



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

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Cover Image:

Indian External Affairs Minister with Australia's Prime Minister H.E. Mr. Anthony Albanese, in Canberra, Australia, on 6 November 2024. Source: [X/@DrSJaisankar](#)

During his official visit to Peru, the President of the Republic of Indonesia, Prabowo Subianto, was awarded the highest honor "Grand Cross of the Order of the Sun of Peru" in Lima, on November 14, 2024. Source: [President of the Republic of Indonesia](#)

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. signed into law two pieces of maritime legislation, in Manila, on November 8, 2024. Source: [Philippines' Presidential Communications Office](#)

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Jaishankar's visits strengthen ties with Australia and Singapore

by

Pradeep Taneja

Just as the world was digesting the news of Donald Trump's return to the White House and its ramifications for the international order, the Minister of External Affairs, Dr S. Jaishankar, was winding up a visit to Australia (3-7 November). No other Indian government minister has ever travelled Down Under as frequently as Jaishankar. This was his fifth trip to Australia in less than three years, and his second in 2024. He stopped over in Singapore on his way back from Australia for high-level meetings and to address an India-ASEAN think tanks forum.

It is unclear if there was any official discussion between Jaishankar and the Australian leaders about the impact of Trump's win on the two countries' bilateral relations with the United States or the Indo-Pacific more broadly, but the possibility of Trump returning to power was front of mind for many participants at the Raisina Down Under forum in Sydney on 5-6 November. The Ministry of External Affairs and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs were both partners in this event, and it was only the second of its kind. This forum also provided an unprecedented opportunity for the foreign ministers of India, Australia and New Zealand to share a stage to discuss regional and global issues in front of a live audience.

The forum brought together senior ministers, government officials, scholars, and industry and civil society leaders to discuss the issues that directly affect the security and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region. In a fireside chat with the director of an Australian think tank at this event, Jaishankar talked about the transformation of the India-Australia bilateral relationship over the past decade. He said India's bilateral relationships with the Quad members – the United States, Japan and Australia – have grown very significantly between 2007, when the grouping was first initiated, and 2017, when it was reborn, but "the bilateral which has changed the most is Australia".

Jaishankar pointed to several developments to support his argument: the substantially increased frequency of meetings between the two prime ministers; the growth in the size of the Indian diaspora in Australia; increased defence cooperation between the two militaries; the signing of an early trade agreement; and the increase in trade volume between the two countries. He said "preconceptions" by both sides about each other had held back the bilateral relationship in the past.

Australian scholars and journalists also quizzed him about India's position on the Ukraine War, the Middle East and on the recent agreement with China on the disengagement of troops along the Line of Actual Control. He repeated some of the same well-worn answers on these issues that he has provided to audiences in India and abroad. When asked about India's membership in competing minilateral groupings such as the Quad, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the BRICS, he said history plays a big part in these decisions and that India's membership of each of these bodies has its own logic.

Jaishankar was also asked to comment on Trump's return to power; he said India's relations with the US will continue to grow irrespective of who wins the election.

Jaishankar also visited Brisbane, where he inaugurated the fourth Indian consulate in Australia. As Australian states compete with each other to attract Indian tourists, students and businesses, the one state that has taken the lead in fostering bilateral relations is Victoria, home to the largest Indian diaspora (about 300,000) and the highest number of Indian students. The current Governor of Victoria, Margaret Gardner, and the state's Premier (equivalent to Chief Minister in India), Jacinta Allan, both chose to make India their first foreign official visit since taking office. Professor Gardner visited India in December 2023 and Ms Allan in September 2024. The Premier's visit to India coincided with the launch of the University of Melbourne's Global Centre in New Delhi, which she formally inaugurated during her visit.

The network of Indian diplomatic missions in Australia has grown substantially over the years, which plays a vital role in building and sustaining the bilateral relationship. While India's sub-national diplomatic efforts lag behind those of other large countries, the Indian embassies and consulates increasingly play an important role in building bilateral ties with local governments and communities in countries such as Australia that are home to a large Indian diaspora. The leading position occupied by the state of Victoria in the Australia-India relationship is largely due to the efforts of the Indian community in the state and the active role of the Indian consulate in Melbourne.

Jaishankar's final stop on his two-nation tour was Singapore, another friendly country with a large Indian diaspora. Singapore has long advocated for India's enhanced engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In Singapore, Jaishankar held meetings with the President of Singapore, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, the Prime Minister, Lawrence Wong, and the foreign and defence ministers, among others. His [discussions](#) in Singapore focused on strengthening bilateral relations and enhancing

cooperation in technology, especially semiconductor manufacturing, defence, and skills development.

One key message Jaishankar tried to convey in both Australia and Singapore was that the world is not headed for de-globalisation, but re-globalisation. A return to protectionist trade and investment policies will not be in anyone's interest. India's own interests would be better served by an economic order where de-risking, diversification of production, and resilient supply chains become the norm.

An Ill at Ease Singapore: Navigating US-China Relations Amid Domestic Challenges

by

Jayantika Rao T.V.

