Building a U.S.-Australia-Philippines Triad

By Gregory B. Poling and Andreyka Natalegawa

THE ISSUE
U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific vary dramatically in terms of reliability, capability, and clarity of strategic rationale. The two oldest U.S. security alliances in the region—with the Philippines and Australia—illustrate this clearly. The U.S. alliance with Australia has never been stronger. By contrast, the United States’ alliance with the Philippines has barely survived a period of deep uncertainty and remains fragile and underdeveloped, posing significant challenges and risks to U.S. defense strategy and interests. It is increasingly urgent that the United States and Australia shore up the strategic foundations of their partnerships with the Philippines, highlight the mutual benefits of working together, and assess the role that trilateral cooperation should play in regional security.

INTRODUCTION
As outlined in the 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS), the United States is engaged in long-term strategic competition with China that is playing out with particular intensity in the Indo-Pacific. Beijing seeks to undermine the U.S. alliance system and displace the United States as the preeminent power in the region. Given China’s clear strategic intent, the focus in the NDS on strengthening alliances is well placed, but U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific vary dramatically in terms of reliability, capability, and clarity of strategic rationale. The two oldest U.S. security alliances in the region—with the Philippines and Australia—illustrate this clearly. The U.S. alliance with Australia has never been stronger. The two are developing new defense capabilities, building interoperability, and increasingly working together as a networked security architecture. The Australia-United Kingdom-United States pact, or AUKUS, is just the latest sign of this increasingly robust partnership.

By contrast, the United States’ alliance with the Philippines has barely survived a period of deep uncertainty under the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte. While Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr.’s administration has signaled that it will prioritize the Philippines’ relationship with the United States, the alliance remains fragile and underdeveloped, posing significant challenges and risks to U.S. defense strategy and interests. However, this alliance remains critically important for the United States, both for the benefits the United States derives from bilateral cooperation in peacetime and for the role the alliance plays in U.S. defense planning above or just below the threshold of conflict. If China succeeds in peeling the Philippines away from the United States, it will profoundly weaken the strategic position of the United States, Australia, and other allies within the broader Indo-Pacific.

It is increasingly urgent that the United States and Australia shore up the strategic foundations of their partnerships with the Philippines, highlight the mutual benefits of working together, and assess the role that trilateral cooperation should play in regional security. Furthermore, defense policymakers in the United States and Australia need to better understand Philippine strategic assessments and
threat perceptions to inform assumptions about the role the Philippines would play in the event of conflict with China, including in a Taiwan contingency. How do Filipino and Australian strategic planners view China? How can the United States and its allies respond to—and deter—Chinese gray zone activities? What are the implications of a Taiwan contingency on regional stability, and how would Manila and Canberra respond to such a crisis? Under what circumstances would the Philippines allow access for U.S. and allied forces flowing into the region in the event of an emerging conflict?

In order to answer these questions, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) convened a trilateral U.S.-Australia-Philippines track 2 strategic dialogue in August 2022 in Manila, Philippines. The dialogue was intended to provide a platform for U.S., Australian, and Filipino experts and practitioners to discuss practical issues of alliance coordination, share insights regarding each country’s respective strategic outlooks, and consider the ways in which the security triangle could be operationalized in a time of conflict. CSIS concluded the dialogue by hosting a tabletop exercise involving a complex near-future crisis in the South China Sea.

Discussion at the dialogue largely spanned four key themes: the need to assess and align strategic outlooks and threat perceptions in Washington, Manila, and Canberra; the challenges associated with Chinese gray zone activities and potential pathways toward enhancing resilience; the growing need for all three countries to consider how a Taiwan contingency would not only impact alliance obligations, but also affect their own respective national security priorities; and the current limited ability of the security triangle to respond to a South China Sea crisis.

The dialogue informed the findings and recommendations in this brief, although all opinions are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the dialogue participants.

**THE U.S.-AUSTRALIA-PHILIPPINES SECURITY TRIANGLE**

The U.S.-Philippines alliance has experienced an upswing since then-president Rodrigo Duterte’s decision to recall the abrogation of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) in 2021. Early signs demonstrate that the Marcos Jr. administration is generally less skeptical of the United States than its predecessor and views the alliance as a top priority. President Biden’s meeting with President Marcos Jr. in New York in September 2022 represents a positive step forward—as well as the first time a sitting Philippine president visited the United States since the late president Benigno Aquino III attended the Sunnylands summit in 2016—with the United States affirming its commitment to the defense of the Philippines. Whether these trends continue and the alliance undergoes much-needed modernization will ultimately depend on it continuing to receive high-level political and military attention from both sides. Implementation of the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) remains years behind schedule, the Armed Forces of the Philippines’ modernization plans need a considerable increase in support, and the long-term viability of the alliance rests on a number of agreements and new institutions currently under discussion.

