

# The Faces of Philippine Agency in Foreign Affairs: The Philippines and the United States Security Alliances

By

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## Abstract

Why did the Philippines under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. choose to compromise its own agency in favour of its realignment with the United States in 2022? The thesis investigates how the Philippines through its leaders perceive its own agency or the capability to act independently towards a certain objective such as its recent realignment to the US with the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement in 2022. Certain scholars who follow agent-centric and relationalist approaches contend that agency derives from within agents and in their interactions with each other. In the Philippine case, this thesis argues that when considering the role of structures, the Philippines' foreign policy, exemplified by the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement with the United States, exercised a form of agency that is constrained rather than fully realised. Using discourse analysis, findings show that the Philippines through its leaders created three interconnected identities and realities by using selective language in justifying their foreign policies such as the EDCA: firstly, a pragmatic Philippines, secondly, a cooperative Philippines, and lastly, a vulnerable and dependent Philippines. By justifying the EDCA as a pragmatic and cooperative-driven foreign policy, the Philippines, through its leaders, were able to self-ascribe their agency. The leaders of the Philippines perceived EDCA as an exercise of actual agency. However, in doing so, Philippine leaders undermine their vulnerable and dependent identity which perceives Philippine agency as constrained. This particular identity underscores a reality where the leaders of the Philippines were compelled to act due to existing structural factors.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

AFP - Armed Forces of the Philippines

DFA - Department of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines

DND - Department of National Defense

EDCA - The Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement

IR - International Relations

MDT - Mutual Defense Treaty (US-PH 1951)

PH - The Philippines (Republic of the Philippines)

PRC - People's Republic of China

SCS - South China Sea

VFA - Visiting Forces Agreement (US-PH 1998)

US - United States of America

WPS - West Philippine Sea

# Introduction

In December 2022, the president of Republic of the Philippines Ferdinand “Bong Bong” R. Marcos Jr. addressed his intentions to realign the country’s alliance with the United States (US) by ‘evolving’ the 1951 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) with the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) as a response to the ongoing tension at the South China Sea (SCS) (PCO, 2022). Initially, the Philippines’ strategy seemed practical due to the persistent Chinese contestation of the West Philippine Sea (WPS). However, progressive groups and government officials were concerned that the US realignment would not only fail to deter China’s aggression but also violate the territorial integrity of Filipino sovereignty through foreign policies such as the EDCA (Heydarian, 2023). Due to the strategy’s counterintuitive characteristic, this thesis questions whether the Philippines, through its leaders, acted independently from potential constraining factors of its structural environment when they decided to realign with the US.

This thesis investigates how the EDCA as a Philippine foreign policy was justified by its leaders amid the recent realignment to the United States in 2022. The thesis questions whether the Philippines is exercising actual agency (the ability to act independently towards a certain objective) as opposed to a form of perceived agency wherein its leaders claim to exercise agency expressed through language. Most of the existing literature claims that the Philippines exercises agency in its realignment to the US. However, this thesis, through its central research question, examines why the Philippines would compromise its agency in favour of its engagements with major powers such as the US, which has historically led to asymmetrical power dynamics with the Philippines positioned as a US subordinate. This thesis argues that when considering the role of structures, the Philippines’ foreign policy,

exemplified by the EDCA with the United States, demonstrates a form of agency or the ability to act independently towards a certain objective, that is constrained rather than fully realised. Even though, Philippine leadership possesses the ability to make choices, they are constrained since those choices are actually limited within certain structures. In other words, there are existing elements outside of agents, such as the structural changes of the international system posed by China's activities in the South China Sea, that facilitate the available options for the Philippines' foreign policy.

To show this, the thesis is structured into three chapters. The first chapter begins with a literature review on scholarship concerning the basis of foreign policies. This section mainly focuses on agent-centric and relationalist approaches in foreign policy analysis and its applications in the case of the Philippines' historical shifts between the US and the People's Republic of China (PRC). This section highlights a research gap in current literature, specifically concerning the role of structures in shaping the foreign policy of the Philippines.

Following the literature review, this chapter proceeds to explain the conceptual framework of this thesis which draws from Wendt's (1987) structurationism and Olsen's (2024) use of historical institutionalism as the main elements towards understanding Philippine agency. This section seeks to provide the fundamental concepts and necessary definitions applied in answering the central research question of this thesis.

The chapter concludes by presenting the methodology of this thesis which involves conducting discourse analysis of statements by Philippine leaders and officials. Specifically, the thesis qualitatively analyses the justifications in 'evolving' the 1951 MDT through the EDCA in 2022 under the administration of the Philippines' President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. This section aims to show how the thesis approaches the central research question and provide



the reasons in applying a qualitative discourse analysis method in contrast to quantitative methods for this research.

The second chapter provides a summary of the recent historical context of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) in 2022. More importantly, this chapter serves to connect the claims of scholars from the first chapter who argue with agent-centric and relationalist approaches for Philippine agency. Following the approach of historical institutionalists, this chapter also demonstrates instances wherein structures limit the choices of the Philippines' foreign policy decision-making during previous administrations before President Marcos Jr.

The final chapter presents the analytical findings of the thesis. Research finds that the Philippines under the President Marcos Jr. administration utilise discursive language strategically in order to justify the realignment of the Philippines to the United States through foreign policies on security such as the EDCA.

