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EDITORS

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OFFICE

Institute for National Defense and Security Research
No.172, Bo-Ai Road, Zhongzheng Dist., Taipei City, Taiwan (R.O.C.)
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Chinese Nationalism under Xi Jinping and Impacts on Cross-Strait Stability

*Christina Chen**

Policymakers, academics and the general public grapple to understand the role Chinese nationalism plays in its outward behavior. Central to the debate is whether the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) caters to nationalism, and if so, whether this leads to assertive foreign policy behavior. As Taiwan remains an integral component of CCP's ruling legitimacy, and is thus on the top of the party's priority list, the question "does nationalism shape China's foreign policy and make it more assertive, even aggressive?" matters to China's Taiwan policy, and in turn has implications for stability in the Taiwan Strait.

While there are many factors that influence China's policy on Taiwan, Chinese nationalism has affected its outwards behavior since ancient times, and incidents of Chinese nationalism driving Beijing to act aggressively towards Taiwan despite increasing cross-Strait economic and social ties have appeared since the 1980s. For example, during what analysts later called the "1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis," the People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted large-scale military exercises and fired missiles across the Taiwan Strait as Taiwan prepared for its first presidential election. In 1999, after former President Lee Teng-hui announced the "special state-to-state relations" theory, Beijing put an immediate hold on official contacts with Taipei, and redoubled its military activities in the Taiwan Strait. Following Tsai Ing-Wen's election as Taiwan's president in 2016, Beijing cut diplomatic contacts with Taipei and exerted more military pressure on the island. This essay shows that Chinese nationalism under Xi Jinping has taken a different form, and with the party's hardening stance on Taiwan, the likelihood of a more hawkish policy on Taiwan increases. Although

* Christina Chen is Assistant Research Fellow of Division of Chinese Politics, Military and Warfighting Concepts, INDSR.

Beijing seems unlikely to start a major conflict as Trump's return to the White House brought uncertainties to the world, nationalism under Xi and its consequences still have negative implications for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

CHINESE NATIONALISM UNDER XI JINPING

Chinese nationalism under Xi Jinping contains both “peaceful” and “assertive” elements. The promotion and the official adoption and revitalization of Chinese culture were meant to inspire Chinese national pride and collective unity. However, the reinforcement of Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity, the ambition to act as a great power (by presenting the Chinese economic model as an alternative to Western models and being central to global governance), and the strong promotion of propaganda initiatives, patriotic education and informational control indicate more assertive thoughts and actions. In fact, the party has cultivated a form of “state nationalism” characterized by a strong national agenda, intolerance of criticism of the CCP, and animosity toward Western values.¹ As it called on China to abandon the “keep a low profile and bide your time (韬光养晦 tao guang yang hui)” attitude and instead to actively project and fulfill its ambition, while reinforcing the division between “us” versus “them,” it represents the growing assertiveness of Chinese nationalism.

In recent years, the party leadership has been confronted with external and internal challenges. Partly due to the downturn of the real estate market, China has been struggling with continuing economic slowdowns and weak consumer demand, and analysts are not optimistic about the country's short-term economic outlook.² A bleak economic outlook is tied to rising social instability—youth unemployment, labor protests, mental illness, suicides, random violence and other signs of social strains are being seen across the country. As tensions between the U.S. and China grow, and are seen by Chinese leadership as threat to its control, the CCP has called for more unity, resulting in a heightened emphasis on Chinese identity and national sovereignty. It is expected that rising socio-economic problems and nationalist sentiment will give the party more incentive to become more outwardly assertive, even aggressive.

1. Suisheng Zhao, “From affirmative to assertive patriots: Nationalism in Xi Jinping's China,” *The Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (February 2022), 141–161; Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung, *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

2. Yuchen Li, “Can China climb out of economic stagnation in 2025?” *DW*, December 13, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/can-china-climb-out-of-economic-stagnation-in-2025/a-71044629>.

CHINA'S POLICY ON TAIWAN BECOMES MORE HAWKISH

Beginning in 2014, the CCP expanded the definition of Taiwan independence and its definition on the status quo, which meant that Beijing no longer accepted Taiwan's definitions. Such a change also paved the way for Beijing's more proactive and aggressive stance to ensure that Taiwan would not become independent (the stance is also directed towards the domestic audience).³ Moreover, the unification of Taiwan and China was put in the context of China's national rejuvenation: the importance of unifying Taiwan has been elevated, and China should use all its capabilities and means to achieve this end. This is different from Hu Jintao's emphasis on peaceful development as the political basis for achieving unification.

In 2019, Xi delivered his first Chinese policy toward Taiwan, and introduced the "Two Systems, 'Taiwan' solution. While analysts were divided over whether this solution was different to the longstanding Chinese stance on Taiwan, in 2022 China released a white paper titled "The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era," which was seen by analysts as Beijing's more hardline approach to Taiwan. The 2022 white paper differed from previous policies on Taiwan.⁴ First, the 2022 white paper used more explicit language to emphasize the necessity of using the Chinese military to achieve unification. Although the use of military force was also mentioned, previous policies focused more on economic, diplomatic and peaceful means to achieve unification. Secondly, the 2022 white paper presented the "One Country, Two Systems" formula as the way for Taiwan to preserve its social and economic systems, while previous policies presented the model more as an option for Taiwan. Third, the 2022 white paper took a stronger tone against Taiwanese independence, blaming Taiwanese independence activists for potential conflict and labeling them as a national security threat to China. Previous policies did reject Taiwanese independence, but the tone was softer and more focused on the peaceful nature of China's approach. Fourth, the 2022 white paper showed a stronger stance against foreign interference, stating that any foreign interference will lead to "serious consequences," while previous policies did not frame foreign interference as a threat to China's sovereignty. Lastly, a major departure of this white

3. Bonny Lin, "Enabling 'Patriots' to Be Masters of the Island: Evolution of Xi's Policy on Taiwan Since 2013," *China Leadership Monitor* 73, September 1, 2022, <https://www.prcleader.org/post/enabling-patriots-to-be-masters-of-the-island-evolution-of-xi-s-policy-on-taiwan-since-2013>.