The U.S.-Australia alliance has also experienced a surge in activity in recent years. Canberra and Washington have seen increased alignment on strategic outlooks, as evidenced by enhanced U.S. rotational access to Australian facilities, collaboration through the Quad, and the AUKUS pact. The transition to a Labor government led by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in May 2022 has further opened the door to enhanced cooperation with the United States, including in relation to the Biden administration’s stated focus on issues like climate change. Albanese has also cast himself as a foreign policy-oriented premier, attending the Quad summit in Tokyo immediately after being sworn in and directing his cabinet to embark on a series of diplomatic tours to affirm Australia’s position in the region.

Australia’s growing role in the Indo-Pacific underscores the need for Canberra and Washington to collaborate more closely in engaging with other alliance partners, including the Philippines. Australia is uniquely suited to this role as it is the only country other than the United States to have a Status of Forces Agreement with the Philippines. As a result, Australia and the Philippines enjoy a significant degree of security cooperation, including the presence of Australian mobile training teams on the ground undertaking capacity-building work on counterterrorism, urban warfare, maritime security, and other fronts. Yet, despite the wide array of ongoing bilateral activities and the significant potential for enhanced Australia-Philippines cooperation, high-level discussion on the merits of the partnership remains limited and has only just begun to emerge in Australian policy circles.
STRATEGIC OUTLOOKS AND THREAT PERCEPTIONS

Shared challenges faced by Manila, Washington, and Canberra necessitate a review of strategic outlooks and threat perceptions in all three capitals, along with an examination of the extent to which Philippine, U.S., and Australian assumptions about these alliances and partnerships cohere amid strategic competition with China. The 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy made clear the Biden administration’s intent to strengthen the United States’ long-term position in, and commitment to, the Indo-Pacific. Congress remains steadfast in its bipartisan support for shoring up U.S. alliances to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific and counter China’s advances in the region. Thus, in the face of continued reservations about U.S. staying power in the region and a challenging strategic environment in Europe and the Middle East, Washington has signaled that its commitment to the Indo-Pacific remains robust.

Australia’s presence at the forefront of Beijing’s coercive activities in the Indo-Pacific has significantly sharpened strategic outlooks toward China in recent years. Opinion polling demonstrates that a majority of the Australian public now views China as a security threat. The Australian political and security establishment, mirroring the public, has largely reached consensus on its views of China, even as the governing Labor Party and the opposition Liberal-National Coalition disagree over tactics and tone in foreign policy. Australia’s experience with China’s coercive activities and its long-standing history of alignment with the United States in times of conflict mean that Canberra is an essential partner for Washington in countering challenges to the regional order.

Strategic outlooks in Manila, by contrast, remain in transition. The shift from a decades-long focus on internal threats to a more maritime-oriented external defense doctrine is underway. But this shift is constrained by limited state resources and colored by concerns about U.S. credibility, made especially salient by the huge disparity in power between the two allies and the economic necessity to balance engagement and confrontation in China policy.

In contrast to Australian views on China, which have largely sharpened in recent years, there is no singular view of China policy in the Philippines. The state and military bureaucracy, public opinion, and business interests are broadly pro-American and suspicious of Beijing—and becoming more so in the wake of China’s increasing coercion. But they remain divided on how to respond to that coercion. An influential minority within the political and business elite continues to view the U.S.-Philippines alliance as a destabilizing factor that could upend Manila’s ties with Beijing and lead the Philippines into unwanted conflict. That minority continues to use the narrative of U.S. failure and ambiguity during the Scarborough Shoal standoff in 2012 to insist that, when push comes to shove, the United States will not stand with its ally. The power of this line of argument has been diminished by the increasing clarity of U.S. declaratory policy and closer alliance coordination over the last decade, but it is unlikely to disappear entirely any time soon. Moreover, views on China in the Philippines are divided across geographic lines, with some subnational actors in places like Mindanao and northern Luzon increasingly reliant on Chinese investment and people-to-people ties.

