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Summary

The Indo-Pacific region continues to grapple with a myriad of issues amid the actions of great powers. After months of military buildup and prolonged negotiation, Russia invaded Ukraine in late February. Australia suffered a laser attack from China. The Philippines continues to scrutinize its presidential candidates and their platforms for long-term national security.

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The Indo-Pacific region continues to grapple with a myriad of issues amid the actions of great powers. After [months of military buildup and prolonged negotiation](#), Russia invaded Ukraine in late February. Australia suffered a laser attack from China. The Philippines continues to scrutinize its presidential candidates and their platforms for long-term national security.

Eyes on China as Russia invades Ukraine

Prior to the official start of the invasion, Russia [formally recognized](#) two breakaway regions in Ukraine as independent republics and justified an invasion as a "peacekeeping operation." Western states such as [France](#) and the [United Kingdom](#) (UK) reacted negatively, calling the act a breach of international law. Germany then halted approval of the [Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline](#), which is speculated to double the amount of gas flow into Russia.

Two days later, on February 24, [Russia invaded Ukraine](#) to [worldwide condemnation](#) and an initial batch of [new economic sanctions](#).

As Ukraine resisted the invasion, speculations about China conducting its own invasion of Taiwan began. President Tsai Ing-wen put her country on [alert](#) in the days leading to the Russian invasion. A Chinese invasion has not occurred as of publishing date. However, [a Chinese incursion](#) into Taiwan's airspace was reported on the same day. China's Horizon News, a state-owned media outlet, [accidentally leaked "instructions"](#) on how to cover the Russia-Ukraine crisis: China is to provide "*emotional and moral*

support” to Russia to receive similar support once China moves to “*solve the Taiwan issue once and for all.*”

Despite their [deepening ties](#) and mutual interests, China’s view of the Russian invasion has not been as supportive. While China [did not condemn](#) Russia’s actions, China [did not endorse](#) them either. When the invasion began, China sent a [mixed message](#) by refraining to call it an invasion but called for all parties to exercise restraint. Analysts argue that Russia’s invasion is a “[major challenge](#)” for China as it tries to navigate its own people’s nationalist fervor for Taiwan’s assimilation and the extent of possible consequences brought about by international blowback.

A Shaken Region

The status quo in the Indo-Pacific was largely kept throughout February save for the following notable moments:

An excerpt of a United Nations (UN) report stated that [North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs](#) grew, profiting from cyberattacks. North Korea claimed it was “[shaking the world](#)” with its missile tests. However, the rogue state only conducted [one test](#) the week of the invasion of Ukraine.

A week prior to the invasion, an Australian fighter jet suffered [a laser attack](#) from a Chinese warship. [Prime Minister Scott Morrison](#) called it an “*act of intimidation.*” [Defence Minister Peter Dutton](#) condemned China and stressed the importance of exposing such behaviors from China. China called it a “[provocative action](#)” on Australia’s part, while Prime Minister Morrison rebutted that Australian planes had every right to watch Chinese vessels in Australian waters.

[The 2022 State of Southeast Asia Survey](#), of which [Amador Research Services](#) is the Philippine partner, was released mid-February. While perceptions of the United States (US) have increased, Southeast Asians are now [engaging more critically](#) with the Western power, particularly on the economic aspect. Indeed, China has taken a [noticeably softer approach](#) to Southeast Asia by lauding positive economic relations, at odds with its “wolf warrior” approach to the US and its allies. Respondents’ views of ASEAN are notably low – the institution is seen as incapable of coping with political and economic developments. This comes even as QUAD states released a [statement of support](#) for ASEAN and called for deeper engagement.

Meanwhile, states continued to move for stronger national security. Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto aimed for Indonesia to have the [strongest navy in Southeast Asia](#). Indonesia has also entered deals with [France](#) and [the US](#) for the Rafale fighters and Boeing F15EX Eagle II fighters, respectively. India created the post of [maritime security coordinator](#) with the role of coordinating multiple authorities and policies in the maritime domain.

Taiwan received significant signs of US support. A bipartisan move in the US legislature was submitted in early February to begin negotiations to rename Taiwan’s *de facto* embassy in Washington as the “[Taiwan](#)

[Representative Office](#)"; said to be consistent with the Taiwan Relations Act. The US also approved the [\\$100 million support contract](#) to boost Taiwan's missile defense system

The Philippines: Long-term Security

While the EU was primarily concerned with Russia, the Indo-Pacific region was not neglected. The EU expressed in late February the desire to [deepen maritime cooperation](#) with the Philippines through its CRIMARIO II (Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean II) initiative. RADM Caesar Valencia revealed that the EU was offering trials in the Philippines for the [Indo-Pacific Information Sharing Platform](#), described as a "very secure Facebook", aimed at assisting maritime security. Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin spoke of the [importance of the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy](#) and the value of [the Philippines cooperating with its allies](#) and partners in enhancing maritime security.

