China from inside and out, Amb. Sta. Romana [understood](#) the intricacies of China relations - he managed to talk about disputes and tensions at sea while also looking for ways to benefit from the Duterte administration's friendly stance towards the country. If China wants to maintain positive development of its economic ties with the Philippines for the next six years, it must keep in mind that setting aside differences and cooperating on low-hanging fruits would mean respecting Philippine sovereignty and refraining from taking aggressive actions in the West Philippine Sea.

The Philippines may have a substantial role in regional dynamics. The new government is called on to be [practiced](#) in long-term strategic thinking and to adopt a [multilateral policy](#). This would entail deepening existing relations with [like-minded states](#) and leveraging international instruments. This will be [difficult](#) as all these states will have to consider the different contexts of its neighbors whilst arriving at a unified approach. There is also the [issue](#) of lingering anti-Western/US sentiments. Yet this can be done with significant and consistent international support, similar in manner to how the West has assisted Ukraine. [The European Union](#) and [the United Kingdom](#) can be of great assistance – not through the [argument](#) of democracies against autocracies, but in the supply of assets and training. In the face of great power rivalry, cooperating with states that respect the rules-based order and international institutions would be a useful tool for small states with less-developed defense capabilities like the Philippines.

The Philippines has been firm and many times made it clear its [commitment](#) to the rules-based order, most especially in [cooperation](#) with ASEAN. Presidential candidates look to utilize its cooperation with Southeast Asian member states on many aspects but most particularly in standing up to China in the South China Sea disputes. Outside bilateral consultations, the ASEAN Code of Conduct has been the preferred way for the smaller claimant states to negotiate with China. While expected to be a [long and bumpy road](#),

Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs [previously announced 2022](#) to be its target date of completion. Whether Duterte's administration managed to champion the country's interests or whether China managed to outweigh its smaller adversaries in making an effective and substantive COC remains to be seen. With no end in sight just a few more days before the elections, it seems like the COC negotiations will still be handed off to the next President.

Whilst some have more idealist and less realistic thinking on how to conduct Philippine foreign policy, all the Presidential candidates acknowledge the need for strengthening foreign relationships, acquiring more up-to-date assets and continuous assertion of sovereignty. With complex [aspects of foreign policy and national](#) security to be considered, on May 9, votes of the Filipino people will decide what direction the Philippines will take in the next six years.