Divergences in Philippine and Australian threat perceptions are compounded by differences in capacity to respond to Chinese coercion and other material and non-material factors. As an advanced economy, Australia has been better able to absorb economic coercion, and its military capabilities mean that it is ultimately better equipped than the Philippines to respond to gray zone challenges. Furthermore, Australia’s status as a mature democracy means that it is generally less tolerant of authoritarian practices and challenges to the regional order, more resilient to misinformation and influence operations, and more likely to view a China-dominated order as a threat to Australia’s interests and worldview.

Over the past year, changes in government in both Canberra and Manila have reshaped Australian and Philippine strategic outlooks. As noted above, the Australian political establishment has largely reached consensus in their views on China, though the new Labor government has opted to strike what it views as a more delicate tone in approaching Beijing and regional partners. While President Marcos Jr. has generally taken a stronger position toward Beijing than his predecessor and sought to deepen relations with the United States, his focus on economic recovery and attracting foreign investment makes it likely that he will try to balance this with outreach to China, to say nothing of the Marcos family’s own long-standing ties with the Chinese business community. However, no matter what Marcos Jr.’s own perspectives toward China may be, it is likely that the Philippine foreign policy and security establishment will ultimately constrain the president’s ability to make any extreme overtures toward Beijing.
Changing dynamics in the regional security landscape have also shifted strategic outlooks in the three capitals, including challenges associated with China’s nuclear buildup and other proliferation risks. Yet, while both Washington and Canberra have increasingly voiced concern regarding the threat of nuclear escalation in a Taiwan contingency or other crises, issues related to nuclear buildup and proliferation remain underdiscussed and understudied in Manila. To the extent that public discourse in the Philippines focuses on nuclear risks, this discourse largely centers on evincing concern around narratives that AUKUS could negatively impact nonproliferation in the region—even while Philippine views on the pact are largely positive relative to those of its immediate neighbors. Manila generally views China’s nuclear ambitions and the threat of nuclear escalation as a less critical issue relative to other, more immediate threats posed by Beijing in the maritime, cyber, and information domains.

Despite clear opportunities for Australia and the Philippines to deepen cooperation, neither capital has prioritized its partnership with the other at the level one would expect given the increasing convergence in their strategic outlooks and the logic of closer coordination. In contrast to the U.S. government, Canberra has not historically given the Philippines as much priority in its regional strategy as Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, or especially Indonesia. In the Philippines, meanwhile, high-level discourse on non-U.S. partnerships tends to focus on Japan and South Korea. Filipinos evince warm feelings toward Australia in public opinion polls and the military maintains significant on-the-ground cooperation, but those ties are rarely top of mind.


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ultimately, philippine and australian strategic outlooks will be shaped by overall views toward the united states and u.s. credibility as a guarantor of regional stability and security. while support for the u.s.-australia alliance is at an all-time high, this largely reflects anxieties about the threat posed by china, rather than a vote of confidence in the reliability of the united states. and despite these concerns, neither australia nor the philippines have a plan b in the event of waning u.s. commitment to the indo-pacific, as only the united states currently has the weight needed to balance china.

enhancing resilience against gray zone challenges

china has leveraged an extensive tool kit of coercive measures in the region, including activities that fall in the gray zone short of conflict—weaponizing investments in critical infrastructure and using economic coercion, employing influence operations and disinformation campaigns, and deploying maritime militia and coast guard vessels in philippine waters. coupled with a general increase in china’s risk tolerance, these levers of influence have granted beijing a wide range of policy options and approaches that enhance the risks associated with sub-conflict disputes.

in the south china sea, beijing’s island-building campaign and its deployment of law enforcement and maritime militia vessels have significantly altered the strategic landscape, allowing beijing to harass oil and gas operations and restrict philippine resupply vessels’ access to the isolated filipino marines stationed aboard the brp sierra madre at second thomas shoal. the broad span of china’s gray zone activities points to the need for an “all of the above” approach that encompasses both military and diplomatic solutions to deterring chinese behavior. but successful responses to gray zone activities will ultimately be contingent on whether the united states, australia, and the philippines are able to determine what specific approaches would credibly deter chinese aggression, let alone whether there are activities that the united states and its allies simply cannot deter. responses to chinese gray zone activities could encompass both offensive and defensive measures, particularly in the informational realm. this could include declassifying intelligence relevant to chinese coercive behavior (in a manner similar to u.s. declassification of information related to russian activities prior to and during the invasion of ukraine), while also focusing on enhancing domestic military capabilities and resilience.
Efforts to respond to gray zone activities will be complicated by the extent to which the Philippines remains vulnerable to Chinese influence operations and elite capture. This includes ongoing narratives regarding China’s overwhelming economic dominance in the Philippines. Whether they are overstated or not, these narratives of economic dominance and political influence speak to the success of China’s information operations.