4. The Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and The State Council Information Office, "White Paper: The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era," August 2022, http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202208/t20220810_10740168.htm.

paper from the previous two papers issued in 1993 and 2000 is that the promise of not stationing PLA troops or CCP administrators on Taiwan was omitted. Thus, the 2022 white paper lays out Beijing's uncompromising stance on Taiwan, and the language and tone used indicate a tougher, even more militarized, stance on Taiwan.

At the 20th party congress held in October 2022, Xi made a remark regarding Taiwan: "The wheels of history are rolling on towards the unification and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Complete unification of our country must be realized." This has caused concern among international observers. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated in a discussion at Stanford University on October 17, 2022, that China has determined that the current situation is no longer satisfactory and is eager to accelerate its agenda for "reunification within a significantly shorter timeframe."⁵ Also, it could be gathered from the speech that Xi would not hesitate to use a hardline approach—just like how Beijing treated Hong Kong—to achieve unification.

Up to Taiwan's presidential and legislative elections in 2024, Beijing increased military activities around the Taiwan Strait, threatened to impose sanctions, and even openly stated that the elections were a choice between peace and war.⁶ It continued to exert pressure on Taiwan after the elections. On June 2024, the Chinese authorities unveiled guidelines on imposing criminal punishment on "diehard Taiwan independence" separatists. According to the guidelines, China's courts, prosecutors, public and state security bodies should "severely punish Taiwan independence diehards for splitting the country and inciting secession crimes in accordance with the law, and resolutely defend national sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity."⁷ On October, 2024, four days after President Lai Ching-te's speech on Taiwan (ROC) National Day, China conducted "Joint Sword-2024B," large-scale military exercises around Taiwan and outlying islands. China's maritime law enforcement forces also conducted unprecedented patrols around Taiwan. And in December, 2024, the PLA conducted the largest military drills in nearly three decades, deploying around 60 PLA Navy warships and 30 China Coast Guard vessels in areas ranging from

5. Rebecca Falconer, "Beijing speeding up plans to seize Taiwan, Blinken says," *Axios*, October 18, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/10/18/china-seize-taiwan-plans-moving-much-faster-blinken>.

6. Ben Blanchard and Liz Lee, "China piles pressure on Taiwan ahead of election," *Reuters*, January 10, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taiwan-ruling-party-candidate-will-maintain-status-quo-engage-with-china-2024-01-09/>.

7. Li Yuchen, "Could Taiwan's 'separatists' face death penalty in China?" *DW*, July 9, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/could-taiwans-separatists-face-death-penalty-in-china/a-69604024>.

the South China Sea to Japan's Ryukyu Islands, complementing the 134-plus PLA warplanes operating in the island's vicinity across a three-day period.⁸ These activities reflect CCP's increasingly hardline approach vis-à-vis Taiwan.

THE CHINESE PUBLIC BECOMES MORE HARDLINE ON TAIWAN

In the midst of rising nationalist sentiments and the party's Taiwan policy, the Chinese public are more inclined to demand a harder approach vis-à-vis Taiwan. For example, right before former U.S. Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, many Chinese netizens applauded the tough rhetoric from government, military and media personalities who were attempting to thwart the visit. Some of them made a list of celebrities or influencers who did not publicly express support for China's position on Pelosi, inviting social media users to pressure them to make a statement. A former editor of China's Global Times wrote that China should "shoot down Pelosi's plane."⁹

Seeing Pelosi visit Taiwan, many netizens expressed disappointment, commenting that they were lied to by the government, and the government did not deserve people's respect.¹⁰

In January 2024, Chinese nationalists, who are growing impatient, called for war in response to the Democratic Progressive Party's victory in Taiwan's presidential election. Prominent Chinese social media influencers, such as one called Midnight Knight, remarked that "It's better to fight early than late, and it's better to fight big than small." Individual Chinese who were interviewed by Voice of America also echoed this thinking, saying that the victory of Lai could quicken China's pace of unifying Taiwan by force.¹¹

Aggressive, hardline opinions on the internet may not be representative of Chinese people's views of Taiwan, and indeed public opinion polls shows that only a slim majority (55%) of Chinese respondents support Beijing's armed reunification

8. Jack Burnham and Reece Breaux, "China Conducts Major Military Exercises Around Taiwan, Foundation for Defense and Democracies Policy Brief, December 16, 2024, " <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/12/16/china-conducts-major-military-exercises-around-taiwan/>.

9. Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "Nationalism rules China's internet during Taiwan tensions," *Axios*, August 9, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/08/09/china-taiwan-tensions-reactions-pelosi>.

