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RECEIVED 06 June 2024

ACCEPTED 26 August 2024

PUBLISHED 06 September 2024

CITATION

Putra BA (2024) The Philippines' acquiescent
ascension.
Front. Polit. Sci. 6:1444748.
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2024.1444748

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The Philippines' acquiescent ascension

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One of the puzzles to the Philippines' middle power status is how it responds to great power rivalries in the Indo-Pacific. As a claimant state to the South China Sea, its responses in the maritime domain could reveal unique foreign policy patterns on how middle powers respond to overlapping maritime borders. However, the middle power literature cannot make sense of the inconsistencies in the Philippines' foreign policy vis-à-vis the South China Sea, showcasing deference and defiance policies between 2016 and 2023. This study argues that bridging role theory into middle power literature can retrieve a more nuanced understanding of how middle powers behave. Utilizing primary and secondary data, this qualitative inquiry captures state narratives of the Philippines' role conceptions and concludes: (1) Duterte's abandonment of the US alliance and appeasement to China as 'active independent' and 'anti-imperialist agent' role conceptions; and (2) Marcos's alignment to the US regional order, sea-based power projections, and leverage of the Philippines' arbitral ruling representing 'faithful ally' and 'example' role conceptions. Bridging role theory in assessing maritime diplomatic actions allows for a nuanced understanding of why foreign policy inconsistencies occur.

KEYWORDS

Philippines, middle powers, role conceptions, Southeast Asian regional dynamics, role theory

1 Introduction

The Philippines is rising in its diplomatic influence in Southeast Asian regional affairs. In a recent opinion, Chester Cabalza termed this new age in the Philippines 'Philippinization,' arguing that the country is emerging as a middle power (Cabalza et al., 2021). Rightfully so, the Philippines now possesses the material and resources that academics tend to label under the 'middle powers,' which is between small and great powers. With the 13th largest population, thriving economy, and a rising middle class (Heydarian, 2023), the 21st-century Philippines can now exert influence that is at a similar level to its Southeast Asian counterparts that have been attached to this categorization of states: Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia (Thies and Sari, 2018; Dinh Tinh and Thu Ngan, 2021; Do, 2022). Coupled with the material capabilities under the possession of the Philippines, its strategic location makes it a vital sea route, which can determine the continuity of trade and commerce of great powers going through the Indo-Pacific.

Recognition of the Philippines' new middle power status is significant. The Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index categorized the Philippines as a middle power, ranked 16 due to its comprehensive powers, consisting of increased economic relationships, diplomatic influence, and solid defense networks (Lowy, 2023). Besides the Lowy Power Index, assessing the position of Asian states across different fields, the Philippines is also included as an N11 (Next Eleven) state. This Goldman-Sachs-identified categorization of states concluded that the Philippines would be among the 11 states having the most

impactful and potential economies in the upcoming decades, indicating the potential that the Philippines contains (Fachrurrozi et al., 2022).

As with past studies, it is thus pivotal to address why assessing the Philippines' middle power status matters. As stated, the geopolitical properties of the Philippines are significant in determining the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific region. However, equally important is its capacity in the 'power equations' of China and the US, as great power rivalry is becoming more transparent in the region.

Unlike some states that have shown apparent deference or defiance of one great power over the other, the alignment of the Philippines is somewhat confusing. Traditionally, it gravitates to the US, considering the vast defense treaties it shares: Mutual Defense Treaty, Visiting Forces Agreement, and Enhanced Cooperation Agreement. Washington has also continued to reassure that any attacks encountered by the Philippines would trigger Article 4 of the MDT, attracting immediate action through the United Nations (Cabalza et al., 2021). When national interests converge, the Philippines would sometimes solidify its defense treaties with the US. Meanwhile, in other circumstances, it would showcase deference to China. In fact, China is currently the Philippines's leading trading partner, comprising 27.2% of the Philippines' international trade (Lowy, 2023). Locating in the middle of those great powers and the smaller states of Southeast Asia, the Philippines could be entrapped in the middle of great power rivalry or display agency in establishing peaceful norms for the region. Therefore, what the Philippines decided may provide insights into our understanding of how middle-power states behave vis-à-vis great power rivalries in the region.

However, what makes the Philippines' ascent particularly interesting to investigate is due to its position in territorial disputes that relate to great powers. It is currently a claimant state to the South China Sea, albeit struggling to defend its claims in the Spratly Islands, Scarborough Shoal, and Second Thomas Shoal (Chubb, 2022). The Philippines is decisive in defending its maritime borders and is willing to take the disputes to the Arbitral Tribunal, which in 2016 ruled in favor of the Philippines (Yu, 2016). Despite this ruling, China has continued to exert its presence at the seas. In 2022, Chinese Coast Guards (CCG) maintained an almost daily presence in the overlapping Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) claims with the Philippines: 344 days in Scarborough Shoal and 279 days in the Second Thomas Shoal (AMTI, 2023b). China populates the waters and aims to display effective occupancy with such maneuvers (Chang, 2018; De Castro, 2022a). Unfortunately, the crisis has continued to escalate. Tensions have recently risen as CCG vessels have started to use military-grade lasers in contested waters, targeting local Philippine fishermen and officials, causing disruptions to sea-based operations (De Guzman, 2023; Masih, 2023).