In conclusion, the thesis finds that the Philippines created three distinct yet interconnected identities and realities through selective language in justifying their foreign policies such as the EDCA: firstly, a pragmatic Philippines, secondly, a cooperative Philippines, and lastly, a vulnerable and dependent Philippines. By portraying the Philippines as a state in the international community guided by practical and mutual interests, the Philippines' leaders are able to self-ascribe a state identity that possesses agency when interacting with the United States despite being asymmetrical powers. At the same time, the Philippines and its leaders acknowledge the structural changes of the international system pressured by China and their activities in SCS. However, in doing so, the Philippines also acknowledge the vulnerability and dependency of the state in great powers for resources in security and defense which implies that they had no other choice.

# Chapter 1: Understanding Agency

This chapter provides the conceptual background and methodology of this thesis. This chapter is structured into three sections. The first section showcases the approaches employed in determining the basis of Philippine foreign policy, namely agent-centrism and relationalism. This section highlights the empirical gap of the existing literature in terms of the approaches applied and its implications for Philippine agency. The second section introduces Wendt's (1987) structurationism and Olsen's (2024) use of historical institutionalism as the conceptual framework of this thesis analysis. Lastly, the third section of this chapter presents discourse analysis as the qualitative methodology of this research. The chapter concludes with the limitations and ethical considerations of the methodology.

## *1.1 Agent-centric and Relationalist Approaches on Agency*

This section presents the approaches employed in determining the basis of foreign policy and its implications for Philippine agency. Certain scholars have applied an agent-centric approach while others utilised a relationalist approach to determine the basis of foreign policies. While this thesis acknowledges the merits of each approach in their foreign policy analysis, the objective of this section is to highlight its empirical research gap and limitations in determining Philippine agency.

An influential body of scholarship contends that the foreign policy of a state is shaped by its leaders and their individual characteristics. Kaarbo (2021) explains that leaders in both democracies and authoritarian states shape states' foreign policies and has shown that changing personalities of leaders over time have a significant effect in orienting its foreign policy (Kaarbo, 2021, p.423). Hall and Yarhi-Milo (2012) support this idea with reference to

historical world leaders who drew upon personal impressions to judge their counterparts in foreign affairs (Hall and Yarhi-Milo, 2012, p. 560). Wivel and Grøn (2021) argue similarly but underscore how charismatic leadership influences foreign policy, especially in liberal democracies (Wivel and Grøn, 2021, p.365).

In the Philippine case, many scholars employ an agent-centric approach and argue that the Philippines' foreign policy is largely influenced by the personality of its leaders. Nguyen and Tok (2024) argue that in the case of "the Philippines' shifting South China Sea policy": the President of the Philippines and its closest circles of officials dictate the course of foreign policy (Nguyen and Tok, 2024, p. 5). Song and Velasco (2024) argue likewise that the foreign policy of the Philippines is shaped by its individual leaders "in terms of their personal affinity, background, leadership style, values, belief systems, attribution bias and threat perception" (Song and Velasco, 2024, p.139). Crabtree and Laksamana (2023) similarly support the notion that leadership personalities matter in the Philippines' SCS strategy by drawing on the longstanding pro-American views of President Marcos Jr. (Crabtree and Laksamana, 2023, p.82). Scholars have also mentioned how the officials of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and their associates play a significant role in influencing state leadership to align more closely with the US rather than with China in its security alliances (Crabtree and Laksamana, 2023, p.82; de Castro, 2018, p.176).

An alternative body of scholarship has adopted an agent-centric approach in determining the basis of foreign policy by taking into account the capability of leaders to calculate the economic benefits of its foreign policy. Scholars like McDermott (1992) applies the prospect theory in understanding the decision-making of the Carter administration of the United States in the context of the Iranian Hostage Rescue Mission of 1980 (McDermott, 1992, p.238). Robert (2017) and Gross Stein (2017) similarly apply the concept of loss

aversion to explain how state leaders assess and decide its foreign policies based on risk and potential losses (Robert, 2017; Gross Stein, 2017).

When determining the basis of Philippine foreign policy, certain scholars have applied a version of the agent-centric approach which involved the calculation of gains or losses. Song and Velasco (2024) characterise the former President of the Philippines (2016-2022), Rodrigo A. Duterte's leadership style and foreign policy on the SCS as pragmatic and practically motivated by economic gains as he pursued significant interest with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Song and Velasco, 2024, p.138). Filipino scholar, de Castro (2018), argues that "the head or leader of a small state makes decisions not based primarily on rationality, but on the utility of gains differently than losses" in the Philippine case (de Castro, 2018, p. 167). Misalucha-Willoughby (2023) has claimed that since the Philippines' independence in 1946, the Philippines' realignments with the United States is based on "the domestic calculations... and the expectations of foreign policy gains of its leaders" despite the US being the Philippines' former coloniser (Misalucha-Willoughby, 2023, p.1549).

However, there is a notable absence of discussion or consideration for Philippine agency in previous agent-centric studies of Philippine foreign policy. This empirical gap is significant given how domestic criticisms were directed at past presidential administrations of the Philippines in terms of their leadership. In the reality where great powers like the United States and China assert its influence over sovereign territories of the Philippines, questions of agency emerge when presidents commit to a foreign policy that contradict the interests of the domestic sphere (Abarca, 2024). Therefore, it is essential to determine the basis of Philippine foreign policy and its implications for Philippine agency as it provides an enhanced understanding of the asymmetrical powers and dependence of states which facilitate the choices of countries like the Philippines and its leaders.