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Meanwhile, enhancing domestic resilience includes the continued modernization of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, including procurement of BrahMos cruise missile systems or other similar platforms. Such weapons systems would effectively allow the Philippines to raise China’s short-term costs in a time of conflict, mirroring Vietnam’s approach to military modernization in recent decades. This approach has focused on the acquisition of a small but capable number of advanced surface, undersea, and air platforms paired with asymmetric strike capabilities to ensure that it can give China a “bloody nose” in any contest.

**IMPLICATIONS OF A TAIWAN CONTINGENCY**

Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in early August, as well as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and perceived parallels between that conflict and China’s behavior in the Indo-Pacific, have helped sharpen the region’s focus on the prospect of a Taiwan contingency.

The Philippines’ proximity to Taiwan means that simple geography, to say nothing of the alliance with the United States, could drag Manila into a Taiwan contingency. This in turn highlights the need for Filipino strategic thinkers to consider the potential impacts of such a conflict. Much in the same way that South Vietnamese refugee ships fled to Subic Bay during the fall of Saigon, a cross-strait contingency could lead to Taiwanese vessels evacuating to the Philippines. With northern Luzon less than 200 miles from Taiwan, and the Batanes Islands even closer, a refugee crisis seems inevitable in the case of a Taiwan contingency.

The Philippines has nearly 200,000 overseas foreign workers based in Taiwan, and their evacuation—likely impossible in the face of an outright invasion of the island—would be a top priority if conflict were to break out across the Taiwan Strait. The Philippines also has a much smaller, but still sizeable, number of overseas foreign workers in mainland China, and even more in Hong Kong. This raises the possibility that those workers could become political leverage for Beijing in a time of conflict and limit the Philippines’ flexibility in responding to a Taiwan contingency. The direction of public sentiment in such a crisis—whether demanding intervention on behalf of those Filipinos in Taiwan or restraint in the name of those in China—is difficult to predict. Much would depend on the details and scale of the crisis, including the number of Filipinos killed.

The proximity of Philippine territory to Taiwan also makes it an attractive staging point for U.S. intervention and a possible target for Chinese retaliation. Both the United States and the Philippines have increasingly recognized that Washington would expect access and support in any crisis endangering the lives of U.S. service members. Most Filipino strategic thinkers recognize that is part of the price
of a more “equal” alliance with the United States that both the Duterte and Marcos governments have sought. To this end, if the Philippine government wants the United States to increase security assistance and stay committed to defending Filipino lives in the contested South China Sea, then Manila must meet matching obligations. U.S. forces will require greater access to the country to rotate forces and pre-position equipment to credibly project power over both the South China Sea and Taiwan. The extent to which the Philippine strategic community has internalized the implications of reciprocity—meaning that the Philippines has obligations to the United States under Articles II, IV, and V of the Mutual Defense Treaty, not just vice versa—is unclear. The security establishment appears more cognizant of these than the wider political and academic community.

Candid, ongoing, and at times difficult, discussions on alliance obligations and their role in a Taiwan contingency between the United States and the Philippines at the track 1.5 and track 2 levels mirror the talks currently underway between the two governments as part of the ongoing process of alliance modernization. At the 9th U.S.-Philippines Bilateral Strategic Dialogue last year, interlocuters from the Biden and Duterte administrations set forth a roadmap for modernizing the alliance. They agreed to negotiate their first set of joint defense guidelines and a military information-sharing agreement, launch a new maritime security dialogue, increase U.S. capacity-building support to the Armed Forces of the Philippines, and implement the long-delayed 2014 EDCA.

