

KARAGATAN OBSERVER | MARCH 2022

Summary

The region continues to grapple with the shockwaves of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Its implications are considered, and its lessons analyzed by all states in the region. Atop all these concerns, it is imperative for states in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, particularly the Philippines, to abide by the maxim "*plan for the worst while hoping for the best*".

Prepared by

Matthew C. Uy

Date

10 April 2022

Recommended citation

APA: Uy, M.C. (2022). "Karagatan Observer: February 2022." *Amador Research Services*.

CMOS: Matthew C. Uy. "Karagatan Observer: February 2022." *Amador Research Services* (2022).

The region continues to grapple with the shockwaves of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Its implications are considered, and its lessons analyzed by all states in the region. Atop all these concerns, it is imperative for states in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, particularly the Philippines, to abide by the maxim "*plan for the worst while hoping for the best*".

Shockwave of the Russo-Ukrainian War

The Russian invasion of Ukraine continues to make waves in the Indo-Pacific.

[China has struggled](#) to balance its "deep ties" with Russia amid the suspicious eyes of the United States (US) alliance. While US President Joe Biden called China an [economic competitor](#) in his first State of the Union Address, he has been called on to [formulate a strategy](#) to deter Chinese aggression. Meanwhile, the US government has warned China against responding to [Russian calls for aid](#). President Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping [spoke to each other](#) mid-March on the issue, but that discussion [failed](#) to produce any substantive action on China's part.

The invasion has "[bolstered](#)" US Congressional support for Taiwan. [Delegations to Taiwan](#) also signaled US commitment to Taiwan's defense. In a separate visit, former US State Secretary Mike Pompeo said that the US should "[change 50 years of ambiguity](#)" by officially recognizing Taiwan as a sovereign state, citing the [example of Ukraine](#) as a need for "*deep concerted focus leadership from those of us who cherish freedom*". The US has stated unequivocally that a Chinese attack would garner a "[more robust](#)" response than what Russia is experiencing from the West.

Taiwan has taken the example of Ukraine to heart. Amid [concerns of readiness](#), Taiwan has [studied the Ukrainian resistance](#) as a means of deepening its own defense. [An unverified leak](#) from a Russian document claimed that China planned an invasion of Taiwan in the Fall of 2022, now forestalled by Russia's actions. [Chen Ming-tong](#), director-general of Taiwan's National Security Bureau, described the leak's claims as impossible. He further added that China was unlikely to invade Taiwan for the [remainder of President Tsai Ing-wen's term](#). Regardless of the veracity, Taiwanese Foreign Minister [Joseph Wu](#) has repeatedly stressed that a Chinese military threat is real and cited the need for defense readiness as a Chinese attack could occur at any moment.

The Indo-Pacific, particularly [Australia](#), [Japan](#), and [the Philippines](#), continues to keep a close eye on the Taiwan Strait. The [Italian Chamber of Deputies](#) passed a motion for the government to prepare for a potential crisis.

The Will of Two Korean Leaders

Within the Indo-Pacific, the Korean Peninsula made notable shockwaves. South Korea elected a new president and North Korea ramped up its missile tests.

South Korean [President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol](#) has called for closer ties with the US and a tougher stance on North Korea. Yoon's victory denied some of [his fellow candidates' policy](#) of prioritizing peace talks with North Korea, who had used the Russo-Ukrainian conflict as an example of the importance of diplomatic outreach over arms development. Yoon is [planning to pursue](#) a peace *"based on strong national security defense posture, not of submission,"* indicating the installment of a second anti-ballistic missile system. Additionally, Yoon called for an [improvement of bilateral ties](#) with Japan.

Yoon's electoral victory comes amid North Korea's revitalization of its missile tests. It launched a ballistic missile [before the election](#), prompting the US to [intensify its readiness](#) in this part of the Indo-Pacific. [Japan](#) was also moved to boost deterrence capabilities with the US. In late March, North Korea fired a suspected [intercontinental ballistic missile](#) into Japan's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The US responded with [new sanctions](#) while South Korea sent a [barrage of missiles](#) into the Sea of Japan. South Korea had fired on a [North Korean patrol boat](#) earlier in the month.