Following the landslide victory of former US President Donald Trump, the second 'Trump' Administration is set to come into office on January 20, 2025. This development has generated considerable apprehension amongst numerous countries, particularly in Southeast Asia. As the implications of a second Trump administration and his 'America First' agenda become more apparent, Southeast Asian nations are actively assessing both the opportunities and challenges that may arise. The troubled US-Chinese relationship raises profound questions about Asia's future and the shape of the emerging world order under a second Trump Administration.

During a recent conference, Singaporean Prime Minister Lawrence Wong articulated that the current state of US-China relations presents significant challenges. Trump's victory, will create "a less accommodating environment for smaller nations such as Singapore"¹. Singapore's position is of particular concern, as it navigates the competing interests of major powers and seeks to avoid being ensnared in a position that necessitates making unfavourable choices. The principal issue for Singapore is that relative to many of its Southeast Asian counterparts, it enjoys favourable relations with both China and the United States. The nation aspires to evade the pressure of having to choose between these two powers, a scenario that might increasingly manifest in the future.

Singapore faces significant concerns regarding the potential repercussions of Trump's economic policies on global trade, particularly his strong preference for protectionism. As a nation intrinsically reliant on international trade, Singapore is likely to encounter challenges stemming from Trump's proposed universal tariffs ranging from 10 to 20 percent on all imports, as well as a 60 percent tariff on Chinese goods.² These developments may compel Singapore to align itself with either the United States or China – a choice that Singapore would not like to make given its strategic national interests. As competition

¹ "PM Wong concerned with rising US-China tensions after Trump win". CNA, November 8, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fD2dkY5KVE>

² Singh, Kavaljit. "What Does Trump 2.0 Mean for Global Trade?," The Wire, November 22, 2024. <https://thewire.in/world/what-does-trump-2-0-mean-for-global-trade>.

intensifies between the two powers, the likelihood of the Indo-Pacific becoming a battleground is a security risk that Singapore would want to avoid.

Given its characteristics - including a highly open economy and substantial dependence on international trade - Singapore occupies a challenging position. The country acts as a strategic intermediary within both China-centred manufacturing supply chains and the regional operations of U.S. technology firms.³ Furthermore, Singapore has built a reputation as a proponent and beneficiary of globalisation, a status that complicates its geopolitical positioning. Trump's implementation of blanket tariffs may diminish global export demand, thereby contributing to a decline in economic growth. Moreover, there are apprehensions that Trump's hawkish stance on China could result in trade restrictions affecting nations and enterprises with significant investments in China.⁴ Consequently, Singapore's considerable investments in China may be subjected to increased scrutiny.

Additionally, the fate of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), spearheaded by the Biden administration, remains precarious during the Trump 2.0 administration. Trump has characterised the IPEF as akin to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Two⁵, implicitly indicating the potential withdrawal from the agreement. While the ramifications of such a withdrawal would likely to be less severe than those associated from Trump's withdrawal from the TPP in 2017, it would nonetheless undermine US's commitment to maintaining its economic engagement in the region. The primary effect of Trump's potential withdrawal from the IPEF would be the erosion of trust among Indo-Pacific nations, which could prompt many to gravitate closer to China.

An increased engagement with China coupled with diminished engagement with the US stands contrary to Singapore's national interests. Singapore has consistently acknowledged the significance of a robust US presence in Asia, viewing it as pivotal for maintaining regional stability. The partnership between Singapore and the United States is instrumental in supporting this presence. During an event at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington last year, then-Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong

³ Lim, Linda. "Implications of Trump's Policies for Singapore's Economy." CNA, November 19, 2024. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/donald-trump-impact-singapore-economy-tariffs-trade-us-china-4755016>.

⁴ Tang, Louisa. "Trump's 'America First' Policy Will Impact Global Trade in Asia, Say Analysts." CNA, November 9, 2024. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/united-states-trump-presidency-asia-china-impact-trade-tariffs-america-first-4732481>.

⁵ Singh, Kavaljit. "What Does Trump 2.0 Mean for Global Trade?" The Wire, November 22, 2024. <https://thewire.in/world/what-does-trump-2-0-mean-for-global-trade>.

articulated Singapore's hope for the US to remain actively involved in the Asia-Pacific region.⁶ He underscored that Singapore's foremost motivation for seeking the presence of the United States is its advocacy for an open, integrated, and rules-based global order, which serves as the foundational principle of Singapore's foreign policy. During the interview, PM Wong stated that Singapore hopes that the next administration would continue its engagement in the region, recognising its strategic advantages. However, the shift in US priorities may compel Singapore to adapt to Trump's transactional approach that would result in a reduced military deployments in the Indo-Pacific, thereby fostering an environment that may encourage a more assertive stance from China.