Assessing the response of the Philippines' actions at sea against China's assertive maneuvers may reveal important patterns to understanding the ascent of a middle power. Middle powers are known to be 'good' international citizens, echoing the importance of international legal standards, adopting niche diplomacy, and constructing peace activism in regional and global forums (Tyushka, 2018). As in the case of the Philippines, despite their peaceful activism in the past, it has started to display greater assertiveness in response to China's aggression at sea. The common policies engaged in the South China Sea, as will be the focus of this article, have been the deployment of maritime constabulary forces (coast guards) and the

maintenance of alliances with great powers to counter China, its main trading ally.

However, an empirical puzzle is revealed. There are clear indications that the Philippines has adopted contradictory policies in responding to China in the South China Sea. During Rodrigo Roa Duterte's presidency (2016–2022), Manila adopted deference policies vis-à-vis China. In contrast, Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos' presidency (2022-present) adopts limited balancing policies against its adversary at sea. This inconsistency in the policy manifestation of the Philippines' ascent is confusing and worthy of investigation. This study argues that a nuanced understanding of the Philippines' middle power status could be understood by consulting role theory. Through this, it is contended that the changes, from appeasement to limited hard balancing, are comprehensible due to Manila's changes in role conceptions concerning the constant crisis in the South China Sea. In the case of the South China Sea, this provides a nuanced understanding of how the Philippines responds to the foreign policy alignment dilemmas between China and the US.

In doing so, this article provides a novel contribution to understanding the foreign policy of the Philippines. First, no studies have currently assessed the Philippines' behavioral traits vis-à-vis its new middle power status. Most have focused on its middlepowerhood (a realist-inspired perspective), evaluating how the Philippines' material resources fall under the category of an ascending power (Gill, 2020; De Castro, 2022a; Espena, 2022; Alano, 2023; Espena and Carlos, 2023). Second, no study has assessed the role conceptions of the Philippines. This comes as a surprise. A sociological taking of foreign policy has been developed for other middle powers in Southeast Asia (Lee, 2017; Thies and Sari, 2018; Karim and Nabila, 2022; Do, 2022) and has succeeded in offering a subtle understanding of the performative roles that those states take in the conduct of foreign affairs, especially in diffused settings (regional context).

2 Identifying and assessing the behaviors of middle powers: conceptual and methodological foundations

Why does it matter to assess middle power behaviors? There is a growing number of literature attempting to determine the unique nexus between agency and structure that middle powers are able to display. In the past, studies have primarily focused on traditional middle powers, such as Australia and Canada, due to their supportive role in constructing a Western liberal order through multilateral institutions (Holbraad, 1984; Jordaan, 2003; Wilkins, 2018). However, there have been an increasing number of investigations into non-Western middle powers, termed 'emerging middle powers' (Jordaan, 2003), an extension of the middle power scholarship by including states that showcase peace activism, defense over rules-based international order, and the focus on niche diplomacies in its international relations (De Swielande et al., 2018; De Swielande, 2018). Nevertheless, there is still a large body of literature within the middle power scholarship that remains understudied. Specifically, in relation to Southeast Asia, studies have focused only on Indonesia and Vietnam's middle power status and policy manifestations (Lee, 2017; Thies and Sari, 2018; Karim and Nabila, 2022; Do, 2022). The Philippines, in this regard, remains understudied.

This becomes problematic, considering the diffuse of power in international relations in contemporary times. Because of the rising dynamics in regional settings, an investigation of middle powers becomes prominent (Acharya, 2007). However, the dominant research theme has been how such middle powers adopt common middle-power behaviors. This includes regional alignments, agenda setting, niched diplomacy, and agency in international institutions (De Swielande et al., 2018; De Swielande, 2018). This study does not disregard the contributions made by such inquiries. However, the conclusions seem somewhat stagnant. Finding a middle power that takes a different policy route than most other middle powers is difficult.

One research agenda lacking under this scholarship is how middle powers behave vis-à-vis great powers. For Southeast Asian states, middle powers have mainly responded through hedging practices to maintain good relations with great regional powers (Balcer, 2012; Patience, 2014; Emmers and Teo, 2015). This argument is prevalent, as most states share the importance of non-alignment, thus allowing an ambivalent alignment decision to surface. However, one area that lacks academic attention is situations when a middle power is a claimant state against a great power in a disputed territory. Consequently, there is not much explanation of what is expected from middle powers when they face the alignment dilemma in times of crisis.

One of the solutions to better understand some of the inconsistencies in middle power behaviors is bridging the rich conceptual explanations of role theory into middle power scholarship. This has primarily been done in the case of Indonesia's middle power literature (Karim, 2018; Thies and Sari, 2018; Karim and Nabila, 2022). Scholars have argued that role theory is an investigation of behaviors. Thus, inconsistencies, for example, in a middle power's foreign policies can be understood under the role theory as changes to role conceptions or role conflicts (Karim, 2018). As Linton argues, "a role represents the dynamic aspects of status..." (Linton, 1963, p. 114).

Before assessing the policy manifestation of the Philippines' middle power status, this study needs to confirm whether the state falls under this category. Middle power scholars have argued that there is now a trend of 'emerging middle powers' (Holbraad, 1984; De Swielande, 2018). Such states do not necessarily defend the Western liberal order, as traditional middle powers have displayed in the past. Furthermore, there is a tendency for such states to showcase themselves as 'good international citizens' due to the inclination to adopt peaceful activism, be active in multilateral forums, and establish agency (Tyushka, 2018). However, to make the position of the Philippines clear, consultation is needed with the realism, liberalism, and constructivism approaches in determining whether a state falls under the middle power category.