10. Li Yuan, "Perils of Preaching Nationalism Play Out on Chinese Social Media," *The New York Times*, August 4, 2022, " <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/04/business/new-world-nancy-pelosi-taiwan-social-media.html>.

11. Kelly Tang, "China's Combative Nationalist Urge War to Reintegrate Taiwan after Presidential Election," *Voice of America*, January 17, 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-s-nationalists-urge-war-to-reintegrate-taiwan-after-presidential-election/7444075.html>.

with Taiwan.¹² Still, netizen opinions could lead to the “tyranny of the minority”—the amplification and misrepresentation of some voices could overwhelm more moderated voices, and increase the pressures policymakers face.

CHINESE NATIONALISM, TRUMP 2.0, AND IMPACT ON TAIWAN: IMPLICATION

Chinese nationalism under Xi Jinping could lead to even more hawkish policies on Taiwan. Nationalism acts as double-edged sword: while leaders can use nationalism to win domestic support, nationalism skews perspectives on outsiders, causing individuals to view adversaries as threatening and possessing harmful motives. This can get out of hand and force leaders to promote more hardline, aggressive responses as they wish to dominate others or think that defending their nation necessitates the use of force.

Alternatively, the CCP may be induced to invoke preexisting nationalism to consolidate control. According to diversionary theory, leaders facing domestic pressures may generate international conflicts to divert public attention to foreign troubles to stay in power. One study found that Xi Jinping relied on diversionary foreign policies to inoculate himself during the time when serious tensions between Xi Jinping and political elites occurred.¹³ Some analysts and officials also deemed recent military drills by the PLA as part of Chinese internal propaganda, with the goal of winning domestic support.

While nationalist sentiment may drive Beijing to rely more on diversionary tactics, under the current geopolitical environment, Beijing has little incentive to start or engage in large-scale conflict in the Taiwan Strait. The U.S. government under Donald Trump is quickly reshaping international politics. Trump’s preference for a unilateral, transactional diplomatic approach may indicate more opportunities for authoritarian regimes (as shown by Trump’s plan for Gaza and attempt to end the war in Ukraine) to expand their influence, but Beijing has been expecting the Trump administration to implement tough policies on China.¹⁴ What happened after Trump

12. Adam Y. Liu and Xiaojun Li, “Assessing Public Support for (Non)Peaceful Unification with Taiwan: Evidence from a Nationwide Survey in China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 33, no. 145, 1-13, May 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2023.2209524>.

13. Erin Baggott Carter, “Diversionary aggression in Chinese foreign policy,” *Brookings*, January 22, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/diversionary-aggression-in-chinese-foreign-policy/>.

14. Xie Tao, “What do Chinese analysts expect for China-US relations under Trump 2.0?” *Brookings*, January 23, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-do-chinese-analysts-expect-for-china-us-relations-under-trump-2-0/>.

took office justified Beijing's worries. On January 20, Trump imposed a 10% duty on all Chinese imports, which prompted Beijing to respond with countermeasures, and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said on February 14 at the Munich Security Conference that China will "Play along to the end" if the United States is bent on suppressing the country even though Beijing does not wish to be in conflict.¹⁵ As the outlook of U.S.-China relations remains unclear, Beijing is likely to prioritize its relations with the U.S., while maintain its current policy stance when it comes to cross-strait relations—intensifying pressure and advancing so-called integrated development measures on Taiwan. Diversionary tactics may come in the forms of further gray-zone aggression against Taiwan, which still increases tensions in the Taiwan Strait.

Although the purpose of nationalism and diversionary aggression are for authoritarian rulers to maintain domestic control, and the likelihood of the CCP engaging in large-scale conflicts seems low in the near term, the increase in the frequency and intensity of nationalist sentiments will lead to negative responses from Taiwan. For example, a public opinion poll commissioned by the Institute for National Defense and Security Research showed that, when being asked to identify whether China's territorial ambition constitutes a security threat, 64% of the respondents said it is a "critical security threat."¹⁶ The growth in distrust across the Strait makes unification by peace less feasible, and tensions more likely to occur.

15. "China will 'play along to the end' with U.S., its top diplomat says." *Reuters*, February 15, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-will-play-along-end-with-us-its-top-diplomat-says-2025-02-15/>.

16. Kuan-chen Lee and Christina Chen, "Navigating Security Challenges and Geopolitical Shifts: Assessing Taiwanese Public Perspectives on Defense and Foreign Policy," *Defense Security Brief*, Vol. 13, issue 3 (December 2024), 1-12, <https://indsr.org.tw/en/respublicationcon?uid=15&resid=3001&pid=5364>.

Analyzing Philippines President Marcos Jr.'s China Policy Shift in the South China Sea: The Implications for Taiwan

*Dr. Ya-Wen Yu**

Regarding the Philippines' South China Sea policy towards China, analysts generally agree on the following two points: First, during the Presidential campaign, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. initially attempted to resolve the South China Sea issue through traditional diplomatic means,¹ but after he became President, he decided to strengthen military deterrence in alliance with the United States.² Secondly, the Philippines originally agreed to China's joint-development agreement, using a bilateral approach to deal with the South China Sea disputes. However, Marcos Jr. later shifted to multilateral cooperation with various countries to defend the Philippines' sovereignty in the region.³ In other words, the administration of President Marcos Jr. appears to be recalibrating its approach to the South China Sea by seeking greater international involvement, particularly from countries like the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. This policy shift signals a move toward multilateral engagement to bolster the Philippines' sovereignty claims and strengthen its position in dealing with China. A key aspect of this realignment is the decision to align more closely with the United States, reviving and deepening security ties. What remains unclear, however, is why this pivot occurred: What factors prompted

* Dr. Ya-Wen Yu is an Associate Professor at the Graduate Institute of International Security, National Defense University (NDU). She specializes in comparative politics and international relations, with a focus on Southeast Asian studies.