Compared to many Southeast Asian countries, Singapore is highly economically integrated with China, yet it actively seeks to reduce its dependence on the country. While Singapore acknowledges and supports China's ascent, as well as the deepening of bilateral relations over the past two decades, Singaporean leaders remain acutely aware of the destabilising effects arising from China's assertive posture, particularly when it perceives provocation. This was notably illustrated by Beijing's strong response to then deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's unofficial visit to Taiwan in July 2004, a situation that continues to influence the hawkish rhetoric and policies articulated by China regarding Taiwan and the South China Sea.⁷

Furthermore, Singapore has an added issue of being the only Southeast Asian country whose multiracial population is majority ethnic Chinese. In fact, it is the only sovereign state in the world with such demographics, other than China itself. Therefore, Singapore has made enormous efforts to build a multiracial national identity and not a sole Chinese one. The government has been particularly vigilant in preventing any actions that could be perceived as aligning with Chinese interests.

Concerns regarding Chinese influence in Singaporean domestic politics have become increasingly prevalent among senior officials, prompting the passage of a stringent foreign interference law. Although the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act (FICA) was enacted in 2021, it was not until February 2024 that Singapore invoked this legislation for the first time against Philip

⁶ "A Conversation with Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong". CSIS, October 13, 2023. <https://www.csis.org/events/conversation-singapore-deputy-prime-minister-lawrence-wong>

⁷ "China opposes Lee Hsien Loong's visit to Taiwan (12/07/04)". Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States, July 12, 2004. http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zt/twwt/200407/t20040712_4912753.htm

Chan, a Hong Kong-born Singaporean.⁸ Accordingly, Singapore is committed to mitigating China's growing influence in the region, particularly within its own domestic context by ensuring a US presence in the region which is being challenged at this time.

Domestic Issues

In Singapore, a prevailing notion is that as long as the People's Action Party (PAP) continues to meet the needs of Singaporeans, the electorate will remain supportive of its governance. However, over the past decade, significant structural changes within the domestic landscape have catalysed a critical transformation in the political arena. Notably, although the PAP secured its 13th consecutive general election victory in 2020, it garnered only 61.2% of the popular vote, representing a marked decline from the 70% it achieved in the 2015 elections.⁹ A significant outcome of the 2020 General Elections was the formal recognition of an opposition led by the Workers' Party. Moreover, for the forthcoming 2025 General Elections there is considerable discourse regarding the speculation that the PAP may struggle to form a government after the elections. In May 2024, before being sworn in as Prime Minister, Lawrence Wong said that it was "not unimaginable for two or maybe three opposition parties to come together, form a coalition, and run the government."¹⁰ (He subsequently contradicted himself by saying that there was "No chance of an opposition wipe-out"¹¹). Nevertheless, the reality is that for the first time, the PAP is confronting a more cohesive political opposition that can no longer be easily dismissed as a marginal or unrepresentative faction. These domestic structural changes, occurring within the context of an uncertain external environment, present significant challenges for Singapore.

Many analysts highlight the change in Singaporean politics with the recent political controversies that have undermined the country's established clean image and reputation for stability. A primary factor contributing to the situation was the indictment of (now former) senior minister, S. Iswaran on corruption

⁸ Fang, Chin Soo. "Who Is Philip Chan, the Man Against Whom S'pore Has Invoked Its Foreign Interference Law?" The Straits Times, February 2, 2024. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/who-is-mr-philip-chan-the-man-against-whom-s-pore-has-invoked-its-foreign-interference-law>.

⁹ Hin, Ooi Kok. "Singapore's Election: Why Aren't the Winners Smiling?" Lowy Institute, July 21, 2020. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/singapore-s-election-why-aren-t-winners-smiling>.

¹⁰ Yuen-C, Tham. "Not Unimaginable for Opposition to Win Enough Seats to Form Coalition Government: DPM Wong." The Straits Times, May 14, 2024. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/not-unimaginable-for-opposition-to-win-enough-seats-to-form-coalition-government-dpm-wong>

¹¹ "No Chance of an Opposition Wipe-out: PM Wong," The Straits Times, November 24, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vOVScUhWKk>.

charges. Iswaran faces thirty-five charges related to bribery and corruption. The prosecution alleges that he accepted a variety of gifts from a Malaysian tycoon and developer, as well as from another contractor.

This indictment coincided with the resignations of two members of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) due to personal misconduct. Simultaneously, two senior government ministers were subjected to public scrutiny regarding their rental of state-owned colonial-era bungalows. While the investigation found no evidence of wrongdoing, "many Singaporeans questioned how the ministers could rent the properties, given that contracts are awarded through a bidding process."¹² As Eugene Tan, an associate professor of law at Singapore's Management University said "the government has taken a hit. It has suffered reputational damage, to say the least"¹³. These developments have significantly impacted the nation, which is renowned for its political stability, and are likely to influence the 2025 General Elections profoundly.

Conclusion

Like other nations in the region, Singapore's geopolitical focus over the next four years will centre on navigating the strategic competition between China and the United States. This task is becoming increasingly complex, even for a prosperous and diplomatically influential nation like Singapore, as it tries to balance the two powers amid a growing trade conflict. Additionally, Singapore is facing a significant domestic challenge for the first time, marked by the possibility of a weakened People's Action Party (PAP) and a stronger opposition. As a result, the historically practical approaches that have served Singapore well in the past may leave it vulnerable with regards to its future stability and international standing.

