

KARAGATAN OBSERVER | MAY 2022

Summary

On the 9th of May 2022, the Philippines elected Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. as its 17th president, obtaining [58% of the vote](#). Later in the month, Australia had a swift change in government after its election now led by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. United States (US) President Joe Biden made his first visit to Asia to reaffirm ties and formally unveiled the US-led economic plan aptly titled “Indo-Pacific Economic Framework” (IPEF). All this occurred as China made steps to push its sphere of influence in the South Pacific.

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The Philippines

Potential New Security Framework

President-elect Marcos was congratulated by the international community for his electoral victory. Some states and entities include: [The European Union](#) (EU), [Japan](#), [India](#), [Singapore](#), [Russia](#), and China (both the [Foreign Ministry](#) and [the Embassy](#)). Chinese President Xi Jinping spoke of the “*grand story*” of Philippine-Chinese relations. Each of these countries expressed willingness to deepen relationships and to contribute to Philippine security development. The US in particular noted its optimism in [cooperating](#) with the new government on regional priorities. President Biden highlighted the [strengthening](#) of relations. This was [echoed](#) by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, emphasizing the “*enduring alliance*”.

The incoming Marcos administration is [widely expected](#) to follow the outgoing Duterte administration’s foreign policy of balancing relations with both the US and China. However, some have noted that President-elect Marcos

values the US alliance, making him [unlikely](#) to repeat President Duterte's foreign policy errors. [Amb. Jose Manuel Romualdez](#), Philippine envoy to the US, noted that the incoming presidency will greatly benefit Philippine-US ties.

Security experts and analysts around the country presented their [recommendations](#) for the new administration: these include formulating a new National Security Strategy centered on the 2016 arbitration award. President-elect Marcos mentioned in late May that his government would [uphold](#) the ruling. Former Supreme Court Justice Antonio Carpio [warned](#) prior to the election that a Marcos presidency would mean the loss of the West Philippine Sea. But Justice Carpio [commended](#) the statement and called for constant vigilance in defending Philippine sovereignty. At the [Maritime Security Symposium 2022](#) held after the election, the panelists also recommended that the new government draft a National Security Policy as soon as possible, remain vigilant on Taiwan, shift security priorities from internal to external, and to learn best practices from neighbors and from the Russo-Ukraine War.

The current situation

In the days after the election, the Philippines made noteworthy steps in safeguarding its sovereignty. The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) set up [command-observation posts](#) on three islands in Kalayaan Island Group. [Navigational buoys](#) were also deployed to mark out territory. The PCG also activated the largest ship in its fleet, the [BRP Teresa Magbanua](#), which will be deployed in the West Philippine Sea. In their [first](#) bilateral meeting, the PCG met with the Japanese Coast Guard to discuss stronger maritime cooperation and interoperability.

The Philippine Navy activated a naval operating base in [Subic](#) that will now support its deep draft vessels. It has also expressed interest in [ordering more](#) patrol vessels from South Korea. Locally, the Department of Science and Technology (DOST), in partnership with the Robotics Society of the Philippines and the Department of National Defense, completed a prototype of the "Building a Universal Mount for Heavy Barrel Automated Weapon Integration" ([BUHAWI](#)) project. The project is meant to augment the Navy's capabilities and DOST eyes [mass production](#).

All this as China continues to violate Philippine sovereignty. The Asia Maritime Transparency Institute detailed [three separate incidents](#) over the past few months involving Chinese Coast Guard or maritime militia ships interfering with Philippine research and exploration projects. China was also reportedly undergoing [new](#) construction work at Zamora Reef.

Flight of the Eagle, Claws of the Dragon

Problems Down Under

As with the Philippines, the [issue](#) of China was present in Australia's elections, with some noting little policy differences between the two leading contenders. Regardless, China congratulated the new government, which some have pointed as a [sign](#) that relations between the two states were beginning to thaw. It was [reported](#) that Former Foreign Minister Marise Payne argued that Australia needed to increase its soft power with economic plans in the Pacific to counter China. Her proposal was made in 2021 and was rejected for being too costly.