EDCA allows the United States to gain access to five predetermined Philippine military sites to fund upgrades, pre-position equipment, and engage in joint training and operations. In addition to implementing the agreement at those five sites, the allies are seeking to expand it to additional locations, which has fueled speculation that new sites would include facilities in northern Luzon, less than 200 miles from Taiwan. Moreover, ongoing discussion on the risks associated with a Taiwan contingency has raised expectations that the United States would look to the Philippines to, among other things, help monitor the Bashi Channel and prevent any undetected Chinese breakout from the first island chain in a crisis scenario.

Meanwhile, Australia has met rising concern over a Taiwan contingency by increasing funding for high-end capabilities and other deterrent responses—as have Japan, South Korea, and other partners. But Australian public opinion and strategic thinking toward Taiwan generally come from a low base of knowledge, viewed more through the prism of U.S. alliance obligations rather than a clear articulation of what Taiwan—and the defense of Taiwan—means for Australian national security interests. And few, if any, of Australia’s recent strategy documents—including the 2020 Defence Strategic Update—explicitly reference Taiwan.

Similarly, with regard to the Philippines, it remains generally unclear the extent to which the Marcos Jr. administration has focused on thinking through how a Taiwan contingency would impact the country. To this end, both Australia and the Philippines need to take major steps toward articulating why Taiwan matters to their foreign policy and national security interests outside of the narrow prism of their U.S. alliance commitments.

**THE U.S.-AUSTRALIA-PHILIPPINES SECURITY TRIANGLE IN A SOUTH CHINA SEA CRISIS**

Given current force posture, weak alliance coordination, and political uncertainties, the U.S.-Australia-Philippines security triangle would face considerable challenges in responding to a South China Sea contingency. In particular, the Philippines’ ability to respond to a gray zone challenge in the South China Sea will depend on Manila’s ability to break through excessive internal debate and bureaucratic red tape. This includes ongoing debates on when to view a gray zone challenge as a national security crisis to be overcome or a foreign policy issue to be managed, and when to declare a national emergency and explicitly invoke the Mutual Defense Treaty with the United States. Public opinion will also play a key role in shaping Philippine responses to a gray zone crisis, as public opinion, traditional media, and social media have taken an increasingly central role in the Philippine policy discourse.

For the United States and Australia, a lack of considered preplanning or of a prearranged playbook between allies for responding to a gray zone crisis remains a significant hurdle. Absent the expansion of EDCA sites in the near term, the United States will lack the ability to quickly move assets into the region in response to a crisis scenario, ultimately forcing Washington and its allies into a reactive, rather than proactive, posture. Meanwhile, Australia’s role in a South China Sea crisis will ultimately be limited by the lack of a direct alliance with the Philippines. Limited preplanning across all sides of the security triangle is in turn compounded by a general lack of discussion on rules of engagement in a gray zone contingency and a lack of clarity on whether Manila would be willing to stomach the initiation of conflict, or if it would prefer to stop short of that.
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**KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Finding:** An increasingly complex threat environment points to the need for continued and robust dialogue between the United States and partners in the Philippines and Australia. High-level discussion in Manila policy circles on the threat associated with nuclear escalation and proliferation remains underdeveloped, and these risks are generally underestimated relative to challenges in other domains.

- **Recommendation 1:** Washington should seek more opportunities for high-level track 1.5 and track 2 dialogues with Manila and Canberra. Dialogues held in the trilateral context would grant a degree of political cover to discuss issues that might otherwise be sensitive in the bilateral context. Such dialogues would help build a broader coalition of support for not only each country’s respective relations with the United States but relations between U.S. allies.

- **Recommendation 2:** The United States should seek out more opportunities for high-level track 1 and track 1.5 dialogues between Washington and counterparts in Manila on nuclear issues. Dialogues could be held in the bilateral or trilateral format, and they would allow the Philippine policy community to internalize and take part in the discussions on nuclear deterrence and risk reduction within the U.S. alliance network.

**Finding:** At present, the United States lacks the ground-based air assets or ground-based missiles to be able to respond effectively to a South China Sea contingency, while the Philippines’ military modernization remains sluggish.

- **Recommendation 3:** The United States should not only move swiftly to fully implement EDCA and expand it to include other bases but also encourage the Philippines to continue its process of military modernization, including the procurement of BrahMos anti-ship missiles, unmanned platforms, and other asymmetric strike capabilities.