¹² Hancock, Adam. 'Reputational damage': Singapore's ruling party grapples with scandal'. Aljazeera, February 5, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/5/reputational-damage-singapores-ruling-party-grapples-with-scandal>

¹³ Ibid

The Philippines' Twin Maritime Laws: Tracing the History of the Philippines-China Dispute in the South China Sea

by

Divya Rai

Recent Developments

The recent legislative actions undertaken by the Philippines have dramatically worsened the already fraught relations with China. On November 8, 2024, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. signed two laws: the "Philippine Maritime Zones Act" and the "Philippine Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act". These laws serve to clarify and assert the Philippines' maritime claims, delineating specific zones that include internal waters, territorial seas, and an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in accordance with international law. The "Maritime Zones Act" reinforces its claims within its 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone, particularly concerning the Kalayaan Island Group (KIG)¹⁴.

The "Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act" designates three specific sea-lanes for foreign vessels navigating through Philippine waters. Under this act, foreign vessels and aircraft are permitted to transit in an unimpeded, continuous manner without unnecessary interruptions¹⁵. Following the signing of the acts, China immediately condemned the legislation and published 16 geographic coordinates for baselines around Scarborough Shoal¹⁶. Interestingly, the newly promulgated baselines are confined to the Scarborough Shoal, and do not include China's extensive baseline claims surrounding the Paracel Islands.

The Philippines' territorial claim to the Spratlys Islands is limited only to the KIG, Mischief Reef, Scarborough Shoal and Second Thomas Shoal. The tensions have escalated as China seeks to assert territorial rights in these areas. However, this is not the first instance when these areas have been a focal point of geopolitical tension. The dispute goes back to the pre-Cold War era.

¹⁴ Congress of the Philippines, "An Act Declaring the Maritime Zones Under the Jurisdiction of The Republic of The Philippines," <https://legacy.senate.gov.ph/lisdata/4304339610!.pdf>.

¹⁵ Philippines News Agency. "Twin maritime laws secure PH territories for future generation", November 9, 2024. <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1237475>

¹⁶ China Military. "China releases baselines of territorial sea adjacent to Huangyan Dao. November 10, 2024. http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16350831.html.

Historical Claims

In 1946, the Philippines formally asserted its claim to the Kalayaan Islands, part of the Spratly Islands. During this period, then Vice President Elpidio Quirino reiterated that these southern islands were included within the country's territorial boundaries. Admiral Tomas Cloma had proclaimed to the world the Philippines' ownership of the Kalayaan island group by discovery and occupation of the Spratly Islands in 1956. He issued his "Notice to the Whole World" and declared the establishment of the "Free Territory of Freedom Land" off the coast of Palawan, Philippines¹⁷. Following the growing recognition of the resources potential in the SCS, including fisheries and hydrocarbon reserves, it was formally recognised as being under Philippine sovereignty through Presidential Decree No. 1596 in 1978¹⁸. China began claiming the region in 1947, when the nationalist Kuomintang party issued a map with the so-called "nine-dash line", which essentially encircles 90% of the waters and islands of the South China Sea.

Philippines' Position on South China Sea

Manila's policy towards China is shaped by a combination of political dynamics, geopolitical factors, and economic realities. During the Cold War, the Philippines adopted a strongly anti-Communist stance, aligning closely with the United States. It was only under President Marcos in 1967 that the Philippine government began exploring the idea of opening up to other countries and focusing on expanding trade partners to reduce dependence on its traditional markets. Later on, subsequent events and leadership transitions in the Philippines have been crucial in shaping Philippines' policy towards China and the SCS.

Leadership Transitions and the South China Sea dispute

1. From 1990-2010

By the end of the Cold War, the shifting geopolitical dynamics in the Asia Pacific region prompted the Philippines and China to agree on resolving their territorial disputes through dialogue. Throughout the 1990s, both nations engaged in frequent high-level exchanges, with Premier Li Peng visiting the Philippines in December 1990, and President Ramos travelling to China in April

¹⁷ Municipality of Kalayaan, Palawan.

<https://kalayaanpalawan.gov.ph/history.php#:~:text=In%201947%2C%20Tomas%20Cloma%2C%20a.called%20the%20South%20China%20Sea.>

¹⁸ Presidential Decree No.1596

https://laws.chanrobles.com/presidentialdecrees/17_presidentialdecrees.php?id=1638

1993¹⁹. During this period, they signed a joint declaration emphasising the importance of peacefully resolving territorial disputes in the SCS and promoting cooperation in the development of contested areas²⁰. However, this amicable atmosphere was short-lived, as tensions escalated when the Philippines discovered a significant increase in Chinese military presence around Mischief Reef.

