

## KARAGATAN OBSERVER | JUNE 2022

### **Summary**

The Indo-Pacific region witnessed a handful of notable events throughout June. From the Shangri-La Dialogue to the Rim of the Pacific Exercise, from North Korean missile tests to Chinese aircraft carriers, there was much to consider and contend with.

In the Philippines, the Duterte administration reached its conclusion, paving the way for a new administration and its security framework for the country.

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### **Leviathan vs. Shangri-La**

China made waves with two notable events.

The first wave was a move that echoed Russia's language prior to its invasion of Ukraine. Chinese President Xi Jinping signed an [order](#) that outlines and provides legal basis for "military operations other than war," which some analysts say is primarily focused on action against Taiwan. Prior to the order, China repeatedly reasserted its claim over Taiwan and condemned outside interference. It opposed a US-Taiwan [trade initiative](#), and stated that it would "[not hesitate](#)" to start a conflict over Taiwan. China's defense minister [declared](#) that China would "[fight to the very end](#)" to quash Taiwanese independence. The latter statements came after the US [condemned](#) aerial incursions into Taiwan – with China sending [29 aircrafts](#) in late June, the largest group it has sent since late May.

The second wave was the [upgrade](#) to the Chinese Navy: the launch of the third and most advanced of its aircraft carriers, the *Fujian*. It boasts an electromagnetic aircraft launch system which would allow faster and more numerous launches. However, this is only a transition model for a fourth aircraft carrier said to be outfitted with nuclear propulsion, allowing it to stay afloat without refueling for 20 years.

Nuclear armaments and upgrades continue to make headway. One sign of this is Australia's [commitment](#) to the AUKUS nuclear submarines. Another sign is when the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [announced](#) that, unless the current nuclear powers put a stop to it, the world's arsenal of nuclear weapons would grow for the first time since the end of the Cold War. This is exemplified in the rise of North Korea's [nuclear program](#), which spent \$642 million in 2021. The possibility of North Korea testing a nuclear weapon has also caused waves. South Korea announced plans to [improve](#) its defenses, while Australia [denounced](#) the missile tests as "destabilizing," and the US [warned](#) of a "forceful response".

The US and its allies convened at the [19th Shangri-La Dialogue](#), a regular gathering of Asian security officials and experts, which took place from June 10 to 12 in Singapore. China was also in attendance. It was there that it declared its unequivocal intentions for Taiwan, especially in [relation](#) to the US. The allies stepped up in the days following the Dialogue. [Japan and Australia](#) agreed to expand defensive ties; Japan also [deployed](#) a flotilla of its Maritime Self-Defense Force to Indo-Pacific countries as part of joint naval exercises. The European Union was called upon to [leverage](#) its collective power against authoritarian behavior. Ambassador Luc Véron, EU Ambassador to the Philippines, penned an [essay](#) explaining the EU's foreign and security policy in the region.

Most significantly, the Rim of Pacific exercises, [RIMPAC 2022](#), began at the end of June, gathering over 25,000 personnel from 26 countries. These countries include all of QUAD members and some Southeast Asian states such as [the Philippines](#).

### **Out with the Old, In with the New**

Philippine President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. was officially inaugurated on June 30.

Prior to the inauguration, the Duterte administration laid the finishing touches of its maritime security framework. Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin [praised](#) the US for its support in the 2016 arbitration award and for being a "dependable" presence in the region. The Philippines and the US held its [largest](#) joint military drills in early June. The Philippine company Asia Defense and Armament Corporation signed a [venture agreement](#) with US-based Daycraft Systems Corp. for a weapons assembly plant in Bataan.

The Department of National Defense and the Philippine military announced plans for additional asset purchases: [19 brand new ships](#) for the Navy, [12 multi-role fighter planes](#) for the Air Force, and additional 97-meter long multi-role response [vessels from Japan](#) for the Coast Guard. The "enduring legacy" of National Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana was highlighted – these include nearly 7000 naval surface patrols, nearly 6500 air patrols, new structures and infrastructure improvements in Philippine claimed islands, as well as the acquisition of multiple new assets. The Philippine Army praised the secretary's [support](#) for modernization. The Philippines [secured](#) a seat in the United Nations body that implements UNCLOS.