Alternatively, a certain group of scholars, who tackled the question of agency through finding the basis of foreign policy, applied an alternative approach known as relationalism. Braun et al. (2019) explain that “relationalist accounts take interactions as their starting point and then study how patterns of such interactions bring about the seemingly stable elements of the social world, including entities with agential properties” (Braun et al., 2019, p.792). Mabera (2019) in her case study of Africa and the Group of 20, characterises that in this approach, actors mutually constitute their roles, identity, and the character of the configuration in which they are engaged through interactions with one another (Mabera, 2019, p.595). In other words, states can establish what they consider as ‘exercising agency’ through their interactions with other states and without referencing to existing definitions of agency. Through these interactions, states can create the idea of having agency despite the existence of constraining factors such as the structural environment of the country.

In the case of the Philippines, relationalism has been employed to argue for Philippine agency. Specifically, Misalucha-Willoughby (2023) claims that Philippine agency was co-created through its interactions with the US such as their engagements in security. She describes the shift of the Philippines to the US as a “co-constitution of alliances” which implies a mutual and consensual relationship between the two states “despite its colonial past” (Misalucha-Willoughby, 2023, p. 1555). Moreover, she argues that since Philippine independence, it was “natural” for the Philippines to realign itself to the United States in order to portray itself as a credible and responsible member of the international community (Misalucha-Willoughby, 2023, p. 1555). Under these premises, Misalucha-Willoughby argues that the calculative flexibility demonstrated by the moves and countermoves of Philippine bilateralism with the United States and China “highlights the concept and practice of agency in international relations” (Misalucha-Willoughby, 2023, p. 1555). She asserts that in a system

where agency eludes from smaller and weaker states, “the Philippines demonstrated that agency resides in actors’ interactions with each other, rather than being an *a priori* characteristic of a state...agency is seen and measured only when it is practised against another actor” (Misalucha-Willoughby, 2023, p.1555). In other words, Philippine agency can be artificially created and understood in relation to the United States.

While relationalism has its merits, there are limitations of its approach in foreign policy analysis. The relationalist approach notably undermines the significance of structural constraints and power dynamics that pre-existed the practices of states and its conditions. As mentioned, relationalist accounts consider how state interactions constitute ‘identities’ and a state’s configuration in the system—“It is in the intersubjectivity of their interactions that engender agency” (Misalucha-Willoughby, 2023, p. 1555). Considering this premise, agency can be ‘engendered’ given that there is a shared and constructed understanding between the interacting states. Before making this claim, especially in the case of the Philippines, it is necessary to investigate the post-colonial practices conducted by US, which constructed the shared understanding of interactions with the Philippines. For instance, Misalucha-Willoughby mentions briefly that the Philippines “resonated” with the US intervention of mobilising counterinsurgency against the growing communist threat by the Hukbalahap rebellion group in 1951 (*Hukbong Bayan Labal Sa Hapon* or People’s Army against the Japanese) (Misalucha-Willoughby, 2023, p.1545). The term ‘resonated’ implies that the Philippines had a significant inclination out of self-interest. However, alternative accounts such as Roxanne Lynn Doty discovered that the Philippines “resonance” towards US counterinsurgency was not entirely practiced independently but it was shaped by US discourse which made policies appear “natural” (Doty, 1996, p.83). By making the idea natural and out of self-interest, the US highlights the self-determination and autonomy of the

Philippines, which downplays the influence of pre-existing colonial structures that shaped the choices of the Philippines.

This section has shown the approaches employed in determining the basis of its foreign policy and its implications for Philippine agency. This thesis argues that when considering the role of structures, Philippine agency is actually constrained and limited by the structures of its international setting. Following the accounts of agent-centric and relationalist approaches, the Philippines through its leaders demonstrated a form of perceived agency. In doing so, the leaders of the Philippines undermine the structures which facilitate their choices in foreign policy. By examining the surrounding discourse on the Philippines foreign policy, particularly the EDCA, this thesis aims to contribute in understanding how state leaders, as agents, act when they consider the role of structures.

## ***1.2 Finding Agency: Structurationism and Historical Institutionalism***

This section provides an alternative conceptual framework in determining the basis of foreign policy and its implications for Philippine agency in contrast to agent-centric and relationalists approaches. Firstly, This section introduces the conceptual framework of this thesis, mainly Wendt's (1987) structurationism and Olsen's (2024) use of historical institutionalism. Secondly, this section proceeds to conceptualise agency and agents employed in this thesis. Lastly, this section conceptualises the elements of 'structures' applied in this thesis.

Structurationism was raised by Alexander Wendt as a new avenue in theorising agency within the agent-structure debate at the time (Wendt, 1987). The core issue revolving the ongoing debate centred on the question of whether agents shape social structures or vice versa (Baylis et al., 2017; Bourdieu, 1977). This thesis serves to contribute to the IR debate by

taking into account Wendt's structurationist theory. Following Wendt's theory, this thesis argues that structures shape agents and facilitate its choices shown in the case of the Philippines' foreign policy in terms of its inclination towards US realignment through EDCA. The thesis also applies Olsen's (2024) use of historical institutionalism to identify the elements of 'structures' which is employed in the research methodology.

In conceptualising agency, this thesis employs a clear definition that scholars have implemented into their own frameworks: agency is the ability to act independently towards achieving a certain objective. Within the framework of the agent-structure debate, scholars define agency as "the corresponding ability to act" or "an actor/entity's ability to respond to circumstances independently" (Braun et al., 2019; Misalucha-Willoughby, 2023). Olsen (2024) elaborates within the realm of IR by defining agency as "the capacity to make decisions and to ensure implementation of decisions on foreign policy that may contribute to change existing circumstances and power relations" (Olsen, 2024, p.4). Olsen notably attributed Wendt's definition wherein agency is the transformative capacity of agents to change the same structures which shapes agents (Braun et al., 2019; Wendt, 1987). For consistency, the thesis utilises the term "agents" to refer to individual or social/political entities (Bjola and Kornprobst, 2018). This thesis specifically focuses on presidents of the Philippines in the analysis due to their significant influence and executive authority in shaping foreign policies of the Philippines.