1. Yu, Y. W. (2022). The 2022 Philippines Presidential Election and its Influence on Asia-Pacific Geopolitics. *Taiwan Strategists*, 14, 21-40.

2. Tan, A. C. (2024). The Philippines in 2023: Politics, Economy, and Foreign Affairs under Marcos Jr. *Asian Survey*, 64(2), 299-307.

3. Fan, Z. (2024). The logic of the Marcos Jr. Government's South China Sea Policy. *Marine Policy*, 167, 106248.

Marcos Jr. to revise the Philippines' South China Sea policy? Why is the Philippines choosing to align more closely with the United States? And what are the implications of this shift for regional security and diplomacy?

PHASE ONE: FROM SHELIVING THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE TO RESTORING PHILIPPINE-U.S. RELATIONS

During Marcos Jr.'s presidential campaign, he was the most China-friendly of the 10 candidates. In January 2022, Marcos Jr. was interviewed by foreign media; he stated that if elected, he would continue to put aside the 2016 South China Sea arbitral ruling because he believed that it would be the "only practical option" to reach a bilateral agreement with Beijing to deal with the evolving conflict situation.⁴

In addition, Marcos Jr. allied with his predecessor's daughter, the vice-presidential candidate Sarah Duterte, speaking highly of President Duterte's China policy. Another reason that people believed that Marcos Jr. was pro-China was because his father, the former president of the Philippines, established diplomatic relations with China in 1975.

In Marcos Jr.'s first year in office that he adopted a similar approach to Duterte's China policy. At that time, Marcos Jr. attempted to shelve the South China Sea dispute in exchange for economic and trade benefits from China. In the first stage, Marcos Jr.'s China policy and handling of the South China Sea dispute were initially seen as a continuation of his predecessor Rodrigo Duterte's diplomatic strategy of being "pro-China" and "anti-American".

However, starting in 2023, less than a year after taking office, Marcos Jr. showed a completely different attitude towards the South China Sea issue than when he ran for president. First, in February 2023, the Philippines and the United States reached the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), under which the Marcos Jr. administration allowed U.S. troops to rotate in the Philippines and build facilities at Philippine bases.⁵ In addition to the original five bases, Marcos Jr. announced in April 2023 that he had approved the establishment of four more US military bases in the region.

4. Strangio, S. (2022). Philippines' Marcos to Pursue Bilateral Deal With Beijing Over South China Sea. *The Diplomat.com*. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/philippines-marcos-to-pursue-bilateral-deal-with-beijing-over-south-china-sea/>.

5. Crabtree, J., and E. A. Laksmana (2023). The Philippines' Surprising Veer West. *Survival* 65(3): 81-89.

The move was a response to China's growing expansion in the South China Sea. As President of the Philippines, Marcos Jr. decided to restore the US-Philippines military partnership because he believed that the United States would be its ally as well as an external power that could help the Philippines compete with China.

PHASE TWO: THE PHILIPPINES STRENGTHENED MILITARY ALLIANCES WITH THE UNITED STATES AND JAPAN TO COUNTER CHINA

At the end of 2023, on December 19, in response to the South China Sea issue, Marcos Jr. began to publicly admit that it was useless to use “traditional diplomatic means” to deal with China's aggressive behavior in the South China Sea. Therefore, he announced a shift towards adopting alternative approaches to address the South China Sea issue. Subsequently, during his visit to Japan and attendance at the “ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit on the 50th Anniversary of Relations,” Marcos Jr. publicly stated that, guided by the standard principles outlined in the United Nations Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, the Philippines would establish a “free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific region” with friendly nations.⁶ The US and Japan-led Indo-Pacific strategic framework has become one of his response strategies to address the South China Sea issue.

A week later, during a joint air and sea patrol exercise involving the Philippines, the US, and Australia, a spokesperson for the Philippine Armed Forces reiterated Marcos Jr.'s statements, indicating that the Philippines would showcase its modernized military capabilities in the future and engage in bilateral and multilateral joint patrols with allied countries in the South China Sea. This shift highlights that Marcos Jr. is transitioning the focus from diplomatic means to military responses in addressing the South China Sea issue. In addition to reinforcing the Philippines' stance in defending its territorial sovereignty, strategically proposing to “strengthen our alliances with foreign countries, so that our voice will be stronger, we can also enhance legal processes to promote our interests, and promote regional peace and stability.”

6. Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (2022 November). President Marcos Attended ASEAN-Japan Summit and Expressed Gratitude to Japan for its Response to the Covid-19 Disaster and Acceptance of Filipinos. <https://jaif.asean.org/whats-new/president-marcos-attended-asean-japan-summit-and-expressed-gratitude-to-japan-for-its-response-to-the-covid-19-disaster-and-acceptance-of-filipinos/>.