In January 1996, an incident occurred where three Chinese naval vessels engaged in a ninety-minute confrontation with a Philippine navy gunboat near Capones Island, which is part of the Spratly chain of islands claimed by Manila²¹. This marked the first instance of China engaging in military confrontation with an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member state other than Vietnam. This triggered a crisis in Sino-Philippine relations, as the Philippines perceived the occupation of Capones Island as a serious external threat to its sovereignty and security.

As the political climate heated up, bilateral ties experienced a brief decline. This had a dramatic impact on US-Philippine relations. After the withdrawal of US military forces in 1992, the Philippine military was in a sorry state. This raised significant concerns regarding how the Philippines could uphold its national sovereignty and security. Consequently, the Philippines sought to strengthen its military cooperation with the US, through signing of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) in 1998²². This agreement was viewed as a direct response to threats from China.

2. From 2000-2010

During this time, China agreed to discuss the SCS disputes with the ASEAN bilaterally. On November 4, 2002, during the 8th ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China signed the "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties" in the South China Sea (DOC). This declaration aimed to promote peace and stability in the SCS²³.

¹⁹ http://cn-ph.china.org.cn/2012-02/28/content_4841408.htm

²⁰ United Press International. "Ramos says China trip a success", April 30, 1993. <https://www.upi.com/amp/Archives/1993/04/30/Ramos-says-China-trip-a-success/8677736142400/>.

²¹ United Press International. "Manila navy apprehends alleged Sino boat", February 11, 1996. <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1996/02/11/Manila-navy-apprehends-alleged-Sino-boat/5636824014800/>

²² Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) between Philippines and US <https://sc.judiciary.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/251977.pdf>

²³ Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, November 4, 2002. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ASEAN-Documents-Series-2002.pdf>

The DOC was basically a Chinese Confidence Building Measure (CBM) proposal intended to reduce regional strains in diplomatic relations with ASEAN countries, which were claimant states to Islands in the South China Sea. However, the success of the DOC could not last long, due to its non-binding nature and a failure to agree on a formal “code of conduct” as there was no agreement on the shared guidelines.

The tensions escalated significantly in 2009 when China submitted its “nine-dash line” map to the United Nations²⁴, asserting extensive claims over the SCS, which included areas within the Philippines’ EEZ. This move was met with strong opposition from the Philippines, as it undermined its territorial claims and rights to resources in the region.

3. From 2010-2016

The Philippines underwent a political transition from President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to President Benigno Aquino III in 2010. There wasn’t much of a difference in the policy during his presidency, as he prioritised the SCS dispute as a central issue in the Philippines’ foreign policy. Initially, he adopted a more flexible approach, emphasising diplomatic resolutions and recalibrating policies to address the challenges posed by China’s assertiveness in the region²⁵. But despite the softer stance, China’s occupation of the disputed territories saw a major increase.

A major incident occurred during President Aquino’s administration in 2012, when tensions escalated dramatically as China took control of Scarborough Shoal. The standoff began when a Philippine Navy surveillance plane spotted several Chinese fishing vessels anchored at the Scarborough Shoal. The Philippine Navy dispatched the *BRP Gregorio del Pilar* to investigate and subsequently apprehend the Chinese fishermen for illegal activities in Philippine waters. This led to a tense standoff, with both nations maintaining vessels in the area. Despite a supposed agreement mediated by the United States for both countries to withdraw their forces, China did not comply and instead reinforced its presence at the Scarborough Shoal. By July 2012, China had effectively seized control of the area, and preventing Filipino fishermen from accessing fishing grounds²⁶.

²⁴ The Diplomat. “What Does the Nine-Dash Line Actually Mean?”, June 2, 2016.

<https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/what-does-the-nine-dash-line-actually-mean/>.

²⁵ Philstar Global. “Commentary: How did President Aquino stand up against China?”, July 12, 2021. <https://www.philstar.com/news-commentary/2021/07/10/2111573/commentary-how-did-president-aquino-stand-against-china>.

²⁶ Ibid

Aquino realised that appeasing China carried risks, especially given China's emergence as an assertive regional power. He protested China's actions in the SCS and proposed to include the Scarborough Shoal incident in the ASEAN joint statement following the ministerial meeting of ASEAN in July 2012. However, Cambodia's pro-China stance resulted in ASEAN's first-ever failure to issue a joint statement in its 45-year history²⁷.

In January 2013, frustrated by the lack of effective counter-measures against China's assertiveness in the SCS, the Philippines filed a case over the maritime jurisdiction of the Philippines in the West Philippine Sea at the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague²⁸. Despite being a signatory and ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), China refused to participate in the arbitration process²⁹. The arbitration proceedings culminated in a legally binding decision issued on July 12, 2016, which refuted China's extensive claims of sovereignty and "historic rights" over the South China Sea and largely favoured the Philippines. However, due to the changing administration in the Philippines, from President Benigno Aquino III to President Rodrigo Duterte 2016, there was a significant shift in its foreign policy. Despite the PCA court's decision in favour of the Philippines, the results of the arbitration decision were not implemented.