In the existing literature, there has been a continuous discussion in conceptualising what elements are considered as 'structures' in the agent-structure debate (Bieler & Morton, 2001; Braun et al., 2019; Olsen, 2024; Wendt, 1987). Baylis et al. (2017) define structures in the philosophy of social sciences as "something that exists independently of actors but is an important factor in the nature of the action" (Baylis et al., 2017). For structural realists,



material elements such as the number of great powers in the international system constitutes as structures based on a system characterised by insecurity and limited knowledge of the intentions of other states (Baylis et al., 2017; Olsen, 2024). However, this theoretical perspective neglect the role of ideas produced by international institutions. Constructivists and post-structuralists alternatively define ‘structures’ as “modes of reasoning” that produce “ideas” which compel agents to enact certain foreign policies accordingly (Zürn, 2016). Initially, Wendt pointed out that ‘structures’ are “the organizing principles of the state system that constitute states as individual choice-making units which are responsible for their actions; in other words, the agency of international actors is shaped by the structure of the international system” (Braun et al., 2019; Wendt, 1987). Historical institutionalists conceptually specify ‘structures’ as “institutional environments” that shape the actions and behaviour of agents in international affairs. Olsen, notably points out that these ‘environments’ or ‘conditions’ are considered as “path-dependent circumstances and constraints” that originate from “past decisions [which] can be political, military, and economic, in nature” (Olsen, 2024). Drawing upon on the studies of structurationism and historical institutionalism, this thesis argues that structures shape the choices of states due to past decisions that produced conditions which are considered as past-dependent constraints. With this framework, this thesis argues that Philippine agency is limited or expressive within the boundaries of which the structures enable it.

### ***1.3 Navigating Agency in Discourse Analysis***

The research employed a qualitative research method to analyse statements by state leaders and officials from the Philippines and the US in terms of its language on the development of the EDCA. This thesis focused on EDCA since it was considered as the most

recent step in 2022 towards evolving the US-PH MDT. The methodology involved identifying patterns of language in statements that recall to historical institutions or structures. These references to pre-existing structures are hypothesised to be used as reasoning or justifications towards the enactment of US-PH military foreign policies such as EDCA. Hypothetically, references of structures indicate that structures pressure the Philippines to shape its foreign policy accordingly to the same structures.

To achieve this objective, a qualitative method grounded in discourse analysis is applied to this research. Discourse analysis examines the details of an oral or written statement which considers the creator of the utterance, the recipient, and its linguistic and social contexts (Frawley, 1993; Rholetter, 2022). In this thesis, discourse analysis was used to uncover underlying meanings, ideologies, and rhetorical strategies embedded that plausibly relate to historical structures in the statements of key agents involved in the negotiation and implementation of EDCA.

This thesis asserts that using qualitative methods, rather than quantitative ones, in discourse analysis can more effectively identify and analyse the themes conveyed through Wendt's (1984) structurationism and Olsen's (2024) use of historical institutionalism. More importantly, this method enabled the research to connect the main argument with the underlying meanings and intentions found as opposed to quantitative numerical data in the discourse analysis.

The thesis gathered a complete collection of statements on the EDCA by the President of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., and other PH and US government officials. These statements came in the form of interviews, press briefings, and speeches within the timeframe of December 2022 and May 2023. These months covered the initial discussions and finalisation of the EDCA after establishing four additional naval bases in Luzon, Philippines.

The timeframe included President Marcos Jr.'s visit to the United States where together with the US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin delivered their remarks and post-visit statements. The sources were collected from official government websites, government communications, and reputable news agencies.

The thesis recognised some limitations involved in gathering and analysing public statements. Firstly, interpretability of readily available public statements provided by the government websites may consist of selective disclosure of sensitive information. State leaders and officials, especially from AFP or the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), would convey information in a public and diplomatic forum. Secondly, this research required translating statements spoken in Tagalog (Filipino) into English which could have potentially misconstrued the objective meaning of the statement. Given these methodological challenges, this thesis therefore took into consideration the contextual environment of public statements when employing discourse analysis. Misinterpretation would have not only jeopardise the results of the empirical analysis, but the thesis could have also breached ethical considerations by misrepresenting the speakers of public statements.

The analysis of collected data involved two interconnected stages. Firstly, these statements are categorised to identify recurring themes and topics related to EDCA and its historical foundations. Secondly, a thorough discourse analysis was applied to configure how specific language choices draw from structures as reasoning or justification in contrast from domestic pragmatism by calculating gains or out of independent self-interest as previous literature claimed. By approaching the research through qualitative discourse analysis, this thesis determines the role of structures and its influence on agents' decisions towards implementing certain foreign policies.

## Chapter 2: The Evolution of the Mutual Defense Treaty

This chapter presents the recent historical context of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) signed by the Philippines and the United States. This chapter provides the reader the background knowledge to supplement the final chapter of this thesis. More importantly, this chapter shows how agent-centrists and relationalists claim for Philippine agency, reflecting from the basis of the Philippines' foreign policy-making. Specifically, this chapter illustrates how agency could have derived from Philippine leaders as agents and could have been created through its interactions with other agents like its American and Chinese counterparts. Following the conceptual framework, this chapter demonstrates the instances wherein historical structures limit the choices of the Philippines' foreign policy decision-making during previous administrations before President Marcos Jr. This chapter involves several sections presenting the development of US and Philippine relations through treaties such as the Mutual Defense Treaty, the Visiting Forces Agreement, and the EDCA. The chapter includes the events of the Philippines' encounters with the PRC in the South China Sea context.