The three schools of thought place material, behavioral, and ideational facets as vital dimensions to determining the status of middle powers. The realist 'middlepowerhood' focuses on material attributes, indicating the possession of capacities between small and great powers (Shin, 2015). Liberals argue that 'middlepowermanship' can be traced from its behavioral traits, primarily in regional organizations (Keohane, 1969; Cooper et al., 1993). And last, under 'middlepowerdom,' the literature confirms a state's middle power status after self-identification as such (Emmers and Teo, 2015). The following section will assess the Philippines' middle power status from the three distinctive schools of thought to erase doubts as to the

middle power status. However, it is essential to note that describing a state as a middle power is highly subjective.

In terms of methodology, this article supports past arguments that no single methodology is used to identify the role conceptions of states (Thies, 2009). Consequently, this research conducts constitutive theorizing from the narratives introduced by the Philippine leaders, which may indicate convergence to certain role conceptions. In doing so, it takes primary sources from speeches and transcripts, and primary documents from the Government of Philippines (reports, official statements, etc.) under time frame between 2016 and 2023. As an attempt to triangulate the findings, this study also considers secondary sources relevant to the two presidential periods that is inquired in the study. The setting of this timeframe is essential to identify the inconsistent patterns of the Philippines' foreign policies in the case of the South China Sea.

This study references K. J. Holsti's state role conceptions in 'National Role Conception in the Study of Foreign Policy.' It identifies which roles correspond to the foreign policies of the Philippines. Besides bridging role theory in international relations, this study also references maritime diplomacy literature, with the inclusion of terms such as 'white hulls' (coast guards) and 'maritime constabulary forces' (civilian, government-owned vessels) from Le Miere's 'Maritime Diplomacy in the 21st Century: Drivers and Challenges,' to better understand maritime diplomatic actions taken by the Philippines in disputed waters.

3 The Philippines's ascent and fluctuations in its foreign policy manifestations

What attributes are related to the Philippines' middle power status? Consultation with the middle power literature makes it possible to conclude a state under this term if it fulfills material, behavioral, and ideational traits corresponding to an ascending power. Under realism, material-inspired argumentations relate to 'middlepowerhood,' which focuses on measurable aspects (diplomatic influence, economy, population, resources, etc.). Meanwhile, under the 'middlepowermanship' of liberalism, that middle power status relates to the behavioral traits of adopting niche diplomacy, peace activism, and constant focus to establish agency in regional and global institutions. For constructivists' 'middlepowerdom,' what matters is the ideational facets, meaning the construction of an identity as a middle power. In middlepowerdom, the attachment of certain status is argued as a relational process, the process of self-identifying and being attached to the label of middle powers by other states. This section elaborates on how the Philippines falls under all of the existing assumptions that allow the labeling of a state to become a middle power.

As introduced in the previous sections, one of the highlights of the Philippines' ascent is the current material capacities under its disposal. Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index, for example, assessed the Philippines' defense networks, cultural influence, economic relationships, future resources, institutional resilience, economic resources, and military capability in determining what rank an Asian country deserves to be placed (Lowy, 2023). Ranking 16th in 2023 shows that the Philippines currently possesses the tangible resources to be termed an ascending power in Asia. Unlike other Southeast

Asian states, the Philippines enjoys solid defense networks with the world's most formidable military forces, such as the US. Out of the 26 states measured in the Asia Power Index, the Philippines thus was placed 9th in the category of defense networks, a vital component of a realist categorization of middle power status. In other studies, the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies also categorized the Philippines as an 'emerging middle power' (Cabalza, 2021).

Coupled with the Philippines' rising defense networks and diplomatic influence are the country's behavioral traits that indicate middlepowermanship. Its agency as a middle power may not be at the same level as Indonesia, which has been proven to display leadership qualities in the regional affairs of Southeast Asia through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). However, the Philippines showed its decisiveness in pushing regionally peaceful agendas by bringing China to the Arbitral Tribunal (Yu, 2016). Former President Duterte also echoed how the Philippines aims to establish a rules-based international order in multiple forums of the United Nations in 2020 and 2021 (Espena and Carlos, 2023). Marcos has also been noted to echo the importance of such a norm and the Philippines' willingness to embrace 'niche' leadership roles in regional institutions (Espena, 2022). Besides this, the Philippines have also consistently echoed the importance of concluding the Code of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (CoC), albeit in a way that does not aggravate China (in 2016 until 2022) (Mishra, 2017). Therefore, the Philippines' peace activism has become a vital component of the Philippines' middlepowermanship in Southeast Asia.

In a recent article, Salvador argued that it was time for the Philippines to embrace a middle-power identity (Salvador, 2023). In Southeast Asia, not all states embrace a middle power status. Some, such as Vietnam, have refrained from categorizing the state as such, as its middle powerhood has been represented by the policy manifestations to focus on elements of middle power status (Do, 2022; Giang, 2023). There is not much data indicating that the Philippines is embracing this new identity and connecting the term to its policies. However, the current president, Marcos, through its Department of Foreign Affairs, apparently celebrated the Philippine's inclusion as a middle power (Espena, 2023). A recently published Philippines National Security Policy of 2023–2028 also shows an intention of the Philippines to become a middle power (NSP, 2023).

