

Review: Beyond Geopolitics, Where Next for the Philippines?

From US-China competition to the South China Sea, a new book suggests foreign policy futures hinge on a contested domestic landscape under Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

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From evolving U.S.-China competition to the South China Sea, a new edited volume suggests foreign policy futures in the Philippines hinge on a contested domestic landscape evolving under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr's tenure.

WonkCount: 1,487 words (~7 minutes)

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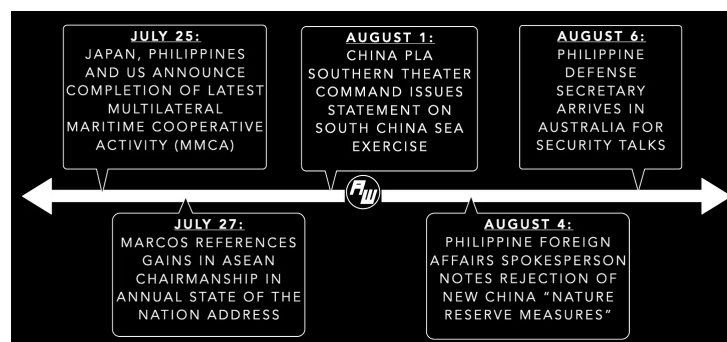


Source: PCO Philippines

Context

"Together, we found ways to alleviate the dire consequences of the war in the Middle East," Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. reflected this past week on regional initiatives being undertaken [during the country's ASEAN chairmanship](#) in the most recent iteration of his annual State of the Nation Address (SONA) ¹. While some of these initiatives are still in the works, Marcos' references to global headwinds were nonetheless notable as part of ongoing attempts to connect these dynamics with domestic priorities still being advanced under his administration, with other cases in point being the South China Sea and the direction of the U.S.-Philippine alliance.

Select Key Recent Foreign and Security Policy Developments Related to the Philippines



Source: Graphic by ASEAN Wonk Team

A new book *Beyond Geopolitics* edited by Cleo Anne A. Calimbahin and Bjorn Dressel provides a comprehensive lens with which to view where the Philippines is and where it is headed under and beyond President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, with implications for the country's foreign and security policy outlook ². In doing so, it

provides one of the few early deep-dive assessments on dynamics surrounding the country’s current and evolving future outlook under Marcos, beyond other book-length accounts we have reviewed here on *ASEAN Wonk* that addressed aspects such as the geopolitical and geoeconomic challenges amid [the attempted China pivot away from the U.S.-Philippine alliance under Marcos’ predecessor Rodrigo Duterte](#) as well as [the transition between the two administrations](#). “These dynamics will play a significant role in shaping the competition among political families for the 2028 presidential race,” the book forecasts before going on to examine these dynamics with implications that extend out to major Indo-Pacific and global capitals ³.

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Analysis

The book also highlights key datapoints to watch on potential futures (see originally-generated *ASEAN Wonk* table below for a summary of important contours. Paying subscribers can also read the rest of the “Analysis” section and “Implications” section looking at how these dynamics play out in the future).