Acquisitions and announcements in the Philippines' military modernization continued in February. The Philippine Coast Guard received its largest vessel to date from Japan—[BRP Teresa Magbanua](#), a multi-role response vessel that will be [deployed](#) to the West Philippine Sea. The Philippine National Police (PNP) received new assets worth P576.67 million, among which were [new high-speed tactical watercraft](#) to aid the PNP Maritime Group. The Philippine Navy received [Skyhawk aircraft from the US](#), and will reportedly acquire [two landing dock vessels](#) and [new corvettes in 2023](#). The Department of National Defense (DND) also announced the contract signing for [32 Polish Black Hawk helicopters](#) and received P1 billion worth of [military equipment from China](#).

2022 election candidates have [China relations as one of the primary aspects](#) of their platforms. Candidates promoting national sovereignty also tied these to the welfare of fishers and overall food security.

Presidential candidate [Manila Mayor Isko Moreno](#) assured fishermen of their security and that he would assert the 2016 arbitration award. Presidential candidate [Vice President Leni Robredo](#) planned to equip fishers for their protection as part of her maritime policy, as well as having a "very apparent" presence in the West Philippine Sea. Presidential candidate [Leody de Guzman](#) said that the contested area in the West Philippine Sea should be converted into an economic zone where all claimants can agree and unite against China.

These views are consistent with the positions of other presidential candidates with the notable [exception of Ferdinand Marcos Jr.](#) His positions reflected the current Duterte administration's policies until he came out in [favor of security dialogue](#) and spoke of the importance of the US alliance. His previous stance continues to be a [subject of concern](#), especially in the broader context of the US-China rivalry.

Other electoral candidates gave their views. [Three senatorial candidates](#) argued for China to recognize Philippine sovereignty over the West Philippine Sea before joint oil exploration can begin. Vice Presidential candidate [Walden Bello](#) clashed with his fellow candidates who echoed their ticket partners stances, arguing that the Philippines must have an independent foreign policy.

Analysis: Lessons from Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has sent shockwaves across the world. Chief of which is the question of China's invasion of Taiwan. While the Philippines faces immediate [economic](#) effects, it must also look towards much larger security threats. States, big and small, could learn much from the Ukraine crisis.

First, while [international law and diplomacy](#) should remain the premiere tools, these should not be the only weapons in our security arsenal. Continuous defense modernization and working closely with our allies and partners are necessary for small states like the Philippines. Ukraine in mid-February praised [diplomatic efforts of the West](#) as deterring Russia's invasion, despite [US warnings](#) that it could occur at any moment. Indeed, Russia had been amassing troops since late November 2021. While a war with China is [not inevitable](#), the [invasion has proven the need](#) to bolster deterrence and overall defense posture. Germany gave a historic announcement of an [immediate investment in its military](#), allocating more than 2% of its GDP.

Second, security issues can be complemented and affected by other factors. Immediate responses by the West to Russia were to unleash new economic sanctions and Germany suspended approval of the gas pipeline. Some have called for these [sanctions to extend towards China](#), effectively disincentivizing support and similar behavior. Taiwan sees the wisdom in this and aims to [protect its technological secrets](#) as China engages in economic warfare.

Other factors also include the use of social media and technology. Ukraine's vice prime minister asked tech mogul Elon Musk over Twitter to provide internet service. [SpaceX's Starlink satellite internet service](#) was then deployed. This signifies the growing role of private actors in international affairs, much so in the field of security.

Third, Russia's actions in Ukraine have forced a [reevaluation](#) of the subject of China and Taiwan. Because of the invasion, the US is now more likely to come to Taiwan's aid or risk losing credibility. China's lack of support is also evident in Russia's recognition of breakaway regions, avoiding establishing a precedent for states like the US to do the same for Taiwan. The US has also refrained from sending troops to Ukraine, to minimize risks of unwanted tensions with Russia and to [remain focused in the Indo-Pacific](#). For now, China may not be able to act with confidence on its plans to reunify with Taiwan.

Greater US involvement in the region is promised under the new [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#). While this may provide reassurance to small states and allies like the Philippines, this could also be a double-edged sword if the major powers involved are to act hastily and resort to the use of force like Russia. The value of diplomacy and having clear and open lines of communication with each other is now greater than ever.

Ukraine's crisis is not just a test for the Western alliances and its established order, it is a challenge for all states to stand with international laws and norms to preserve peace and stability, to not side with unjustified violence and to respect state sovereignty, no matter how small and powerless they seem. How we respond and come to Ukraine's aid will have an impact on the whole world.

Finally, as the Philippines approaches the elections, Ukraine's president [Volodymyr Zelenskiy](#) has become an example of strong and consistent leadership. His people and country have demonstrated how it can be for a small state to stand up to an aggressive bigger power. As hard as it is, standing up and protecting national sovereignty is better than not having the freedom to do so at all. The Philippines and the Filipino people deserve a leader with a strategic vision in fostering ties with other nations and charting an independent foreign policy.