Under middlepowerhood, middlepowermanship, and middlepowerdom, the Philippines has a high chance of being a middle power. However, not much insight can be attained after this categorization. Assessing the material, behavioral, and ideational traits of middle powers leaves out any room to investigate fluctuations in foreign policy behaviors. As Salvador recently argued, the foreign policy fluctuation of the Philippines can be seen in Duterte's transition from appeasement to limited hard-balancing vis-à-vis China (Salvador, 2023).

Part of the policy manifestations to the Philippines's middle power status is its capacity to harness relations with the US and China. The bilateral relations with China under Duterte led to comprehensive strategic cooperation, making China the Philippines' largest trading partner (De Castro, 2019). In 2018, Xi Jinping became the first Chinese president to visit the Philippines in 13 years, marking a milestone in advancing relations between the two states. This came at a critical time when tensions in the South China Sea started to rise, with the continuous presence of the CCG and other Chinese maritime constabulary forces crowding the seas of overlapping EEZ claims

(AMTI, 2023a, 2023b). This policy contrasted the late president Aquino's engagement with China, which primarily constituted a threat perception, as it was during his term that the Philippines decided to file arbitral proceedings against China (Alano, 2023).

Fluctuations in foreign policy also prevail in bilateral relations between the Philippines and the US. No Southeast Asian country enjoys the vast defense treaties that it shares with the US. The Mutual Defense Treaty, Visiting Forces Agreement, and Enhanced Cooperation Agreement are all manifestations of a strong alignment of the Philippines to the US. However, in an infamous speech at the 2016 Beijing Economic Forum, Duterte expressed a separation of the Philippines from the US, citing harsh criticisms (PCO, 2016). What followed was Duterte's disregard of the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling, stating that it 'set aside' the ruling as an attempt to lay the foundations of an appeasement foreign policy vis-à-vis China (Cabalza et al., 2021). However, this was quickly abandoned under Marcos, as the new leadership was determined to revive back its alignment with the US to counter a series of China's assertiveness in the South China Sea.

A consultation to role theory can understand the vast inconsistencies in the policy manifestation of the Philippines' ascent. In the following sections, this article will first explain how the Philippines have responded to maritime-based aggression at sea from China. After bridging role theory in assessing middle power status, this article will explain the Philippines' role conceptions across two leaders: Duterte and Marcos.

4 Policy manifestations to the Philippines's middle power status: the South China Sea case

This article takes the South China Sea as its primary empirical case, as it is argued in the face of overlapping maritime borders, secondary Southeast Asian states display unique policy manifestations to their middle power status. The Philippines is the only country taking the matter to the Permanent Court of Arbitration, which signaled a strong alignment with the US vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific. Foreign policy fluctuations started to emerge after the six-year term of the late President Aquino. Under Duterte, the Philippines abandoned any balancing policies against China but soon returned to Aquino's threat perceptions of China under President Marcos.

Policy manifestations of the different leaders of the Philippines have varied. Despite some arguing policies of appeasement and limited hard-balancing, this has not always been the case. Duterte, despite showcasing deference vis-à-vis China, had also expressed support to Vietnam after a CCG vessel sank a local Vietnamese fishing boat in 2020 (Mangosing, 2019; Chubb, 2022). Duterte also lodged two diplomatic protests in the same year due to an increasingly assertive posture of Chinese maritime constabulary forces within the Philippines' EEZ (Cabalza et al., 2021). This section thus argues that the best method to capture the Philippines' foreign policy manifestations to its middle power status is not by isolating one's leadership programs but by assessing the overall policies taken by the Philippines in the South China Sea. The following argues that Duterte and Marcos share several common strategies in responding to China's aggression at sea: utilization of the Philippine Coast Guards (PCG) and establishing strategic relations with the USA and Japan. This

section builds on several past studies on using the PCG to exert diplomatic messages to adversaries (Parameswaran, 2019; Putra, 2023b).

A common theme in Manila is deploying the PCG to respond to China's vast assertive actions in the two countries' overlapping EEZ areas. Therefore, during Duterte's leadership, the PCGs have been the focus of capacity-building measures, fleet upgrades, and diversifying strategic relations. As stated in the introduction section, this came during a critical time. China's presence in the South China Sea since Duterte's leadership has been worrying. Recent developments under Marcos' presidency have shown that China is deploying its traditional maritime diplomatic strategy of crowding the seas through effective occupancy and using military-grade lasers to further compel its adversaries (Masih, 2023). Therefore, Manila has instructed the PCG to take maritime law enforcement roles, along with the diplomatic function of effective occupancy in the gray zone areas shared between China and the Philippines.

'White Hulls,' another term for coast guards, are strategically used by Manila as a non-coercive resolve to face China's aggression in the disputed waters. This is categorized as non-coercive due to a number of reasons. Under the maritime diplomatic literature, coercive intent is displayed when a state deploys its navies to undergo diplomatic and non-diplomatic roles (Le Mière, 2014). For example, deploying navies may be interpreted as a state's intentions to compel adversaries and militarize conflicts. With white hulls, states do not display similar intentions as with the use of navies. China, Indonesia, and Vietnam have been found in multiple studies, deploying maritime constabulary forces such as coast guards and maritime law enforcement vessels in disputed waters (Darwis and Putra, 2022; Putra, 2023a, 2023c). Therefore, Manila is simply following this trend, as it urgently needs a resolution that would not produce coercive signals to China. This was a vital priority for Duterte, who wanted to appease China to secure lucrative infrastructural and investment deals but had to showcase decisiveness to its domestic crowd.