Future Datapoints to Watch, Along With Key Policy Aspects And Major Pillars

MAJOR PILLARS	KEY POLICY ASPECTS	FUTURE DATAPPOINTS TO WATCH
POLICY FORMULATION	GOVERNING POST-MIDTERM REALITIES OUT TO 2028 POLLS	POPULISM VS. REFORMISM SWINGS VS. POLITICAL SURVIVAL REALITIES; STILL UNFINISHED AGENDA ITEMS IN POST-COVID-19 ECONOMIC RECOVERY; INSTITUTIONALIZING ASPECTS OF CHINA POLICY GIVEN MARCOS’ ROLE IN GETTING PHILIPPINES ‘OUT OF CHINA’S EMBRACE” GEOPOLITICALLY RELATIVE TO DUTERTE
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT	GAPS BETWEEN DEVELOPMENT AND DELIVERY IN MAJOR SECTORS	PROGRESS ON INFRASTRUCTURE BEYOND LABEL CHANGE TO “BUILD BETTER MORE” GIVEN DELAYS, AND COST OVERRUNS SEEN TO DATE; AGRICULTURE AS AN UNADDRESSED “ACHILLES HEEL” OF THE PHILIPPINE ECONOMY DESPITE MARCOS INDICATING EARLY ON AS TOP ADMINISTRATION PRIORITY; ATTENTION TO REMAINING REFORM PRIORITIES SUCH AS ON EDUCATION AND FISCAL TRANSPARENCY
POLITICAL DYNAMICS	CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN POLITICAL POWER AND INFLUENCE	EMERGENCE OF “POLITICIAN-OWNED FIRMS” AS PART OF A “NOT THE USUAL OLIGARCHS” TREND (WITH OVER HALF OF COMPANIES TIED TO ESTABLISHED POLITICAL CLANS); DYNAMICS OF USUAL CYCLE OF “CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE” (“CHA-CHA”) FROM 1987 CONSTITUTION AS PART OF OLIGARCHIC COMPETITION; DUTERTE-MARCOS DYNASTIC DYNAMICS
GOVERNANCE ISSUES	MANAGEMENT OF CENTER-LOCAL DYNAMICS IN THE COUNTRY ALONG WITH CROSS-BORDER PROVINCE-SPECIFIC DYNAMICS	“PROMISE AND REALITY” GAPS IN BANGSAMORO AUTONOMOUS REGION IN MUSLIM MINDANAO (BARMM); BALANCING OF DEVOLUTION DYNAMICS IN ASPECTS SUCH AS FINANCE; RISING DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT IN DOMESTIC POLITICS; ADDRESSING “CLIMATE ADAPTATION VULNERABILITIES” GIVEN STATUS AS ONE OF WORLD’S MOST DISASTER-PRONE COUNTRIES
NARRATIVE EVOLUTION	NARRATIVE CONTESTATION WITH RESPECT TO THE COUNTRY’S PAST AND FUTURE	“MEMORY AND FORGETTING” IN CONTEXT OF THE PAST LEGACY OF FERDINAND MARCOS AND MARTIAL LAW AND ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AS “MEMORY AGENTS”; “FAKE NEWS AND RED-BAITING” DYNAMICS IN THE COUNTRY AND INTERSECTIONS WITH MISINFORMATION ON SECURITY ISSUES SUCH AS SOUTH CHINA SEA AND INSURGENCY

Table designed by ASEAN Wonk Team; Content drawn from *Beyond Geopolitics*

The book’s timing accounts for both its value and limitations. The main argument of *Beyond Geopolitics* is that while the Marcos administration has recorded some modest policy achievements thus far, domestic political theatrics — including fragmenting coalitional unity and intense dynastic and elite political maneuvering as the 2028 elections loom closer — have overshadowed some of its technocratic ambitions and hampered its ability to confront deeper structural and institutional political, social and economic challenges that have dominated the country in the first quarter of the twenty-first century ⁴. The argument is advanced across 17 main chapters in five main parts along with an introduction that amount to just under 500 pages: 1) Part 1 (Chapters 2-5) on politics; 2) Part 2 (Chapters 6-8) on narratives; 3) Part 3 (Chapters 9-12) on power and influence; 4) Part 4 (Chapters 13 and 14) on development; and 5) Part 5 (Chapters 15-18) on emergent governance ⁵. Arguably the chief value of this approach is that this mid-term assessment of Marcos’ rule (after the May 2025 midterm elections) can help further stimulate debates around the administration’s policy approaches such that it can inform the remainder of its time in office, as opposed to an end-of-term account where the focus will naturally already have shifted to a next administration as was arguably the case during the Duterte-Marcos transition. On the flip side, a key limitation of this approach is that it does not

take into account the full single six-year term that an administration is given to implement an agenda that has been further disrupted and delayed by internal and external developments — from continued Duterte-Marcos dynastic sparring to the Middle East conflict fallout — even though it is not uncommon within political cycles in the Philippines for major legislative priorities to have greater chances of taking off before the midterms set in as opposed to after.