During Duterte's term in office, the Philippines began to forge closer political and diplomatic relations with China. A significant turning point in this relationship was Duterte's "ice-breaking" trip to China in October 2016, where he aimed to reset ties after years of tension³⁰. Despite the establishment of airfields, radar installations, and missile systems on the disputed islands by China, Duterte chose to emphasise cooperation over confrontation. But his hands-off approach failed to change China's aggressive actions in the region.

4. Current Policy

Due to escalating tensions in the SCS, Philippines' policy on China took a U-turn when President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. was sworn in as the 17th president of the Philippines. Unlike his predecessor, Marcos moved away from the conciliatory approach and adopted a more confrontational strategy. Manila's

²⁷ BBC News. "ASEAN nations fail to reach agreement on South China Sea," July 13, 2012.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18825148>.

²⁸ CRS Reports. "Arbitration Case Between the Philippines and China Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)", July 6, 2016.
<https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R44555.html>.

²⁹ Xinhua news. "China refuses South China Sea arbitration award", July 7, 2016.
http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-07/12/c_135507844.htm.

³⁰ BBC News. "Duterte in China: Xi lauds 'milestone' Duterte visit", October 20, 2016.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-37700409>.

new strategy and Beijing's counteractions have created a vicious cycle of escalating tensions. Tensions between them have sharply escalated in recent months, primarily due to aggressive actions taken by the China Coast Guard (CCG) against Philippine vessels attempting to resupply the grounded *BRP Sierra Madre* at the Second Thomas Shoal. A notable incident occurred earlier this year when a Chinese vessel and Philippine supply ship collided near the Second Thomas Shoal resulting in injuries to eight Filipino armed forces personnel³¹.

Concerned about potential conflicts, Marcos emphasised renewing alliances with the United States and its allies. He began strengthening defence ties with the US. The Philippines identified four additional Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreements (EDCA) sites in April 2023³². Additionally, Marcos has signed the 'Reciprocal Access Agreements' (RAAs) with Australia and Japan.

Conclusion

Since the end of the Cold War, various Philippine presidents have adopted different strategies to manage territorial disputes with China. So far, the Philippines has favoured a diplomatic approach, seeking to secure its rights through legal channels rather than resorting to provocative actions. This position has been mainly influenced by the imperatives of China-Philippines economic relations, business links, and uncertainties regarding U.S. support for Philippine interests in the SCS. Following increased support from the United States, Marcos Jr. adopted a "hard balance" policy against China. This is similar to what the late President Aquino III pursued.

The current policy of the Marcos administration towards China is more vigorous and ambitious than that of the Aquino administration. Particularly, the increasing strategic presence of the United States in the Philippines and security agreements with other key powers, including South Korea, Japan, and other countries. All these activities aim to strengthen the strategic position of the Philippines against China's maritime expansion in the SCS. As these tensions continue to escalate, the situation remains precarious, with significant implications for regional security and international maritime law.

³¹ CNN World. "Philippines blames China for 'personnel injury and vessel damage' in South China Sea collision", June 19, 2024. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/06/19/asia/south-china-sea-philippines-injury-intl-hnk/index.html>

³² Lowy Institute. "Marcos has turned the Philippines towards America – not without risks", April 28, 2023. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/marcos-has-turned-philippines-towards-america-not-without-risks>.

However, involving the two superpowers in unresolved sovereignty disputes may prove to be detrimental to the Philippines' interest.

To recapitulate, the Philippines' policy on SCS has undergone significant transformations over the years. For decades, this region has been a major flashpoint, with both the Philippines and China asserting claims to the Spratly Islands based on historical titles, discovery, and international agreements. The territorial disputes in the SCS are complex and have led to the contentious relationship between the Philippines and China in recent decades. While discussions about formalising the Philippines' territorial claims have continued since the 1990s, they have often stalled due to political hesitation. The Philippines recognised that formal legislation is essential for addressing longstanding ambiguities surrounding sovereignty claims over Scarborough Shoal and the Second Thomas Shoal. This line of thinking is the reason why the Philippines enacted the two new legislations clarifying ambiguities surrounding its territorial claims in the SCS.

Prabowo Softens his Political image as his Views on Indonesia's Domestic and Foreign Policy Priorities Evolve

by
Biren Nanda

Introduction

On February 14, 2024, **Prabowo Subianto** who was serving in President Joko Widodo's cabinet as the Minister of Defence was elected as the President of Indonesia. Prabowo polled 58% of the votes cast. At the age of 72, Prabowo, a former special-forces commander became the President-elect of Indonesia in his third attempt.

The Transformation in Prabowo's public image

Prior to his successful Presidential bid, during his earlier two failed attempts - specifically during the election campaigns in 2014 and 2019 - Prabowo had relied on divisive rhetoric— separating society into two groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'—to mobilise his supporters. He frequently evoked notions of the people's economy and described liberalisation policies pursued after the 1998 reform movement as an "economic war" waged against the Indonesian people. Prabowo also had long-existing ties with the Islamic Defenders' Front (FPI) and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI). These hard-line conservative Islamist groups which spearheaded massive protests against the ethnic Chinese governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja "Ahok" Purnama, in 2016.