The Philippines is extending the mandate given to the PCG vessels at sea. As Tarriela concluded, states have been extending the mandates of law enforcement vessels at sea, transcending traditional counter-transnational crime roles (Tarriela, 2022). This trend is visible in Southeast Asia as states have a limitation on maritime assets that could be utilized in contested waters (Parameswaran, 2019). Putra concluded that white hulls thus act as 'mini-navies' (Putra, 2023b).

As in the case of the Philippines, PCGs can hide under the mandate of enforcing the law at sea. As the oldest humanitarian service in the Philippines, the PCGs were separated from the Naval command in order to ensure a non-military gesture in enforcing the law of the sea (PCG, 2023a). As of the current status quo, PCGs act under the command of the Philippines Department of Transportation and Communication. Consequently, PCGs enjoy the flexibility of establishing strategic relations with other white hulls in the region, advancing their capacities and increasing their officials while decreasing possible misinterpretations from China. As of 2023, the PCGs remain the primary officials tasked with search and rescue, environment protection, and law enforcement mandates in the Philippines' seas (PCG, 2023b).

As Duterte and Marcos share the importance of white hulls in responding to adversaries at sea, the PCGs have thus adopted visions corresponding to the state's ascending status. Connected to the middle power literature, the PCG is constructed to maintain good order at sea

and ensure the continuation of maritime security functions. Furthermore, the PCG envisions to become a 'world-class guardian of the sea' before 2028 (PCG, 2023a). Therefore, in its operations, it is consistent with the behavioral trait of middle powers, which defends international legal instruments related to the law of the sea and advocates the peaceful use of the seas by countering maritime security concerns. Duterte's National Security Policy of 2017–2022 repeated this maritime security concern numerous times, indicating its importance for the Philippines (NSC, 2017).

Therefore, in the face of growing Chinese assertiveness, it has been necessary for the Philippines to respond non-coercively by deploying the PCGs. In doing so, it attempts to display that the Philippines is unwilling to escalate tensions with China in the South China Sea, coinciding with decisive policies that indirectly allow effective occupancy over the overlapping claims between China and the Philippines. China's assertiveness is marked by the near-daily presence in the Philippines' EEZ and the deployment of maritime constabulary forces. The PCG Chief, Admiral Atemio Abu, notes that recent Chinese assertiveness within the Philippines' maritime borders is concerning, as it constitutes actions of power projections and effective occupancy of the seas (Stranjo, 2023). But as a middle power, the Philippines' response is crucial in determining what type of ascending power it wishes to become.

Corresponding to the middlepowerhood literature, advancing material capabilities relate to the Philippines' new status as a middle power. Only by increasing its capacities will it be adequately perceived as a middle power in the region. In doing so, Manila has focused on advancing the capabilities of its maritime fleets in response to growing uncertainties at sea. The first form has been allocating more funds for the PCG to increase and update its fleets. This took place under Duterte's leadership, with the pledging of USD 6.7 billion for the Philippine white hulls in order to be appropriately equipped to respond to aggression (Parameswaran, 2019). As in the number of personnel, this has also been the focus of Manila in the two past administrations. Just months after being inaugurated, Marcos vowed to focus more on the needs of the PCG, including the increase of its personnel (NN, 2023). Reports have stated that the Philippines is currently working to increase the total number of its PCG personnel to 30,000 (Argosino, 2023).

Being decisive in the South China Sea indicates a unique position of the Philippines in the Asian regional order. It does not reflect that the Philippines can be bullied in disputed waters, as several smaller states have encountered vis-à-vis China (Putra, 2021). It also shows that the Philippines' position is strategic as it holds the power equation functions of China and the US in the South China Sea. It focuses on non-coercive responses to assertiveness but coincides with the display of strategic responses that utilize material traits to counter having its sovereign claims undermined. The Philippines' actions at sea also indicate an extension of its middle power behavioral traits, as it echoes the importance of peaceful norms such as the free and open Indo-Pacific and freedom of navigation, as an extension of its middle power ideational facets that started during the arbitral tribunal ruling against China.

It is further argued in this study that the policy manifestation of the Philippines' middle power status is through rapprochement policies with the US and Japan. In the case of the US, a history of defense treaties and converged interests have allowed rapprochement to be a simple task for Manila. Despite tensions in the bilateral

relations under Duterte, it did not take much for Marcos to revive the strategic relations. For the US, the Philippines acts as an essential gateway for exerting influence in the Asian region. For the Philippines, the US, as a strategic ally, allows the state to respond conservatively concerning China's aggression in the South China Sea. The following measures taken by the Philippines have not been directly connected to the South China Sea crisis. However, it is difficult to detach capacity-building measures and the intensification of relations in the maritime sector away from the crisis in the overlapping EEZ claims of the Philippines and China.

The Philippines have signaled a solid intent to align with the US in maritime affairs. The foundation of this is the amplification of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, which, under Marcos's presidency, allowed the US access to four additional military bases within the country (De Castro, 2022a). In relation to the Philippines' white hulls, the US has also become a vital partner for procuring advanced vessels within the Philippines' maritime borders (Lariosa, 2023). Not only that, US policymakers have also provided training and pieces of advice to PCG officials as part of its more comprehensive strategy to influence Southeast Asian nations to empower coast guard presence to respond to adversaries (Bradford, 2023).