### ***2.1 The US-PH Mutual Defense Treaty (1951) & Visiting Forces Agreement (1998)***

The 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) has served as a cornerstone for various treaties aimed at preserving peace and security in the Pacific region, with the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) emerging as a distinct yet interconnected agreement. Signed at Washington on August 30, 1951, the MDT requires both the Philippines and the US to defend each other in the case of an external attack while reaffirming the purpose and principles of the Charter of

United Nations (Mutual Defense Treaty, 1951). The preceding events of the Second World War, especially the Japanese invasion and occupation of Manila in 1941, developed the motivation for both countries to engage in a joint military alliance in efforts to preserve regional peace and security in the Pacific area.

The 1998 Visiting Forces Agreement served as an endorsement to the MDT by making it accessible for US members to conduct its official business in the Philippines. The VFA which was signed in 1998 by the Philippines and the US provided “simplified access procedures to the Philippines for US service members on official business” which can include US-PH joint military exercises (The Visiting Forces Agreement, 1998). It also serves as a series of procedures for how to resolve issues related to the presence of US forces in the Philippines (Schaus, 2020). These two historical documents laid the foundations of the Philippines’ military exercises and the most recent and criticised Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement signed in 2014 and later formally practiced in 2022.

## ***2.2 South China Sea vs West Philippine Sea (2012)***

The Philippines’ prioritisation of security from internal to external threats occurred at the time when Chinese encroachment escalated in the 2010s. In 2012, a Philippine navy ship was in confrontation with Chinese surveillance vessels on April 11 at the Scarborough Shoal located in the South China Sea (The Associated Press, 2012). Former Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines, Albert Del Rosario, summoned the ambassador of the People’s Republic of China at the time, Ma Keqing, to resolve the dispute diplomatically while reaffirming the Philippines sovereignty over the WPS (The Associated Press, 2012). However, the issue escalated when the Chinese embassy’s responded by asserting Chinese sovereignty over the area with reference to the nine-dash line. Historically, the Nine-Dash Line is the

controversial maritime claim of China in the SCS that is disputed with China's neighbouring ASEAN countries like the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and many other members of the regional group (Caruana, 2023).

The US, under the veil of the MDT, took issue with China's activities in SCS, labelling China's claims as 'excessive' (The Associated Press, 2012). Chinese officials nonetheless, reaffirm to these sovereign claims over these territories and accuses the US for interfering over domestic matters and provoking division in the South East Asian region (The Associated Press, 2012). The tension between the Philippines and China escalated over the span of two months as China became more aggressive in its tactics. The Philippines claimed that China had deployed nearly 100 vessels which entered the disputed zone of the WPS on May 23 (Branigan & Watts, 2012). During this period, China had also tightened the market control of Philippine goods and services which forced the Philippines to develop new overseas markets so that the country's exports were not severely affected. Given these conditions, it was evident that the Philippines had to take a different route that involved the recognition of the international community when facing economic repercussions caused by the Chinese vessels and import controls.

Recognising this situation, the Philippines took legal measures to affirm its sovereignty against China in the case of the disputed shoal and the WPS. On January 22, 2013, the Philippines under the administration of the late President Benigno "Noy" Aquino III, challenged and instituted arbitral proceedings against the PRC under Annex VII to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (the "Convention") (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2013). The arbitration deliberated the role of historical rights and sources of maritime entitlements in the SCS, and it especially concerned China's violation of the

Convention on the lawfulness of certain actions in the region allegedly claimed by the Philippines.

### ***2.3 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (2014)***

While the 2013 arbitral tribunal was ongoing, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) was signed by Philippine Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin and US Ambassador Philip Goldberg on April 28, 2014, at Camp Aguinaldo in Quezon City. Formerly entitled as the Increased Rotational Presence Framework Agreement, the EDCA was the result of eight rounds of negotiations, which initially started in August 2013. At its core, the purpose of EDCA was to primarily shift the Philippines' focus from countering internal threats to improving the security of the Philippines against external threats (EDCA, 2014). In addition, EDCA has served to advance the existing joint military training of the AFP and the US military, establish immediate response for natural and humanitarian crises, and achieve modernisation goals (DFA, 2014; U.S. Embassy Manila, 2023). In practice, the EDCA has functioned as one of the many indirect pragmatic responses of the Philippines to balance China as a great power and to deter China's encroachment in the WPS. Most notably, the preamble instituted that the EDCA was grounded on the basis of pre-existing treaties namely, the MDT in 1951, and the VFA in 1999 (DFA, 2014; EDCA, 2014).