Prabowo, however, has recently been described as a different kind of politician. He shed his image as a "modern-day warrior" and positioned himself as a "patriot ready to serve his people" and a "keen student and follower" of Jokowi's leadership style. Rather than dismissing his rivals as corrupt, he has, on occasion, praised them. Prabowo's efforts to soften his image have improved his reputation amongst the Indonesian public.

For much of Prabowo's time on the political stage, particularly throughout his 2014 and 2019 presidential campaigns, scholars and policy analysts have described him as a "populist" with authoritarian tendencies.

In his previous campaigns, Prabowo emphasised his macho military image as an ardent nationalist and was known for his temper. This time, however, Prabowo embraced an image of an "even-tempered and easy-going politician" and a "cute grandfather" with a vulnerable side through social media. With nearly 56.4 per cent of voters under the age of 40, social media played a pivotal

role in this election compared to the previous years. Instead of only posting nationalist speeches, Prabowo disseminated TikTok videos of himself dancing. He portrayed himself as a jocular grandfather who prioritises economic issues like unemployment and the cost of living, which many young Indonesians are more concerned about.

Consequently, a pertinent question arises: how should we interpret Prabowo's apparent transformation from an "authoritarian and populist politician" to a "congenial party elder" and a committed advocate for policy continuity? The answer perhaps lies in Prabowo's willingness to learn from experience and adapt – and above all his strength of character, his resilience, and persistence, which helped him in beating all odds to win his third attempt at the Presidency.

Continuity in Domestic Policies

Prabowo's promise to follow up on President Joko Widodo's policies on both the economic and foreign policy fronts, was a major factor in deciding the outcome of the elections. President Joko Widodo – popularly known as "Jokowi" – had consistently high approval ratings (81%). His legacy was his signature policies like (1) Social welfare schemes, (2) ensuring Indonesia's resources are processed within the country, (3) drawing down on coal and boosting renewable energy, (4) stimulating growth through large infrastructure projects, (5) building a US \$ 34 billion new National Capital in Borneo, and (6) laying the groundwork to make Indonesia a high-income country by 2045. Jokowi's decade in office is generally seen as one of stability and prosperity for the Indonesian economy.

Jokowi brought Prabowo into his cabinet as defence minister in October 2019 after the two former rivals had shelved their political differences. Prabowo's political vehicle, the Gerindra party, joined Jokowi's 'Onward Indonesia coalition' on October 21, 2019. Prabowo has pledged to continue with Jokowi's grand coalition strategy and big infrastructure program. Prabowo has also promised increases in defence and social welfare spending. A potential loosening of fiscal discipline has prompted investor concern.

The young electorate emphasised job opportunities, eradicating poverty and corruption and controlling inflation as their top priorities. Prabowo pledged to focus on these areas and maintain Jokowi's popular social welfare schemes.

Prabowo's Political Style

Prabowo has a strong personality, and it remains to be seen how far he will stick to the policy priorities of Joko Widodo. Prabowo's military background and

personal interest in defence expansion will likely signal a shift from past policy priorities. Of note is his penchant of speaking off the cuff. At the Shangri la Dialogue in 2023, he called for a referendum on disputed areas in "Ukraine" along with a UN-administered demilitarised zone. On the South China Sea disputes, his response during the presidential debates was on building up maritime defence capacity rather than pursuing effective diplomatic strategies – a policy position which he has contradicted when he met President Xi Jinping on November 9, 2024.

Prabowo's Foreign Policy Vision

Prabowo outlined his foreign policy platform in a speech delivered at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS Indonesia) on November 13, 2023. Prabowo said he would be guided by the principle of "non-membership of any geopolitical bloc" and would pursue a policy of having "good relationships with everybody". He defined his approach as a 'good neighbor policy', seeking cooperation with all countries, including the United States, China and India. As he put it, "1000 friends too few, one enemy is too many". Prabowo claimed that under his leadership, Indonesia would become a leading player globally while prioritising its interests. While Prabowo aimed to be good friends with everyone, his manifesto also recognised that the only way to ensure that Indonesia enjoys a powerful geopolitical presence is through a "well-managed defence and security system, which can protect the nation and ensure its own security".

Prabowo on the North Natuna Sea a year ago

Prabowo pledged to take a more assertive approach, especially regarding defence and security. During the presidential debate held on January 7, 2024, which focused on foreign policy and national security, *Prabowo emphasised the importance of building a strong maritime defence capacity to defend Indonesia in the North Natuna Sea*. To achieve this goal, he would likely make greater efforts than his predecessor did to boost the defence sector, for which he might look towards the United States and other external partners.

Prabowo's New Pragmatism

Prabowo Subianto has just returned from a five-nation tour to China, the United States, Peru, Brazil, the United Kingdom, and the UAE from November 8 to 23, 2024. The tour signalled his plans to focus on a more assertive foreign policy, reflecting his vision for Indonesia's role in global affairs. Prabowo, like other leaders from the Global South, clearly perceive the emergence of a

multipolar world, which explains the context of Indonesia's decision to seek membership in the BRICS economic bloc.