However, the Philippines' precise alignment can be seen in its support of the trilateral security agreement, AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, and the United States). Announced in 2021, the Philippines has expressed its support for the pact to advance the security of the Indo-Pacific region (De Castro, 2022a). This indicates that the Philippines favors the notion that China's presence in the Indo-Pacific causes concerns over power imbalances, and a security pact may provide a positive impact to balance such threats.

For the PCG, advancing relations with Japan has been one of Manila's top priorities. Japan embraces a stance similar to that of the US in the Indo-Pacific, which echoes the importance of peace and prosperity to construct a free and open rule-based sea (Tarriela, 2018; Furuya, 2021). Therefore, assisting the PCG's quest to advance its capacities has also been a priority for Japan to check China's rising dominance in the maritime domain. Through JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency), the Philippines has procured multi-role response vessels, which are pivotal in gray-zone area operations.

As can be seen in the maritime domain, policy manifestations of the Philippines' middle power status reveal fascinating patterns of foreign policies. It shows that policies taken are not dependent upon presidents and are more likely to be in tune with the surface geopolitical tensions. The material and behavioral traits of the Philippines' middle power status, argued in this study, can be understood by investigating the role conceptions of the Philippines. A sociological analysis that aims to reveal what roles the Philippines, as an ascending power in Asia, embraces vis-à-vis tensions with a great power in the region.

5 Role conceptions: toward an acquiescent ascension

This section argues that fluctuations in the foreign policy of the Philippines vis-à-vis the South China Sea can be understood after consultation with role theory. The following assesses the appropriate role conceptions by incorporating Holsti's seminal work 'National

Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy.' Bridging this conceptual framework reveals that Duterte and Marcos adopted divergent role conceptions in the face of tensions in disputed waters, hence leading to fluctuations in the foreign policy manifestations of the Philippines' middle power status. Corresponding to the Philippines' response to the South China Sea conflict, it is argued that Duterte's role conception slightly allows policies such as deploying coast guards. Meanwhile, the deployment of white hulls and rapprochement to the US and Japan are clearly displayed in the policy manifestation of Marcos's role conceptions.

During Duterte's term, it was clear that the Philippines adopted an appeasement stance toward tensions against China in the South China Sea. In doing so, it leads to several policy manifestations: the downplaying of the China threat in the South China Sea in press releases, speeches, and in regional forums such as ASEAN; the adoption of an optimistic perception toward China to reassure domestic constituencies; and deemphasize the importance of the US for the Philippines. Such policy manifestations correspond to the following role conceptions under Holsti's study: 'active independent' and 'anti-imperialist agent.' The previous discussion on the Philippines' coast guards as a response to the South China Sea also corresponds to one of those social roles, which is active independent.

The Philippines' social role as an active independent state refers to its commitment to diversifying relations and ensuring that any significant power does not steer the country's foreign policy. As Holsti describes it, such states are "...free of military commitments to any of the major powers... foreign policy decisions to serve national interests rather than others... shunning ideological and military commitments" (Holsti, 1970, p. 262). This indicates that states taking on this role have reverted to a pragmatic foreign policy by engaging in actions that generate tangible benefits for the country and not deciding upon actions from alignment decisions. In the case of the Philippines, Duterte's policies between 2016 and 2022 that fall under this role conception is the downplaying of the South China Sea conflict and its adoption of a favorable perception vis-à-vis China.

Duterte's appeasement to China relates to the lucrative trade and investment opportunities. Upon his election in 2016, Duterte vowed to focus on domestic development, advancing infrastructures, transportation, and providing its citizens basic needs such as energy and water (De Castro, 2022a). Thus, unlike Aquino, who had a clear outward vision of alignment with the US, Duterte never vowed to make such commitments in the early months of his administration. He perceived that economic programs take center stage of his attention, and states that can provide such support, such as through China's Belt Road Initiative, would be perceived favorably. Duterte knew that the Philippines was left behind by many Southeast Asian states due to the lack of infrastructure across the Philippine islands.

Consequently, Duterte decided to downplay the South China Sea issue, contrasting the previous administration's stance. Duterte perceived that if the Philippines goes to war against China in the South China Sea, the Philippines will not be able to win (Morallo, 2018). This has led the administration to echo the importance of joint exploration agreements as a solution to the disputed waters (Kyodo, 2018).

Besides that, Duterte was also known to downplay the late Aquino's legal victory over China in the South China Sea arbitral ruling. In an attempt to neutralize the South China Sea crisis, Duterte has repeatedly attempted to refrain from referencing the ruling in regional forums such as ASEAN. Duterte announced that it would not

reference the rulings during the 30th ASEAN Summit 2017 by mentioning that "...we will skip, I will skip the arbitral ruling... It is not an issue here in the ASEAN" (De Castro, 2022b, p. 264). The previous year, the Philippines' Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Perfecto Yasay Jr., also refrained from including the ruling in the ASEAN Communique in 2016 (Panda, 2016).

Another policy manifestation of the Philippines' active independent role conception is adopting a favorable perception toward China, indicating optimism for friendly bilateral relations. In the South China Sea context, Duterte perceived that China would eventually become 'fair' in the South China Sea conflict against the Philippines (Kyodo, 2018). This marks a deportation from confrontational policies to the seeking of appeasement with China.