The ongoing dispute between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea serves as a foundation for reinvigorating the military alliance between the United States and the Philippines and restoring partner relationships. As a result, the United States has actively enhanced military cooperation with the Philippines, and the latter has begun to strengthen military alliance relationships with allies such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. James R. Holmes, a professor of maritime strategy at the U.S. Naval War College, believes that the Philippines' return to the U.S. alliance allows the U.S. military to move closer to the “gray zone” of the South China Sea conflict zone. It also enhances the U.S. military’s presence which can support Manila and other potential military partners in the region. Moreover, at the northern end of the first island chain, the U.S. military has been collaborating more closely with Japan. The Japanese Self-Defense Forces has also strengthened defense efforts in the Okinawa Islands.

In early 2023, Marcos Jr. shifted towards a clear military approach to counter China's gray zone tactics.⁷ Firstly, there has been a continuous strengthening of military countermeasures in the Philippines, with a determination to incorporate more military deployments to defend territorial waters. This was evident in April 2024 when President Marcos Jr. signed Executive Order No. 57, establishing the National Maritime Commission (NMC), expanding military forces, taking a firmer sovereignty stance, and attempting to counter the “illegal, coercive, provocative, and dangerous attacks” of the Chinese Coast Guard. Secondly, there has been a strengthening of relations with the United States and other Indo-Pacific partners, with the Marcos Jr. government expanding U.S. military presence in the Philippines beyond base establishment and conducting a series of joint patrols and military exercises to highlight the strength and deterrence of the U.S.-Philippines military alliance. Additionally, the Marcos Jr. government has established a series of new security partnerships, including elevating Australia to a strategic partnership in September 2023 and initiating security cooperation with the Vietnamese Coast Guard in January 2024.

In April 2024, in response to the South China Sea issue, the U.S.-Philippines-Japan held a trilateral summit in Washington, confirming multi-level cooperation among the three countries, including military assistance to the Philippines, joint maritime and aerial patrols, and regular joint military exercises to counter China's

7. Chi, C. (2024). Philippines employs own version of China's 'gray-zone' tactics, say new Navy Chief. *Philstar* <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2024/12/04/2404983/philippines-employs-own-version-chinas-gray-zone-tactics-says-new-navy-chief>.

strategies in the gray areas of the South China Sea and create a deterrent effect.⁸ Experts believe that a multilateral cooperation framework is crucial for the Philippines to maintain sovereignty in the South China Sea. This kind of multilateral cooperation expands the issue of the South China Sea from the perspective of protecting Philippine sovereignty to maintaining international freedom of navigation in the region. This is the new response model that the Marcos Jr. government has established in response to the South China Sea issue, involving militarization and internationalization as countermeasures.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION: SHOULD WE FEEL SURPRISED ABOUT MARCOS JR.'S NEW CHINA POLICY?

Marcos Jr.'s predecessor, Duterte, also shifted his policy towards China. When he became president, he faced China's gray-zone strategies in the South China Sea. He chose a softer approach for economic reasons. In November 2017, he met Chinese President Xi Jinping in Vietnam. He announced a new chapter in relations with China. However, after 2021, Duterte later changed his approach, and began to assert sovereignty. For example, on March 7, 2021, when over 200 Chinese fishing vessels anchored at Whitsun Reef in the South China Sea, Philippines' Defense Secretary Lorenzana publicly accused China of taking "provocative actions that militarize the area." The Philippines subsequently deployed its navy and coast guard to conduct patrols in the area and also sent a fighter jet for aerial surveillance. The reason he did that was he was unhappy that China did not fulfill certain promises.

After June 3, 2022, the Marcos Jr. administration came into power. Marcos Jr. continues to manage this complex relationship in a similar way. Regarding the South China Sea issue, before taking office, Marcos Jr. publicly stated that "he would engage in dialogue with China with a 'firm voice' and would not allow Philippine rights to be 'trampled upon,' but he also referred to Beijing as the country's 'most powerful partner' in the recovery from the pandemic."

It is evident that in the early stages of his administration, Marcos Jr. still leaned towards employing a stalling approach, primarily using diplomatic means to address the issue. According to a special report by Philippine media outlet Rappler on August 23, 2023, Chinese Coast Guard vessels targeted Philippine coast guard ships with military-grade lasers, once again escalating the attack posture against Philippine

8. Murphy, E. L., and G. B. Poling (2024). A 'New Trilateral Chapter' for the United States, Japan, and the Philippines. CSIS. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-trilateral-chapter-united-states-japan-and-philippines>.

supply ships. In response to this, Marcos Jr. continued to refer to and position this area of the sea as a gray-zone in interviews. In September 2023, Marcos Jr. instructed the National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea to adopt a “civilianized approach” in addressing the issue of the Second Thomas Shoal.

However, on October 22, 2023, a Chinese Coast Guard vessel obstructed a Philippine resupply mission to Second Thomas Shoal and fired water cannons at the resupply ship.⁹ This incident was regarded as one of the most serious diplomatic conflicts between the two nations in recent years. At the time, Filipino Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin conveyed “anger, condemnation, and protest” to China's Ambassador to the Philippines, Huang Xilian, and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the strongest terms, reminding China that its vessels were protected under the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty. On November 22 2023, the "30th Anniversary Commemorative Summit of China-ASEAN Dialogue Relations" was held, with Xi Jinping in attendance. Duterte, in his remarks, directly called on China to respect the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 1982 and the 2016 Hague arbitral ruling.