Prabowo is keen to show his broader geopolitical vision, especially regarding the US-China rivalry. This trip to key countries was about securing Indonesia's role in the global order. These initial visits show that that Indonesia's foreign policy under Prabowo will be driven by pragmatic considerations – securing trade deals, boosting defence partnerships etc.

During Prabowo's visit to China, both countries agreed (reached a common understanding) to jointly develop fisheries, and explore oil and gas in the in the 'overlapping waters' around Indonesia's Natuna islands, where China's 'nine-dash line' overlaps with Indonesia's EEZ³³. This understanding appears to validate China's claims in the South China Sea, which, according to UNCLOS, have no basis in international law.

Indonesia has never before formally acknowledged China's claim to what it calls the North Natuna Sea – a nomenclature it has used since 2017. To make matters more convoluted, the Joint Statement doesn't refer to UNCLOS but only to "prevailing laws and regulations." In Washington D.C., on November 12, 2024, the Indonesian side noted the ruling of the 2016 arbitral tribunal constituted under UNCLOS.

The Indonesian Foreign Ministry (KEMLU) immediately went into damage control and clarified that it remains firm in rejecting China's "nine-dash line". KEMLU said that Beijing's claim "does not comply" with the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and "therefore has no bearing" on Indonesia's sovereignty and jurisdiction over the North Natuna Sea. On November 12, the Indonesian Navy Chief stated that Indonesia's EEZ does not overlap with Chinese claims. The Joint Statement issued during the visit to Beijing does not gel with how Indonesian law enforcement has been publicising stand-offs with China Coast Guard vessels in the North Natuna area.

Could this change in Indonesia's stand be due to a genuine error in drafting the Joint Statement, or was it a deliberate and carefully thought out concession to China camouflaged in confusion and shrouded in secrecy in return for which Indonesia will receive more of the Chinese largesse which Prabowo might

³³ Joint Statement Between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Indonesia on Advancing the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the China-Indonesia Community with a Shared Future
https://news.cgtn.com/news/files/Joint_Statement_between_China_and_Indonesia.pdf

deem necessary for Indonesia's growth? The implications of this change in the Indonesian position on the North Natuna Sea will only play out over a period of time. Prabowo will likely learn from the experience of dealing with the Chinese – as others have realised before him – that China has an insatiable appetite and will soon ask for more – when Indonesia has nothing more to concede.

The new Security Pillar of Indonesia's relations with China

During Prabowo's visit to China, to the 'four pillars' of Indonesia-China bilateral relations – political, economic, people-to-people relations and maritime aspects – Xi Jinping and Prabowo agreed to add a 'fifth pillar' – 'security cooperation' in their strategic partnership. Both sides agreed to promote high-level military-to-military exchanges, improve dialogue mechanisms in the area of defence, and systematically promote cooperation at all levels and in all fields. Both sides also agreed to hold the first meeting of the 2+2 Dialogue Mechanism for Foreign Ministers and Defence Ministers in 2025, which will serve as the primary platform to expand high-level strategic communication and political, security and defence cooperation between the two countries.

Prabowo and the United States

Prabowo is the former son-in-law of President Suharto. He has faced accusations of human rights violations in Papua and East Timor as well as the kidnapping and torturing of pro-democracy activists in 1997, during his tenure as a general in the Indonesian special-forces. He has consistently denied these allegations. Due to these human rights concerns, the Bush and Obama administrations denied him entry to the US. The first Trump administration lifted the visa ban on Prabowo. With the Trump Administration coming into office a second time early next year, Indonesia under Prabowo sees more opportunities to expand ties between the two countries

While Washington D.C. may lag in trade and investment, it wishes to sell arms to Indonesia and access metals from Indonesia's mines. The Biden administration is offering large incentives in tax credits under the "Inflation Reduction Act," which are contingent upon 40% of the minerals used in battery production sold in the US being extracted or processed in the US or in one of its free-trade partners. Indonesia is pushing for a limited free-trade agreement in order to be eligible for the tax credits.

Conclusion

Prabowo is keen to show that he has a broader geopolitical vision, especially regarding the US-China rivalry. He feels confident that he can exploit the opportunities that the contestation between these powers will through up for Indonesia over time.

Prabowo has clearly indicated that his foreign policy will be driven by pragmatism and that he will pursue incremental steps to realize his vision for Indonesia's national interest. While he will be guided by both security and economic imperatives, he is willing to boldly depart from long-established policy positions in seeking a trade-off between competing goals – as he appears to have done with Indonesia's position on the North Natuna Sea.

For Prabowo, seeking foreign investment and assistance is a top priority, even if it comes at a price that challenges the current notion of what is regarded as an axiomatic and inviolable principle of Indonesia's foreign policy. The litmus test for any issue will be whether Prabowo regards it as a vital element of Indonesia's national interest.



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