### ***2.4 The Hague Arbitrary Tribunal on SCS (2016)***

After three years of deliberation, in 2016, the arbitral tribunal concerning the Philippines' case against China in the SCS ruled overwhelmingly in favour of the Philippines, concluding that major elements of China's claim including its nine-dash line, recent land reclamation activities, and other activities in Philippine water were considered unlawful on

July 12 (Campbell & Salidjanova, 2016). China refused to acknowledge the results of the tribunal, maintaining it as “null and void” as they adopted a position of non-acceptance and non-participant (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2013; Campbell & Salidjanova, 2016). After the Philippines’ victory on the case of the SCS at the Hague, China’s activities continued and arguably intensified since the arbitral ruling. Although it was initially established in 2014, sightings of construction and development of artificial islands emerged on February 2014 as China had converted numerous reefs into military bases in the SCS (Ellis, 2017). Acts of militarisations and constructions rapidly developed at the end of Aquino’s presidency in 2016. The responsibility in handling dispute on the West Philippine on behalf of the Filipino people transferred to the newly elected President of the Philippines at the time, Rodrigo A. Duterte. Given his populist following in the Philippines, many forecasted Duterte’s approach on the WPS was to take a similar but more personalised response against China’s claims.

## ***2.5 The Philippines Pivot to China (2016)***

Duterte’s foreign policy on the South China Sea/West Philippine Sea dispute took a major shift compared to the president’s predecessors. While previous administrations like former President Aquino aligned with the US and their security alliance, Duterte declared he is “realigning with China as the two agreed to resolve their South China Sea dispute through talks” on October 2016 (Blanchard, 2016). At the audience of more than 200 business people, including Chinese and Filipino business men, Duterte announced his separation from the US. His shift away from the US was also exercised in terms of the Philippines’ security alliances with its treaty partner. In 2020, Duterte had suspended several processes and had ultimately cancelled the continuation of the VFA Agreement after claiming the US failed to provide numerous demands which included vaccines for Covid-19 (Reuters, 2020). Journalists and



scholars alike took notice of Duterte's motivation in acquiring economic benefits in the Philippines' shift to China. The BRI, which consists of building transnational trade networks and stimulus packages dedicated to infrastructures, stood out as an attractive initiative that would benefit Duterte's policy goals on the 'Build, Build, Build' program (Montemayor, 2019).

Beyond economic pragmatism, Duterte's approach was driven by his personal background. According to an interview in *The New York Times*, his hatred towards Americans as an ally came from his personal experiences as the Mayor of Davao. On May 16, 2022, an American named Michael Terrence Meiring allegedly detonated a bomb at a local hotel in Davao known as the Evergreen Hotel. Meiring was charged with possession of explosives but managed to flee the Philippines with the help of FBI agents according to Philippine officials. Along with many others, this episode fuelled Duterte's discontent of the US (Paddock, 2016; Song and Velasco, 2022).

Given these personal engagements, certain scholars argue that the Philippines' shift to China was a clear practice of Philippine agency. Duterte attempted to sell his foreign policy on China as an 'independent foreign policy' that represents the interests of the domestic Filipino people (Misalucha-Willoughby, 2023; Song and Velasco, 2022). At the end of his presidency however, similar accounts recognise his 'defeatist stance' on the SCS issue. Duterte stated "he had no choice but to treat disputes in the South China Sea as diplomatic endeavours because the alternative was to go to war with China" (Reuters, 2020; Misalucha-Willoughby, 2023). Duterte stating that he had 'no other choice' suggest that there are other elements that facilitate his choices on foreign policy. In his particular case, Duterte's past engagements with China limited the choices of the Philippines which reflect the accounts of

Olsen's (2024) use of historical institutionalism where the choices of agents like Duterte are path-dependent or constrained.

## ***2.6 Revisiting the MDT through EDCA (2022)***

President Ferdinand 'Bong Bong' Marcos Jr. subsequently realigned the Philippines towards the US and has strengthened the alliance and relationship between the two countries. In 2022, President Marcos Jr. was elected as the new and current President of the Philippines following the Duterte administration. President Marcos Jr.'s foreign policy on the SCS initially navigated through 'hard-balancing' strategies (de Castro, 2024). However, this power balance in the East tilted when President Marcos Jr. welcomed back the idea of US forces visiting the Philippines in 2022 (Romero, 2024). In early 2023, President Marcos Jr. and the United States agreed on four naval bases under the Enhanced Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) to be located in Northern Luzon, the northernmost main Island of the Philippines, with the purpose of conducting joint military exercises and immediate humanitarian aid—a move which was heavily criticised over concerns of Philippine sovereignty and the risk of setting a stage theatre for a potential war (Mangaluz, 2023; PCO, 2023).

The thesis argues that President Marcos Jr.'s basis on foreign policy is heavily influenced by pre-existing structures. By analysing the language surrounding the discourse on the EDCA, the thesis can determine the structures that shape President Marcos Jr.'s foreign policy towards realigning with the US through the EDCA. Considering the references to historical institutions as structures within the EDCA discourse, this thesis signifies how structures can influence the Philippines' choices in foreign policy which implies that Philippines' practice of agency is actually constrained.

## Chapter 3: The Different Faces of Philippine Agency

The thesis analysis finds that the Philippines created three different yet interconnected identities and realities through the use of rhetorical and strategic language in justifying their foreign policies such as EDCA. Firstly, the pragmatic and calculative stance adopted by the Philippines through its leaders illustrates an agent-centric perspective, wherein the state positions itself as an active agent in the decision-making processes. Secondly, the cooperative and international-minded stance reflects a relationalist perspective, emphasising collaboration and mutual consent in their interactions with the international system. Thirdly, the portrayal of a vulnerable and dependent Philippines signifies a structurationist viewpoint, suggesting that the state's identity and actions are influenced by broader structural factors. The thesis finds that states such as the Philippines deliberately and strategically align to a setting that constitute the country's identity as a state with constrained agency. It is evident in this analysis that discursive language can alter our perception on Philippine agency.