Implications

Looking ahead out to and beyond the 2028 presidential elections, the book sees shifting political factionalization and rivalries continuing to dominate the landscape, with implications for foreign and security policy. Though *Beyond Geopolitics* does not suggest an unraveling of “significant policy shifts” in foreign policy — including concretizing a more assertive South China Sea approach, renewing a focus on partnerships with Western partners and attracting sectoral investment in mining, green energy and infrastructure — it is more skeptical about any domestic wins, particularly on sensitive areas like agricultural reform. Unsurprisingly, a key variable is dynastic dynamics around who will succeed Marcos after the 2028 elections amid already ongoing controversies, as we continue to see with periodic updates around the status of Rodrigo Duterte’s detention at the International Criminal Court at The Hague (with a trial announced earlier this year as kicking off in November); attempts by his daughter Sara Duterte to push back against what she has called efforts to undermine her political fortunes; and shifts within Marcos’ own network as we saw with the ouster of House speaker and Marcos’ first cousin Martin Romualdez amid a giant flood scandal last year ⁶. In such an environment, the authors see the consolidation of a fragmented political landscape where policymaking is “driven less by programmatic agendas than by elite rivalries, regional power bases and the imperatives of political survival...[and]...legislative maneuvering, public spectacle and institutional brinkmanship increasingly displace long-term governance reform” ⁷. Following from this, the Philippines is likely to witness more incremental and performative efforts at policy formulation with a long list of what the authors label “neglected yet essential reforms” continuing to be unaddressed, including strengthening oversight institutions, addressing persistent socioeconomic inequalities as well as fostering political and economic stability needed to manage both external challenges and internal pressures ⁸. If the 2025 midterms are any indicator, the authors suggest that divergent positions on China; approaches to crime and security; domestic insurgency and red-tagging of opposition voices and policy formulation dynamics in areas like budgets and appointments are among the areas to monitor ⁹.

A more difficult question to answer is where incremental progress is possible in the coming years within this rather sobering outlook that lies ahead. While the book points to initiatives already at play — including piecemeal measures on budget transparency and digitalization of public services — it is also candid in noting that these still pale in comparison to challenges around everything from pork barrel practices to bureaucratic inefficiencies in sectors like health or education. Some of the quantitative metrics addressed in the book — such as the fact that over half of corporations have tied to established political clans or that a study of over 300 major infrastructure projects in the 21st century suggest a concerning record around delays, cost overruns and limited oversight — reinforce the sobering tone it adopts given ground realities ¹⁰. At the end of her chapter in the book, Carmel V. Abao, former student leader and current professor, concludes rather chillingly in her final two sentences that “there is no regime shift or regime cycle...there is only political survival,” in reference to a past pattern noted by scholar Mark Thompson regarding the Philippines cycling between variations of democracy and autocratization ¹¹. Given the fact that the extent to which this survivalist conception plays out in the coming years will have profound consequences for foreign and security policy, as the book title rightly suggests, keeping in mind these domestic realities “beyond geopolitics” will be critical in the coming years extending out to and then beyond 2028.



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1. PCO Philippines, “Fifth State of the Nation Address (SONA) of His Excellency Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr., President of the Philippines to the Congress of the Philippines,” July 27, 2026.
 2. Cleo Anne A. Calimbahin and Bjorn Dressel (eds), *Beyond Geopolitics: The Philippines in the New Marcos Era* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2026).
 3. *Beyond Geopolitics*, pg. 13.
 4. Ibid, pp. 1-19.
 5. Ibid, pp. 27-486.

6 Ibid, pp. 43-44.

7 Ibid, pg. 2.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid, pp. 6-7.

10 Ibid, pp. 230-257 and pp. 317-344.

11 Ibid, pg. 48.