The focus on deploying coast guards vis-à-vis the South China Sea also represents the social role of active independent. Duterte's focus on increasing the capacity of coast guards acts as a non-coercive resolve to tensions in the South China Sea. Despite the favorable Chinese perception adopted and the abandonment of the US strategic alliance, only through coast guards can Duterte ensure a minimal level of defense being maintained to protect the Philippines' EEZ claims in the South China Sea. Therefore, despite discussions of the Philippines' appeasement policies toward China, it still is able to showcase an active independent role conception as it does not fully show deference to China in the disputed waters. If Duterte were to defer to the interests of China entirely, it is expected to follow such requests and abandon its claim in the South China Sea. On the contrary, it can still make its own interests present by adopting a non-coercive resolve to the disputes.

What came as a surprise was the role conception of an anti-imperialist agent in Duterte's foreign policy. Holsti argued that this role conception relates to how a state perceives itself in relation to what is described as 'evil'. In Holsti's words, such states "...see themselves as agents of 'struggle' against this evil" (Holsti, 1970, p. 264). Perhaps the most surprising element of Duterte's foreign policy was his harsh words and criticism toward the Philippines' long ally, the US. Duterte set the tone during his speech at the Philippines-China Trade and Investment Forum on 20 October 2016. He stated that "America does not control the economy now," and "...they go there (the Philippines) as if they owned the place, maybe thinking that it was still their colony until now" (PCO, 2016). It was clear since the early months of Duterte's administration that it did not wish to align with the US. But the introduction of harsh words targeted at the US indicates a unique role conception that echoes the 'evil' in one country and how the Philippines' has been struggling to fight such evil throughout its history.

This 'evil' perception laid the foundations for several negative perceptions adopted by Manila. Duterte initially threatened that the Philippines would terminate the Mutual Defense Treaty with the US, including the Philippine-US naval joint patrols (De Castro, 2020). In contrast to the optimistic perception vis-à-vis China, Duterte perceived the US's good intentions pessimistically. In 2017, Duterte argued that the US had failed the Philippines and claimed that it would not fight for the Filipinos (Heydarian, 2017). This was primarily linked to the South China Sea and how Duterte reserved doubts that the US would help the Philippines in times of crisis in disputed waters (Saighal, 2017).

The Philippines' role conceptions in relation to its ascent indicate that it was not willing to abide by the willingness of its traditional

strategic ally, the US. In doing so, it has maintained the role of being active, independent, and as an anti-imperialist agent. Consequently, such role conceptions allowed Duterte to downplay the South China Sea conflict and adopt optimistic perceptions of China. In contrast, the Philippines' perceptions toward the US have degraded, with harsh criticisms directed toward Washington. However, this was not the same under the 2022 elected Marcos. For Marcos, the role conceptions of Duterte did not fit the ascending status of the Philippines as a middle power, thus leading to the reformulation of role conceptions.

Under Marcos's administration, the Philippines' adopted a tougher stance vis-à-vis China. Besides the dominant approach of deploying white hulls and rapprochement to the US and Japan, Marcos has also shown intentions to become an example (at a normative level) of defending one's sovereign claims at sea. Therefore, this study concludes that with reference to Holsti's study, the Philippines' role conceptions under Marcos as a 'faithful ally' and 'example.'

During the first months of Marcos's administration, he made the necessary steps to revive the US' trust in the Philippines. The bilateral relations between the Philippines and the US highly deteriorated during Duterte's term, and realizing the importance of the US in balancing great power relations in the Indo-Pacific, he was determined to revive the relations. This corresponds to Holsti's explanations, arguing that states that adopt the role conception of faithful ally establish "...alliances for protective purposes...only where a government makes a specific commitment to support the policies of another government" (Holsti, 1970, p. 267). Marcos reassured the US that their visions of an open and rules-based Indo-Pacific region converge.

As described in the previous section, Marcos has signaled a solid intent to align with the US in maritime affairs. He first abandoned any thoughts of abandoning the strategic alliance by quickly reinforcing the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (Salvador, 2023). This allowed greater US access to the Philippines' military bases. Rather than simply responding to the question of China's rise, Marcos focused on diversifying relations, which included the vast security relationship he forged with the US, Japan, South Korea, and Australia (De Castro, 2022b). This paved the way for strategic procurements, allowing the PCG's increased capacity to undergo maritime securing operations of both traditional and non-traditional security threats within the South China Sea and beyond. With Japan, the cooperation with JICA allowed for greater convergence of Marcos' maritime strategies to that of Japan. Consequently, Marcos's role conception of a faithful ally was clearly shown with how it attempts to align with the interests of states adopting the importance of a rules-based regional order in the Indo-Pacific, with stronger emphasis on the US and Japan.

One of the more apparent signs of Marcos's faithful ally role conception is his support of the AUKUS. Southeast Asian states were divided in opinion on this matter, as some states perceived that the AUKUS only caused greater polarity among the secondary states of Southeast Asia (De Castro, 2021). However, when Marcos took office, he clearly expressed his support for AUKUS and how it allows for greater security in the Indo-Pacific by stabilizing power imbalances. This vision alignment shows a significant departure from Duterte's stance, which was against the US by intentionally defaming the state and adopting measures against the peaceful maintenance of the Philippines' and US' bilateral relations.

The second role conception of Marcos is by acting as an example. As Holsti elaborates in his study, when states adopt such a role conception, they "...emphasize the importance of promoting prestige and gaining influence in the international system by pursuing certain domestic policies" (Holsti, 1970, p. 268). This role conception corresponds to several of the policies taken under Marcos's administration. The deployment of coastguards and the leverage of arbitral ruling to establish a normative level agreement in countering China's aggression at sea.