In 2025, there are increasingly tense maritime confrontations between China and the Philippines. On March 5 2025, a China Coast Guard vessel blocked a Philippine resupply mission at Second Thomas Shoal, making the Philippine government take a hard stance against China to protect sovereignty and national interest. Therefore, it is not surprising that Marcos Jr.'s policy shifted toward China because of the escalating tensions between the Philippines and China since 2021 in the South China Sea.

CONCLUSION: THE KEY FACTORS INFLUENCING MARCOS JR.'S SHIFTED CHINA POLICY AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR TAIWAN

In conclusion, there are three main reasons President Marcos Jr. changed his China policy in the South China Sea:

First, the support of the U.S. and Japan played a significant role in making Marcos Jr. adopt a new China Policy. U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's visit to Manila in January 2023 facilitated even deeper US-Philippines security cooperation. Since U.S. President Biden had demonstrated his commitment to defend the

9. Mahadzir, D. (2023). China Coast Guard Vessel Collides with Filipino Supply Ship in South China Sea. *USNI News*. <https://news.usni.org/2023/10/22/china-coast-guard-vessel-collides-with-filipino-supply-ship-in-south-china-sea>.

Philippines if China took aggressive actions toward the Philippines in South China Sea disputed waters, especially the second Thomas Shoal, this influenced Manila to have strong determination to defend itself and have confidence that is beneficial for the Philippines to align closely with the U.S. under the Indo-Pacific strategy.

Secondly, Marcos Jr. relies more on the Philippine Armed Forces, which is another reason why he takes an anti-China stance. Traditionally, the Philippine Armed Forces supports a pro-America stance, and also favor a tougher approach to China. Therefore, it made Marcos Jr. contrast with his predecessor Duterte's pro-China policy.

Third, anti-China sentiment is growing in the Philippines, with more and more people supporting the United States over China. Domestic sentiment is very important, and public opinion is likely to prompt Marcos Jr. to take a tougher stance against China, because he has to adopt a policy that is in line with the preferences of the majority of people, and protect the national interests of the Philippines.

These factors combined to push Marcos Jr.'s China policy away from engagement and towards a more confrontational approach to China, but aligned with the United States and Japan and guided by domestic preferences.

In April 2025, General Romeo Browner publicly stated that if China invaded Taiwan, the Philippines would "inevitably" be involved.¹⁰ What are the implications for Taiwan? As the Philippines' stance indicates a shift toward a more proactive regional security posture, we can also see that during the Marcos administration, the Philippines emphasizes collective defense and its alliance with the United States when facing China's aggressive behavior in the South China Sea. This signal shows that Taiwan can seek to establish a closer security partnership with the two countries in the Indo-Pacific region. Additionally, it may encourage the establishment of diplomatic relations and personnel exchanges between Taiwan and the Philippines, especially after the Philippine government eases restrictions on official exchanges with Taiwan on April 22, 2025.

10. Agence France-Presse (2025, April 1). Military chief says Philippines 'inevitably' involved if Taiwan invade. *Philstar*.<https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2025/04/01/2432741/military-chief-says-philippines-inevitably-involved-if-taiwan-invaded>.

Should South Korea Develop Its Own Nuclear Weapons?

Some Observations about The Debate Related To South Korea's Nuclearization

*Man Fung YEUNG**

INTRODUCTION

In the Washington Declaration signed in May 2023, the United States and South Korea agreed to enlarge the scope of their security cooperation. Among various issues, cooperation related to nuclear deterrence against North Korea was included. Washington showed its willingness to consult with Seoul over the possible deployment of nuclear weapons in South Korea to deter North Korean aggression. Moreover, both countries discussed nuclear strategic planning and contingency through a newly established Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG).¹

Although the United States solidified its security guarantees for South Korea during the Biden Administration, the side effects caused by the alliance and the changing regional strategic environment generated a sense of insecurity for South Korea. Prior to Biden's presidency, the Trump administration attempted to reduce Washington's security commitment to South Korea.² Meanwhile, Washington's

* Man Fung YEUNG is a Ph.D. Candidate of the International Affairs and Strategic Studies, Tamkang University. His research interests focus on alliance behavior, economic sanctions, Northeast Asian Security.

1. "Washington Declaration," *The White House*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/washington-declaration-2/>.

2. Bob Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018); Randall Schweller, "Three Cheers for Trump's Policy: What the Establishment Misses," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 5 (September 2018): 133–43.

“Indo-Pacific” Strategy tries to mobilize Seoul to counterbalance China collectively.³ In this respect, Washington’s approach has triggered Seoul’s abandonment and entrapment anxieties.

In response to the current strategic environment in Northeast Asia, President Yoon Suk Yeol suggested South Korea should develop indigenous nuclear weapons in 2023.⁴ Yoon’s statement triggered debate about South Korea’s nuclearization amongst the South Korean public. Current policy debate and review on this issue focus on the reasons South Korea should develop its own nuclear weapon and the public attitude toward this issue. However, given the contentious nature of this issue, deeper discussion is necessary.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE DEBATE TOWARD SOUTH KOREA’S NUCLEARIZATION

Current research and policy review focus on the factors behind and the possible consequences of South Korea’s nuclearization. Facing North Korea’s frequent provocations and the side effects of the U.S.-ROK alliance (both the abandonment and entrapment anxieties), developing nuclear weapons would help South Korea defend itself from external threats and enhance South Korea’s autonomy vis-à-vis the United States.⁵ However, opponents argue that South Korea’s nuclear weapons development may undermine South Korea’s international reputation, trigger Washington’s abandonment of Seoul, and exacerbate the security dilemma in the region.⁶ Beside security factors and the possible results of nuclear weapons development, details related to this agenda deserve deeper investigation.