**Finding:** Australia’s presence and engagement with Southeast Asia has traditionally been anchored in its closest neighbor, Indonesia. But the Philippines’ unique status—including its role in the U.S. alliance network, its own robust ties with Canberra, and its position at the front lines of China’s coercive activities—means that firming up relations with Manila will be critical for Australia moving forward.

- **Recommendation 4:** Canberra needs to invest time and political capital into shoring up relations with Manila, particularly in the context of the upcoming Defence Strategic Review. The United States should use its bilateral dialogues with Australia to encourage it to do so, and it should seek to bring Australian officials into the mechanisms of the U.S.-Philippines alliance (such as the annual Mutual Defense Board-Security Engagement Board meetings) as observers.

**Finding:** China’s maritime militia poses a potent threat to the ability of Southeast Asian nations, including the Philippines, to exercise their sovereign rights in the waterways of the South China Sea.

- **Recommendation 5:** In line with the Quad’s Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness, the United States and Australia should continue to invest in the remote sensing capabilities of its Southeast Asian and Pacific partners, allowing regional states better visibility into activities occurring in their waters. The United States, Australia, and like-minded partners like Japan should also explore avenues for unmanned data collection in the South China Sea in partnership with the Philippines. Fifth Fleet’s Task Force 59 in Bahrain offers a good model that could be pursued by Seventh Fleet from the Philippines. The United States should publicly clarify that it would treat militia vessels that intentionally endanger the lives of U.S. or allied personnel as armed combatants, and that any attack on Philippine troops or vessels by militia falls within the scope of Articles IV and V of the Mutual Defense Treaty.

**Finding:** The BRP Sierra Madre is the most vulnerable Philippine facility in the South China Sea, with resupply missions facing frequent interference by Chinese militia and coast guard forces. This makes it the most likely site for military escalation in the South China Sea at present. It is also the only Philippine outpost whose legal status within the context of the alliance is crystal clear: it is an underwater feature within the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and China can make no claim upon it. Loss of control over the feature would be severely damaging.
to the Philippines politically and strategically, not to mention to the credibility of the U.S.—Philippines alliance.

- **Recommendation 6:** The United States and the Philippines should focus on contingency planning for a Second Thomas Shoal crisis, including a U.S. commitment to help resupply the garrison if needed in case of a blockade. The United States should help the Philippines assess the structural integrity of the *Sierra Madre* and repair or replace it to ensure permanent control over the feature by Manila.

**Finding:** The United States currently shares sensitive information with the Philippines through a Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA), which is set to expire in March 2023. Without a replacement, information sharing and alliance coordination will be severely hampered.

- **Recommendation 7:** The United States and Philippines should conclude a permanent General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). Negotiations for a GSOMIA are underway and were flagged as a priority at the annual Bilateral Strategic Dialogue last year. That high-level focus from military and political leaders, if maintained, should be enough to break through the sticking points in negotiations.

**Finding:** China maintains significant diplomatic and economic largesse in Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific. In particular, Beijing has embarked on a campaign of subnational diplomacy in both Australia and the Philippines, undermining their respective national governments’ ability to formulate a coherent and unified China strategy.

- **Recommendation 8:** The United States should redouble its efforts toward engaging with local and subnational stakeholders—whether through diplomatic, economic, or military-to-military channels—focusing on outlying regions of the Philippines vulnerable to China’s economic heft. The State Department’s recent appointment of Ambassador Nina Hachigian—formerly U.S. ambassador to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations—as special representative for subnational diplomacy is a welcome step in the right direction. The United States must continue to build on this momentum and establish comprehensive interagency mechanisms for focusing time, attention, and resources to local and subnational stakeholders that may be disconnected or disenfranchised from the Manila and Canberra elite. This should include the reopening of the U.S. consulate in Cebu and the exploration of new consulates in Davao and Ilocos Norte, both of which already host Chinese consulates.

**Finding:** China’s island-building activities in the South China Sea not only impact the military and strategic balance in Southeast Asia, but also pose risk to the health of the marine ecosystem.

- **Recommendation 9:** The United States, Australia, and other regional partners should collaborate on scientific efforts focused on understanding and publicizing the risks associated with China’s activities in regional waters and their potential impact on Southeast Asian fisheries and marine resources.

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**Gregory B. Poling** directs the Southeast Asia Program and Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), where he is also a senior fellow. **Andreyka Natalegawa** is an associate fellow for the CSIS Southeast Asia Program.

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