Marcos continued Duterte's efforts in advancing the capacity measures of the PCG. When Marcos came to office, most of the Southeast Asian states displayed their intent to showcase effective occupancy in disputed waters through the deployment of maritime constabulary forces (Parameswaran, 2019). However, what differentiates the Philippines from Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia, states that have adopted similar patterns of resolve in disputed waters, is that the Philippines is the only country that brought the matter to the Arbitral Tribunal. This indicates that the Philippines acts as an example by showcasing a secondary state's decisiveness in bringing issues to the tribunal. It also shows that it will not remain silent about China's 'bullying at sea.'

Marcos continues to leverage the arbitral ruling by being consistent with its stance on regional platforms. Through ASEAN, Marcos invited his regional counterparts to take action and adopt the rules-based international order principles vis-à-vis sea tensions (Espena and Carlos, 2023). This contrasted Duterte's resolve, which primarily refrained from referencing the arbitral ruling as an attempt to appease China.

The role conceptions of faithful ally and example indicate that the policy manifestation of the Philippines' middle power status corresponds to being an acquiescent middle power. This means the Philippines' realignment to the US vision of regional order in the Indo-Pacific has led the Philippines to adopt the role conceptions that showcase its faithfulness to the US-led vision of a rules-based international order in the South China Sea.

As seen in the discussion above, Duterte and Marcos adopt different role conceptions but share the fact that multiple roles are adopted. Middle power scholarship has argued that it is common for states to adopt various roles. As a study investigates, when states adopt numerous roles, they may de-emphasize specific roles and increase the intensity of other roles (Chafetz et al., 1996). This makes it possible for states to adopt different role conceptions. The Philippines has shown that its foreign policy can fluctuate. It may sometimes showcase deference, but in others, it is defiance vis-à-vis China in the South China Sea. In making sense of this, consultation with the rich conceptual framework of role theory reveals the reasons why such inconsistencies occur. In the case of the Philippines, the different role conceptions seem to correspond to the changes in administration, ultimately resulting in contrasting role conceptions being adopted between 2016 and 2023. There are multiple conceptual lenses available in making sense of such inconsistencies. This study has shown that role theory allows readers a parsimonious view toward why such inconsistencies occur.

6 Conclusion

An investigation into the middle power behavior of the Philippines is intriguing. The Philippines fulfills the requirements of

becoming a middle power under relevant scholarship, as it shows clear indications of material, behavioral, and self-identity traits as a middle power. But what makes the Philippines different is its unique status as a traditional, strategic ally of the US, which coincided with its economic need to pursue lucrative economic opportunities associated with China's rise. This dilemma is primarily evident in the South China Sea, in which the Philippines encounters an alignment dilemma to showcase defiance or deference vis-à-vis China in the South China Sea.

The empirical puzzle taken for this study is the contradictory policies shown under Manila in responding to the South China Sea crisis. Between 2016 and 2023, the Philippines have, at times, showcased deference policies to China under Duterte's leadership. Following that, Marcos's administration has consistently revived the US trust and re-adopted a threat perception of China in relation to the vast intrusions it conducts within the Philippines' maritime borders. In making sense of this, this study proposes to bridge role theory in understanding middle power behavior, as it allows better comprehension as to why inconsistencies occur within Manila's foreign policies.

After consultation with role theory, this study concludes that the Philippines adopts divergent role conceptions, thus making the inconsistencies in the Philippines' foreign policy understandable. Under Duterte's leadership between 2016 and 2022, the Philippines' role conceptions consisted of 'active independent' and 'anti-imperialist agent.' In doing so, it has adopted favorable policies for China, including downplaying the South China Sea crisis, encouraging optimistic perceptions of China, and abandoning the US alliance. However, such measures were still balanced with the adoption of a 'coast guard' policy, deploying white hulls to display a non-coercive resolution to tensions at sea. Meanwhile, when Marcos came into office in 2022, the role conceptions dramatically shifted to 'faithful ally' and 'example.' The policy manifestations thus focus on a more substantial presence in disputed waters through maritime constabulary forces, revival of the US strategic alliance, and leveraging the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling. Consequently, changes in role conceptions allow a nuanced understanding of why foreign policy inconsistencies occur.

In the current status quo, the middle power scholarship has largely ignored the empirical puzzle of the Philippines' actions in the South China Sea. In fact, the primary focus of the Philippines' middle power scholarship has been a 'checklist' of its middlepowerhood, assessing how the Philippines have the material traits consistent with a middle power. Furthermore, no studies have evaluated the Philippines' role conceptions. Both of those deficiencies within the literature result in a lack of understanding of how the Philippines as a middle power behaves amid tensions with a regional great power. By bridging role theory into this analysis, such inconsistencies in foreign policy can be better understood under the lens of changing role conceptions across different leaderships.

Future inquiries to middle power status can benefit from the bridging of role theory. With the rising number of conflicts in international affairs and fluctuations to foreign policy decisions, a sociological approach allows authors to provide alternative interpretations of issues that may have resulted to stagnant conclusions under international relations perspectives. In relation to great power politics in Southeast Asia, an interesting point of inquiry could be a

test of role theory's relevant adopted in Southeast Asian states that also can be categorized as middle powers. This includes Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore.

Author contributions

BP: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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