Early in May, as Australia continued to contend with the [Chinese deal](#) with the Solomon Islands, it was reported that China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi would make visits to Pacific Island nations. Former Defense Minister Peter Dutton, at the time, [described](#) this as a part of China's pattern of "aggressive behavior". He expressed a similar sentiment regarding a Chinese spy ship [detected](#) off the coast of Exmouth.

A few days after the election, a [report](#) was released indicating that China was pursuing a deal similar to its pact with the Solomon Islands directed at 10 Pacific countries. Prime Minister Albanese sounded [alarm](#) over this, accusing China of attempting to increase its influence where Australia has been the “*security partner of choice*”. New Zealand Prime Minister [Jacinda Ardern](#) said the Pacific had all its security needs without China’s presence. However, analysts [agreed](#) that the deal would not push through, given how Pacific Island states value consensus. The deal was [shelved](#) due to lack of consensus among the 10 states.

Biden’s Commitments

President Biden made waves on May 23, in Japan, when he said that the US would [respond militarily](#) if China attempted an invasion of Taiwan; the statement was quickly retracted by the White House. China [strongly condemned](#) the remarks. It has been noted that this is the third time in which he has committed to Taiwan’s defense only for the White House to insist there was no change in policy. Some [argue](#) that these could either be the president’s personal view or part of a larger strategy to maintain strategic ambiguity. Others argue that if the US is going to abandon strategic ambiguity, the US must [take steps](#) to actively counter China

Earlier in the month, President Biden welcomed members of ASEAN to a [summit](#) in Washington. Some [pledges](#) made include \$60 million in new maritime initiatives and agreement to work on [upgrading](#) ties to “comprehensive strategic partnership” in November. A [Joint Vision Statement](#) was released which, among others, emphasized economic ties, maritime cooperation, and digital infrastructure.

In late May, the US officially [unveiled](#) the IPEF, a means of challenging China’s economic influence. Prior to the official announcement, some have argued that the IPEF should not be [framed](#) as explicitly “anti-China” and that the plan should be a means of strengthening institutional connections, particularly in the realm of cybersecurity. This and the overall US strategy were [denounced](#) by China.

Analysis: What’s Next

Amb. Olexander Nechyaylo, Ukraine’s envoy to the Philippines, [warned](#) that the world will become more volatile as the conflict continues. The world, particularly China, continues to [watch](#) the conflict closely. The US continues to supply [support](#) in funding and arms. Indeed, Amb. Nechyaylo has proven to be correct as China launched [the second largest incursion](#) of the year into Taiwan, [Russia](#) and [North Korea](#) continue to test missiles, and as [Japan](#) and [South Korea](#) independently scrambled its fighters in response to Chinese and Russian approaches to their airspaces.

Apart from the parallels that can apply to a potential invasion of Taiwan, there are other lessons that states like the Philippines under a new administration can learn. One lesson is that of priority. Russia suffered a [naval loss](#) to anti-ship cruise missiles. Taiwan may take a cue from this as it focuses on turning its coast guard vessels into missile-equipped “[ship killers](#)”. The Philippines can move forward with its military modernization by prioritizing assets that are focused on countering and deterring. It can also partake in willing markets: Japan has expressed its desire to [export](#) arms and the US has need to [discard](#) its outdated assets.

Additionally, the Philippines must focus on sustaining the rules-based order and actively participate in any campaign to defend it. This can be achieved in many forms. One simple means is the filing of a diplomatic protest such as Vietnam’s [response](#) to China’s [fishing ban](#). Another can be in helping ASEAN reach out to its regional neighbors, most especially those with new governments like Australia and [South Korea](#), and other interested parties such as [the UK](#). Yet another can be to recalibrate its National Security Strategy and align it with [like-minded partners](#) similar to Japan’s deepening defense partnership with [the US](#) and [the UK](#). And, should it be in the nation’s best interest, the

Philippines can overtly join or imitate initiatives such as QUAD's [maritime surveillance plan](#) to augment relationships with like-minded partners while simultaneously engaging in capacity-building.