### *3.1 A Pragmatic Philippines*

In the earlier stages of the EDCA timeline in 2022, the Philippine leadership discourse conveyed a calculative and pragmatic justification on the EDCA and its realignment to the US. President Marcos Jr. and other Filipino officials, including those from the AFP and the DFA, consistently justified the EDCA and its processes as practical security and humanitarian measures on numerous occasions. This pragmatic style of justification is evident in the following four examples:

Firstly, on December 1, 2022, during a media interview with President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., at the *Kadiwa ng Pasko* (translated from Tagalog: *Christmas Spirit*) at Quezon City, Manila, President Marcos Jr. treated the talks on the EDCA as a “negotiation” and claimed that the proposal of the US involving EDCA, was undertaken with the idea of reviewing what is “feasible” and “what will be the most useful for the defense of Philippine territory” (PCO, 2022).

Secondly, on February 12, 2023, during a media interview, President Marcos Jr. emphasised that the additional sites to be constructed under EDCA would not have a negative effect on the terms of the Philippines. When asked about the possible provocative effect the EDCA may have on other claimants of the SCS, President Marcos Jr. responded that “[the EDCA] will not have the effect of — the opposite effect from what we want which is to make the tensions even higher” (PCO, 2023). Together these two statements indicate that the Philippines’ justification on the EDCA is based on what additional gains or benefits the country can obtain while acknowledging the negative effects or potential losses in external security matters.

Thirdly, on March 22, 2023, during a media interview following the 126th Philippine Army Founding Anniversary Celebration in Taguig City, when asked about whether President Marcos Jr. reached out to the local governing units (LGUs) who expressed opposition on the EDCA sites in their locality, President Marcos Jr. responded with “Yes, we explained to them why it was important that we have that and why it will actually be good for their province” (PCO, 2023). This statement illustrates how President Marcos Jr. bargained with LGUs by making the EDCA attractive for its benefits.

Lastly, on March 25, 2023, during a press release, the Philippines Department of National Defense (DND) executive, Cpt. Arsenio Andolong, reiterated in Tagalog that the

EDCA sites are not meant to be used as American military bases but rather it is “just a temporary home” (in Tagalog: *pansamantalang bahay lang nila*), “a hiding place or storage of items” for the purposes of the succeeding military exercises to be conducted (in Tagalog: *pagtataguan ng gamit*). The DND official described the purpose of the EDCA bases as “logistically practical” in English (PCO, 2023). The usage of the Tagalog word “*lang*” emphasises the nonchalantness of the situation which indicates to the Filipino locals that there is little to nothing to be concerned about and that the use of the EDCA sites is ultimately for practical purposes.

These four statements evidently show that there was a strong sentiment of self-interest in the language conveyed by the President of the Philippines and other government officials. The Philippines expressed their justifications on the basis of practicality and thorough calculations of the benefits for their own country in terms of security measures. The use of pragmatic and calculative language, such as signalling the aims of the EDCA for security reasons, illustrate the idea that the basis of the Philippines foreign policy derives from the individual agents. This then implicates a sense of self-determination and agency—a reflection on the agent-centric approach in determining agency.

### ***3.2 A Cooperative Philippines***

Simultaneously, the Philippine discourse on EDCA expressed its reaffirmation to the US-PH alliance and its agreements on security. Specifically, the 1951 MDT became the fundamental principle in advancing the US-PH alliance and agreements, especially under the EDCA. In the previously referenced statements, there were hints of reaffirmation towards historical institutions by President Marcos Jr., specifically on the 1951 US-PH MDT. This reaffirmation is evident in the following three statements:

Firstly, on December 1, 2022, at the *Kadiwa ng Pasko*, President Marcos Jr. explained that “The [MDT] is continuously under negotiation and under evolution...there have been many requests and proposals from the Americans, especially under EDCA..., [what they propose], [the] joint exercises, and EDCA, the use of our bases, all of these...” (PCO, 2022). This statement notably implies that the US initiated first through a “request” or “proposal”; the US acknowledges the agency of the Philippines or at least the country’s capability of being able to decide independently on its own terms. This already indicates agency in a relationalist view of the Philippines—adding in the factor of the recognition of Philippine agency from other states support the idea that the Philippines has agency in that reality.

Secondly, on May 4, 2023, during the meeting of President Marcos Jr. and US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin in Washington, the expansion of the EDCA was justified by US Sec. Austin, as means to achieve a shared goal: “a common vision for free and open Indo-Pacific” viewing the Philippines as “a friend, an ally” (Misalucha-Willoughby, 2023; PCO, 2023). This statement shows how a shared understanding through interactions can engender agency with the idea that it’s in the self-interest of both parties. The idea that Philippine agency derives from its own agents is further emphasised in its interactions with the US. In this case, this is an ‘idea’ which the Philippines subscribes to.

Lastly, during a post-state visit review on May 5, 2023, President Marcos Jr. remarked that “the Philippines and the United States will have to forge closer economic ties and ensure that our bilateral partnership works for our peoples. That will bring a truly important alliance, a truly valuable partnership, and a continuing friendship into the 21st century” (PCO, 2023). However, viewing solely from the perspective of the agents and a scope on interactions alone, it undermines the fact that there are structural changes such as China’s encroachment in the

international system that constrains the Philippines into making foreign policy-decisions not out of self-interest or reaffirmation, but out of necessity, perceiving a limited form of agency.