Kim Jong-un boasted of North Korean missile advancements in a [propaganda video](#). He also announced plans to launch a system of [reconnaissance satellites](#) to provide real-time information on US activities.

Rumblings in the Indo-Pacific

[Dr. Bill Hayton](#), an expert on the South China Sea, declared in mid-March that there was now enough evidence and research to resolve the competing territorial claims. Among his arguments is the need for concerned states in Southeast Asia to resolve these disputes together and then present a united position against China. In recent years, China has used its military drills to [enforce its claims](#). The US announced

that China had [fully militarized](#) Mischief Reef, Subi Reef, and Fiery Cross. China also raised its [defense budget for 2022](#) by 7.1%.

Many countries in the region, in partnership with the US, has continued to ramp up its defense capabilities. Australia announced that it would build a [nuclear submarine base](#). [The largest Balikatan exercise](#) between the Philippines and the US kicked off in late March. The *USS Miguel Keith* entered the South China Sea as part of its deployment. This caused a stir in China's [Global Times](#), claiming that the US and its allies were attempting to recreate the situation in Ukraine. Contrary to that claim, Japan and others have been outspoken in condemning the invasion in hopes to [deter China](#) from copying Russia's actions. As proof of commitment to defending sovereignty, Japan and the US announced that [three weeks of drills](#) had taken place since early March. Japan also protested the [passage of Russian ships](#) through the Soya Strait, between Japanese and Russian territory.

The Philippine Coast Guard revealed that a Chinese Coast Guard ship was involved in an [incident](#) of "close distance maneuvering" early in the month. China [insisted](#) that it was operating within its "inherent territory". The Philippines filed a [diplomatic protest](#). There were additional instances of incursions. In mid-March, the Department of Foreign Affairs [summoned the Chinese ambassador](#) over the presence of a [spy ship](#) in the Sulu Sea that was spotted in late January. National Security Council deputy director general [Rufino Lopez](#) also announced that reports were being made on numerous Chinese incursions in the Philippine Rise.

[President Rodrigo Duterte](#), while condemning the Russian invasion, insisted on the country's neutrality, claiming that there were "more than 800" US and Russian submarines roaming in the region, including Philippine waters. However, he also [expressed willingness](#) for the US to use Philippine facilities should the conflict spillover into the Indo-Pacific. The [issue](#) of the US using Philippine facilities remains to be contentious.

The Philippines: The Next Six Years and Beyond

The upcoming May 2022 elections continue to gain attention due to its [importance](#) in long-term national security and the effect on regional dynamics.

Senatorial candidate [Salvador Panelo](#) championed the Duterte administration's "Filipino First" policy, and called for the next president to continue this while improving the military. But others have called for more robust [improvements](#) that involve veering away from the Duterte administration's "defeatist policy" into a "Filipino First" policy that is more assertive. Still others argue that the next president must [simultaneously defend](#) national sovereignty while preserving world peace.

Presidential candidate Vice President Leni Robredo announced plans to [improve](#) the country's maritime industry. Rear Admiral Rommel Ong, a member of the Robredo national security team, claimed that a Robredo administration would make the Philippines a [maritime power](#). Meanwhile, presidential

candidate Senator Manny Pacquiao said that under his administration, Filipino fishermen will be [free](#) from Chinese harassment.

In line with the desire for free and secure seas, the Philippines acquired “game changer” helicopters from [Turkey](#), secured a contract with South Korean [Hanwha Systems](#) for corvette combat systems, and sold the [Hanjin Subic Shipyard](#) to the US firm Cerberus. The Philippine and French navies made moves for [stronger cooperation](#). These areas include [joint patrols](#) in EEZs and a [possible submarine deal](#). France [argued](#) that it was important for all states, in the European and Pacific theaters, to maintain the rules-based order together and develop partnerships. The [United Kingdom](#) expressed similar sentiments. The positive news of increased Filipino fishers in [Bajo de Masinloc](#) is proof of the Philippines’ increased capability to defend its own.