First, it is necessary to explore the gap between the public and the elites’ concerns about the agenda of South Korea’s nuclear weapons development. Political elites are more concerned about its negative consequences. As a signatory of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), Seoul’s nuclearization would violate the commitments it made to the international community. In the long run, not only are

3. Victor D Cha, “Allied Decoupling in an Era of US–China Strategic Competition,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 13, no. 4 (December 2020): 509–36.

4. Chung-In Moon, “South Korea Should Not Go Nuclear,” *East Asia Forum*, April 4, 2023, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/04/04/south-korea-should-not-go-nuclear/>.

5. Lami Kim, “South Korea’s Nuclear Hedging,” *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (January 2018): 115-33; Min-hyung Kim, “Under What Conditions Would South Korea Go Nuclear? Seoul’s Strategic Choice on Nuclear Weapons,” *Pacific Focus*, November 2023, 1-23.

6. Moon Chung-in, “Going Nuclear Would Ruin South Korea’s Prosperity and Prestige,” *Global Asia* 18, no. 1 (March 2023): 29-33.

the elites concerned about possible sanctions against South Korea, but they also feel anxious about whether nuclear weapons development would undermine South Korea's image internationally.⁷ Moreover, the elites are concerned about the possible deterioration of the security dilemma in Northeast Asia. North Korea would be more aggressive if South Korea develops nuclear weapons. In the most extreme case, North Korea may launch a pre-emptive attack to constrain Seoul's nuclear weapons development.⁸

Compared with the elites, the public is more concerned about the effectiveness of nuclearization in ensuring the country's sovereignty and security. For instance, the public believes that nuclear weapons development would enhance South Korea's capabilities in relation to risks in the region and enhance Seoul's bargaining power vis-à-vis neighboring countries.⁹ Specifically, in addition to counterbalancing North Korea's provocations and nuclear threat, the public believes that developing nuclear weaponry would help enhance South Korea's autonomy in the U.S.-ROK alliance. Not only would nuclear weapons reduce abandonment anxieties when Washington is reluctant to provide support to Seoul, but also would help South Korea ensure its position amidst the power competition between Washington and Beijing.¹⁰ In this regard, the elites in South Korea are more concerned about the impact of South Korea's nuclearization for the country's international reputation and the regional security environment, whereas the public is more concerned about the positive impacts of nuclearization in ensuring South Korea's security and sovereignty.

In addition to the gap between the elites and public over their attitude toward South Korea's nuclearization, it is important to explore the methods through which South Korea could obtain or develop nuclear weapons. Based on the current circumstance, South Korea can either obtain nuclear weapons from the U.S. or develop indigenous nuclear weapons. Admittedly, there are some suggestions that

7. Clifton W. Sherrill, "Neoclassical Realism and South Korea's Nuclear Weapons Policy," *Asian International Studies Review* 16, no. 1 (2015): 1–23; Victor D. Cha, "Eyes Wide Open: Strategic Elite Views of South Korea's Nuclear Options," *The Washington Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (April 2, 2024): 23–40.

8. Daekwon Son, "Flawed Assumption in Pro-Nuclear Arguments and South Korea's Strategic Choice," *Asian Perspective* 43, no. 1 (Winter 2019): 123–44.

9. Seong-whun Cheon, "The Case for Theater Nuclear Deterrence in South Korea," *Global Asia* 18, no. 1 (March 2023): 16–21; Sangyong Son and Man-Sung Yim, "Correlates of South Korean Public Opinion on Nuclear Proliferation," *Asian Survey* 61, no. 6 (September 2021): 1028–57; Lauren Sukin, "Credible Nuclear Security Commitments Can Backfire: Explaining Domestic Support for Nuclear Weapons Acquisition in South Korea," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, no. 6 (July 2020): 1011–42.

10. Jennifer Lind and Daryl G. Press, "Five Futures for a Troubled Alliance," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 33, no. 3 (September 2021): 357–80.

the NATO model could be applied to South Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons. Similar to NATO countries, South Korea can promote security cooperation with neighboring countries to obtain nuclear weapons.¹¹ However, it is unlikely that South Korea would adopt the NATO model due to Washington's opposition and the inability of regional countries to promote nuclear cooperation with South Korea.¹² If it is not possible to adopt the NATO model, South Korea could only receive nuclear weapons from the United States, including the re-deployment of tactical nuclear weapon or the introduction of related weapons into South Korean territory.

Alternatively, if South Korea considers developing indigenous nuclear weapons, it is essential to consider "how" to develop those weapons. Specifically, technical issues such as obtaining the required resources and facilities for developing a nuclear arsenal deserve deeper consideration. Moreover, it is necessary to consider which types of nuclear weapons should the country pursue, such as traditional types of nuclear weapons or tactical nuclear weapons.