### ***3.3 A Dependent and Vulnerable Philippines***

At the same time, the inclusion of the US deemed as necessary indicates that Philippine foreign policy is perceived to be dependent on the structures of the international system that have already been shaped by other agents. These are evident in the following four statements:

Firstly, on April 10, 2023, during a media interview at the commemoration of the 81st *Araw ng Kagitingan* (translated from Tagalog: *Day of Valour*) at the Mt. Samat National Shrine in Pilar, Bataan, President Marcos Jr. underscores the role of the US as their “only treaty partner”, insisting to “give them a chance to be able to come and help us in any way” (PCO, 2023). By expressing as such, the Philippines’ interaction and inclusion of the US is critical because it legitimises the securitisation process that was heavily criticised both by the concerned domestic groups and foreign powers like China which signifies that the Philippines’ leadership is dependent on the endorsement of great powers.

Secondly, on April 24, 2023, during an agenda review ahead of the President’s visit to the US, President Marcos Jr. in the context of reviewing the MDT, stated in English and Tagalog, “We have to evolve it. It has to evolve [it needs to adjust because the situation we are facing here in the South China Sea is changing, the situation here is heating up]” (PCO, 2023). The tone of urgency here is evidently expressed which signals Philippines’ position as an entity adapting to its situation. This is in stark contrast to the earlier statements wherein the Philippines claimed its justification out of self-interest showing initiative while the latter statements convey the situation as a matter of having no other choice and being reactive.

Thirdly, on May 2, 2023, in an interview during his meeting with US Vice President Kamala Harris in Washington, President Marcos Jr. said in the context of the provocative actions of China in the WPS that he is “concerned as you could possibly be...it is one of the major issues that we have to face back home” (PCO, 2023). On this occasion, President Marcos Jr.’s tone in saying that he is “concerned as you could possible be” suggests a high level of worry or alarm. Even during his meetings with US officials, a tone of urgency and necessity is conveyed to their treaty partner. Overall, his reactive response in this statement suggests a serious acknowledgment of the challenges posed by external structures such as China’s encroachment in the WPS.

Lastly, on May 4, 2023, in the same meeting of President Marcos Jr. and US Sec. Lloyd Austin in Washington, President Marcos Jr. acknowledges the external challenges posed by China’s actions. In his response to Sec. Austin’s opening remark, he responded with “...And the call of the times, unfortunately, is asking for us to meet these challenges — new challenges that perhaps we have not faced before” (PCO, 2023). In the same speech, US Sec. Austin and President Marcos Jr. co-created a shared understanding that it is in the self-interest of both parties and reaffirmation to their alliance, as previously exemplified in section 3.2. However, President Marcos Jr. also emphasised his perception of the Philippines being in a vulnerable position in the midst of the changing environment in the SCS accelerated by China. By doing so, the Philippines’ decision to realign with the US is actually driven by a matter of obligation and responsibility for the security of the Filipino people.



## Conclusion

Overall, this thesis finds that the Philippines self-ascribed its agency and co-created a discursive reality where it exercised agency in its interactions with the US. The use of practical and pragmatic rhetoric showcases the ability of the Philippines to portray itself as an entity seeking interest which according to agent-centric accounts imply practice of agency. The Philippines' engagements with the US utilise specific language that co-constitute the two parties together. The US in particular, uses language that reaffirms the bilateral relationship out of friendship or cooperative terms, allowing it to perceive the EDCA as a mutual and consensual policy. Evidently, President Marcos Jr., situated the Philippines in that shared understanding which relationalists accounts like Misalucha-Willoughby (2023) claimed as a source of agency for the Philippines. However, this thesis has shown that by applying Wendt's (1984) structurationism and Olsen's (2024) use of historical institutionalism, the thesis has identified numerous evidence of discourse from statements acknowledging the external structures that influenced the Philippines to commit towards a certain foreign policy such as the EDCA.

This thesis can be further supplemented through the followings points. Firstly, by analysing particular sources of discourse that goes beyond public statements, specifically, private communications among Philippine officials, research may indicate what are the secluded but fully realised motivations behind the EDCA and other foreign policies. Secondly, research could be broadened by investigating actual agency in contrast to perceived agency, aiming to empirically identify the measurements that define actual agency. In doing so, it supplements the thesis by narrowing which acts or policies under certain assumptions best encapsulate true exercise of agency. Finally, this empirical study is not necessarily exclusive

to the Philippines but to other countries as case studies. The regional influence of the US not only affected the Philippines, but also other countries in the same region like Taiwan, which in the pursuit of sovereignty faces structural constraints that are pressured by the international system, or ASEAN members who are similarly caught between the US-China rivalry for influence in the SCS.

In conclusion, the thesis has acknowledged the capability of the Philippines to take an active role in its security alliances out of practicality and self-interest. The thesis has also recognised the endorsement of great powers which acknowledges the autonomy of the Philippines and supports the idea that Philippines is exercising actual agency. However, the thesis has also argued through Wendt's (1984) structurationism and Olsen's (2024) use of historical institutionalism that the Philippines, through its leaders, undermine the reality where it is a vulnerable and dependent state that is constrained by the structural changes of the international system as posed by China in the SCS. The thesis contends that this created reality by the Philippines (with or without the US) does not truly reflect actual agency but rather a perceived agency that is self-ascribed or self-defined. In exchange, the Philippines had to diminish the influence of external structures that could impact its decision-making and its perception of its agency. In this way, despite being a smaller state, the Philippines' leaders show that they have the agency to act and choose its alliances for its benefits. At the same time, the Philippines, through its leaders, convey that they are compelled or obligated to act accordingly rather than acting purely out of self-interest, which questions whether the Philippines truly had any other choice to choose from in reality.

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