There are other issues for the Philippines to consider given the impact of Russia’s invasion: namely, the untapped areas for resources and research. The University of the Philippines Marine Science Institute championed the need for the Philippines to [develop](#) its marine scientific research. Senatorial candidate [Gibo Teodoro](#) said that the Philippines must be open to partnerships with foreign corporations for oil and gas exploration in the West Philippine Sea. The Duterte administration called for a [similar cooperation](#) for Recto Bank. President Duterte argued that the Philippines needed to honor its [commitment](#) for joint exploration with China to avoid “potential trouble.”

Analysis

The war is not going well for Russia. Russian [military errors](#) have resulted in the aggressor [scaling back](#) its plans, likely due to suffering [extensive casualties](#) greater than the US incurred in its campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan combined. These are compounded by [China refusing](#) to aid in alleviating sanctions. Bolstered by [aid](#) from all across the Western world and by the [contributions](#) of private actors such as tech mogul Elon Musk, Ukraine has successfully resisted for more than a month, [despite grim predictions](#). President Biden has called this [conflict](#) a part of “*a fight between democracies and oligarchs*”.

The situation has caused uncertainty throughout the region. Southeast Asian states are struggling with the [economic costs](#), while expressing [concern](#) that the US will prioritize Europe anew over the Indo-Pacific. But the US has made clear its priorities with the release of the [2022 National Defense Strategy](#). China is dealing with [strategic uncertainty](#) as it has more to [gain](#) from denouncing Russia rather than sustaining ties with it. Regardless, while fears of an immediate Chinese invasion of Taiwan were greatly exaggerated, China has taken this as an opportunity to “[study](#)” taking Taiwan by force.

The role of middle powers in regional affairs is also highlighted this month. With the continuous tensions in the Korean peninsula and the close watch on China’s actions towards Taiwan and the South China Sea, states like Japan, Australia and European states can be expected to become more active in engaging the region. With its allies involved, this ensures that US interest and commitments in the Indo-Pacific would continue to remain strong.

Indo-Pacific states, especially the Philippines, have [much to learn](#). One example is how economic interdependence failed to stop Europeans from aiding Ukraine and from [ending trade relations](#) with Russia. [27 heads of the European Union](#) declared the urgent need to rid themselves of depending on outside states and to take charge of their own security. [Germany](#) announced its first major arms purchasing of US fighter jets. [ASEAN states](#) could act the same, should they resolve their internal disputes. While states like [Vietnam](#) will continue to hesitate from openly going against China because of economic ties, the European response to Ukraine has shown that this is not a guarantee of allegiance. Given all these, the Philippines must foster self-reliance and take a long term hold of its national security.

Of utmost importance is in how the Philippines must continue to advance in sovereignty protection while keeping with its [commitment](#) to [diplomatic resolutions](#) of disputes. The [lessons of Ukraine](#) have shown the importance of holistic military modernization, a whole-of-nation approach, the truth in public rhetoric, and technological investments, as well as in adhering to [international law](#). Unlike Russia's use of [hypersonic missiles](#) or [threat](#) of nuclear war as a means of safeguarding national security, the Philippines must continue to reject devastating forms of warfare as part of its policy. It must focus on [deterrence](#) and partnerships. It must [develop its alliance with the US](#), which has been a [consistent partner](#) in upgrading Philippine maritime capacity. These partnerships must also include other like-minded states, such as [Japan](#) and [the EU](#). The acquisition of the [Brahmos missile system](#) can be one such manner of creating minilateral arrangements. It must also learn from the examples of Europe and from its regional neighbors.