Furthermore, it is important to consider the negative effects that would be generated during the process of nuclear development. Admittedly, international relations-related (IR-related) literature concludes that there are some incentives for states to develop their own nuclear capabilities. For instance, nuclear weapons as an instrument to ensure the country's sovereignty, security, as well as enhance national dignity.¹³ Imagine if South Korea were to become a nuclear power, it would have greater capability to deter North Korea's aggression. South Korea would also enhance its sovereignty vis-à-vis the alliance with the United States and enhance its bargaining power over regional security issues.¹⁴ However, negative consequences resulting from the *process* of nuclear development deserve closer attention. In addition to possible strong economic sanctions against South Korea, diplomatic and security side-effects as a consequence of the process of nuclear development need

11. Bence Nemeth, "National Security Concerns Triumph over Security Cooperation— Lessons from European Defense Collaborations for the U.S.–ROK Nuclear Assurance Debate," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 36, no. 1 (March 2024): 1–24.

12. Nemeth, "National Security Concerns Triumph over Security Cooperation."

13. Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better: Introduction," *The Adelphi Papers* 21, no. 171 (September 1, 1981): 1–1.; Scott D. Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?: Three Models in Search of a Bomb," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1996): 54–86; Nuno P. Monteiro and Alexandre Debs, "The Strategic Logic of Nuclear Proliferation," *International Security* 39, no. 2 (October 2014): 7–51; Mark S. Bell, "Beyond Emboldenment: How Acquiring Nuclear Weapons Can Change Foreign Policy," *International Security* 40, no. 1 (July 1, 2015): 87–119.

14. Khurshid Khan, "The Republic of Korea Presents a Strong Case to Go Nuclear, A Perspective from Pakistan," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 35, no. 3 (June 2023): 189–208.

to be considered during the discussion of this agenda. As mentioned before, South Korea's nuclear development would likely exacerbate North Korea's aggression against South Korea. The United States may also withhold its commitment to South Korea, thereby increasing the level of abandonment anxiety of Seoul.

Finally, domestic circumstances in the United States and South Korea play an essential role in the agenda. The United States expanded the scope of security cooperation with South Korea during the Biden administration. For instance, Washington established the NCG to strengthen policy communication with South Korea related to the use of extended deterrent against North Korea and deployed a ballistic missile submarine and strategic bombers to South Korea.¹⁵ However, after President Trump came into office in 2025, he has reduced the support for U.S. allies, the same as in his first term 2016- 2020. There is no guarantee that the United States will maintain the same level of security cooperation with South Korea after President Trump came into office in 2025.¹⁶

In addition, domestic circumstances have played an essential role in South Korea's foreign policy making since 2024. Due to the declaration of martial law in December 2024, the Constitutional Court agreed to impeach President Yoon Suk Yeol in April 2025, leading to a leadership transition in June 2025.¹⁷ Under such a circumstances, there is an uncertainty about whether the incoming president of South Korea will support nuclearization and which foreign policy preferences would be chosen in the face of the challenges in the region.

Overall, without considering the aforementioned issues, there is difficulty in examining the costs of South Korea developing nuclear weapon. Thus, we cannot conclusively evaluate whether the benefits of developing nuclear weapons could outweigh the costs and whether nuclear weapons would actually help ensure South Korea's security and sovereignty.

15. "Joint Press Statement on Nuclear Consultative Group Meeting," *U.S. Embassy & Consulate in the Republic of Korea*, December 16, 2023, <https://kr.usembassy.gov/121823-joint-press-statement-on-nuclear-consultative-group-meeting/>.

16. Jong Kun Choi, "Seoul Must Be Clear-Eyed About the Return of Trump," *Global Asia* 19, no. 4 (December 2024): 14–20.

17. Sunhyuk Kim, "What Went Wrong with President Yoon," *Global Asia* 20, no. 1 (March 2025): 8–13; Koh Ewe, "South Korea to Hold Presidential Election on 3 June," *BBC*, April 8, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd7ve4qnlw9o>.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Facing the changing strategic environment in Northeast Asia, more voices in South Korea suggest that the country should develop nuclear weapons to ensure its security and sovereignty. The existing discussion on this agenda focuses on whether South Korea should nuclearize itself, and the underlying reasons behind this agenda have become a topic of debate. However, details related to this agenda deserve deeper discussion and observation. Based on observations of the current debate on South Korea's possible nuclear weapons development, some policy implications are as follows.

First, more policy communication regarding South Korea's nuclear development between the policy elites and the public is essential. The South Korean public has become more in favor of nuclear weapons development since it would help ensure South Korea's security and autonomy when facing the security dilemma in the "Indo-Pacific" region; the elites are more concerned about the negative consequences of nuclear weapons development for the country's reputation and the security environment in Northeast Asia. The gap between both sides could be narrowed if there was more policy communication regarding this issue.

Second, deeper discussion of the technical issues and the possible outcomes of the nuclear development process is essential. Developing nuclear weapons is a time-consuming process and requires huge investment. In addition, the process of nuclear weapons development would place South Korea in a vulnerable position. In this regard, discussion of technical issues and the possible impact during the development process is an opportunity for policymakers and the public to examine whether this policy option is suitable for South Korea to ensure its national security. Even if the country pursues nuclear weapons, consideration of those issues would help Seoul reduce those side effects during the process of nuclear weapons development.

Besides discussion in the country, communication between Washington and Seoul on nuclear and regional security would help solidify the alliance. In fact, overcoming the abandonment and entrapment anxieties related to the alliance is an important factor influencing South Korea's preference for pursuing nuclear weapons. There is apprehension about Washington's adoption of a distancing policy if Seoul intends to develop nuclear weapons. Policy communication between both sides would help enhance South Korea's confidence in the alliance. In the most ideal case, this will help both sides to come up with policy options that fulfill the interests of both countries.

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