During the transition period, the Marcos administration began to take form. A notable aspect of this formation was the appointment of retired University of the Philippines (UP) [Professor Clarita Carlos](#) as National Security Adviser.

Prof. Carlos emphasized the need for “critical engagement” with China. She also assured the continued use of diplomacy against Chinese incursions, adding that the new administration would be cautious in dealing with China as “war is not an option.” In the same vein, Retired Police General Ricardo de Leon was appointed director of the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, who advocated for the harmonization of government efforts in the West Philippine Sea and the role of modernization to improve intelligence.

The Marcos administration is inheriting a tenuous relationship with China. During the transition period, the Philippines lodged complaints against China’s annual fishing ban in the South China (which China dismissed), the Department of Foreign Affairs also filed another protest over Chinese vessels in Julian Felipe Reef, and China continued to harass the outpost of the derelict BRP Sierra Madre near Ayungin Shoal. A team from Inquirer witnessed the latter firsthand. Secretary Lorenzana told China that it could not interfere with BRP Sierra Madre. Additionally, a team from UP began a three-year study of the West Philippine Sea. China has been reported to harass such initiatives before, prompting calls for the government to provide better protection to scientists.

### Analysis: What’s Next for the Philippines under President Marcos Jr?

Throughout June, there have been criticisms hurled at the US, particularly its conduct in the Indo-Pacific. With similar strength, many have provided recommendations and insights for the new Marcos administration and how to enact its maritime security policy.

Chinese media has highlighted several failings of US initiatives which include the extensive monetary support for Ukraine compared to ASEAN and the lack of tangible benefits in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). Valid as some of these criticisms may be, it is not proof that the US is failing. The Biden administration has been consistent in its desire to strengthen relations with its allies in the region. In Taiwan, it was announced that the US National Guard would be cooperating with Taiwan’s military and that the elements of Taiwan’s political class are looking to re-engage with the US to counter China. The deepened relations of the US and Taiwan have given China pause in pursuing military action, for fear of its costs. The US should replicate and sustain this engagement with key allies, such as the Philippines. Some means of “reinvigorating” the US-Philippine alliance is to enhance security dialogues and capacity-building, including the Philippines in the IPEF and other economic engagements, as well as foster multilateral ties with other states.

These are aligned with some recommendations the Marcos administration has received. There have been calls to balance relations between the US and China without antagonizing either power, enact a more strategic foreign policy of various multilateral ties such as with ASEAN (and perhaps QUAD), as well as engaging in more specific trilaterals with Indonesia and Malaysia, Australia and Japan, and with the US. President Marcos has the opportunity to echo the positive foreign policies of his father: maintaining strong multilateral alliances while being proactive in securing territory. Indeed, the Marcos administration can pursue a more strategic policy through appropriation of the military modernization budget and adhering to local calls for “decisive” action in the West Philippine Sea. All of these require a harmonization of maritime security policy and extensive capacity-building.

The Marcos administration should keep in mind the role of technology and cybersecurity in enhancing the country’s security. An example of the positive use of technology could be seen in the Russo-Ukraine War with the use of Starlink satellites to sustain communication and counter enemy propaganda. Another example is when the Global Fishing Watch developed a map to detect “dark fleets,” ships that do not broadcast their location. On the issue of

cybersecurity, the US revealed that Chinese hackers [breached](#) major telecommunication firms in early June. It is well that one of the priorities for a [new national budget](#) is in enhancing digital infrastructure.

But above all, the Marcos administration must remain steadfast in upholding diplomacy and the sovereignty of the Philippines. A way of supplementing this is by advocating for the sovereignty of other states. China has [applied](#) this lesson by backing Russia. [Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky](#) spoke at the Shangri-la Dialogue on how the world must learn from the current conflict to prevent a repeat in Taiwan. While an invasion of Taiwan would reap [devastating consequences](#) on China itself, there is a high potential for the conflict to spillover, resulting in the Philippines having to pick a side in the conflict and incur loss of life.