

Philippine strategic behavior from 2011 to 2021 in light of developments in the South China Sea

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Abstract

In the past decades, China's rise has set off a shift from the unipolar era, rendering the South China Sea (SCS) a theatre for revived great power rivalry. In this environment, the behavior of secondary states navigating the heavy seas of the SCS dispute has drawn significant academic attention to the study of small and middle-power strategy. This thesis focused on the strategic response employed by the Philippines in response to developments in the SCS from 2011 to 2021. Qualitative content analysis was used to examine official communications and published documents and determine the nature of the state behavior employed by two consecutive presidential administrations, using the theoretical framework of hedging as a risk management strategy. The analysis revealed a shift from a traditional balancing type of response employed by the Aquino III administration, to an approach illustrative of hedging during the Duterte administration, where hedging is understood as a downplaying of events in the SCS, measures of military and defense capabilities enhancement that are not specifically directed at China, and ambiguous alignment signals, all part of an effort to mitigate the risks that the Philippines would face, should a potential escalation of the dispute materialize.

Keywords: Philippine foreign policy, South China Sea dispute, Hedging theory, Risk management, Philippine-China relations, Philippine-US relations

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List of abbreviations

AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
C4ISTAR	Command and control communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance
CA	Content analysis
DFA	Department of Foreign Affairs
EDCA	Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement
FPA	Foreign policy analysis
IR	International Relations
MCE	Military capabilities enhancement
MDT	Mutual Defense Treaty
NDS	National Defense Strategy
NSP	National Security Policy
NSS	National Security Strategy
PCA	Permanent Court of Arbitration
PCA	Permanent Court of Arbitration
PDR	Philippines Defense Reform
PDT	Philippine Defense Transformation Program
PNP	Philippine National Police
SCS	South China Sea
SONA	State Of the Nation Address
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
US	The United States
VFA	Visiting Forces Agreement
WPS	West Philippine Sea

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1. Introduction

The past two decades have brought considerable changes to the regional order in Southeast Asia, with the rise of China setting off a shift from the unipolar era. In the center of this image, the South China Sea (SCS) has become a theatre for revived great power rivalry, concentrating within the so-called *nine-dash line* what Robert D. Kaplan has suggestively named ‘Asia’s Cauldron’ (2015). Navigating the heavy seas of the SCS, secondary states in Southeast Asia have adapted insofar as to shift the understanding of foreign policy analysts and produce a significant amount of research on what concerns small and middle-power strategy.

The beginning of the twenty-first century has seen a rapid expansion of China’s economic power, especially after its ascension to the World Trade Organization and considerably so under the leadership of Xi Jinping, who intends to see China become “a global leader in terms of composite strength and international influence” (Xi, cited in Yahuda, 2019). This geopolitical context is essential for understanding the dynamics in the South China Sea dispute, which involves not only China and the claimant (and non-claimant) Southeast Asian states, but also the United States, as the latter’s foothold in the Asia-Pacific is increasingly challenged.

With an official Code of Conduct still to be drafted and developments affecting members asymmetrically, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is yet to elaborate a unified response to the rising China. Moreover, the US engagement with the region has also been relatively inconsistent, from the Obama administration’s rather short-lived ‘pivot to Asia’ strategy (Saha, 2020) introduced in 2011, meant to strengthen its position and the cooperation with allies in the region, to the ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ under the Trump administration, which singled out China for pursuing regional hegemony (Stromseth, 2019, p.1).

In this complex geopolitical context, Southeast Asian countries have adopted fluid strategies which have come to be referred to as *hedging*, based on the idea of reducing instability “by more carefully calibrated responses to case-by-case crises” (Marston and Bruce, 2020; also Stromseth, 2019).

This thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of how secondary states in Southeast Asia respond to the rise of China and increasing power rivalry, by analyzing the security response of the Philippines from 2011 to 2021. Particularly, the study applies the framework of hedging as a risk management framework in observing the foreign policy shift from the Aquino III to the Duterte administration, aiming to identify potential factors that can influence how the security environment is perceived. Ultimately, a better understanding of how secondary states respond

to security challenges and rising powers serves to adapt policy responses and strategies in a manner of conflict avoidance.

As a point of departure, it is assumed that both systemic factors, such as the changing conditions in the international security environment and the regional power dynamics, as well as domestic factors, such as the personalization of foreign policy (Zha, 2015), influenced the response of secondary states in Southeast Asia. Based on this assumption, the strategic behavior of the Philippines can be examined along two periods: 2011-2016 and 2016-2021 (present). To examine the research problem, the following question was addressed: *How has the behavior of the Philippines evolved from 2011 to 2021, in light of developments in the South China Sea?*

The thesis is organized as follows. This first chapter offers an overview of the research problem, along with the main research question. It is followed by the *Literature Review*, which elaborates on the main directions of study in the existing body of literature, with respect to the traditional balancing-bandwagoning axis, previous conceptualizations of hedging as a foreign policy strategy, framings of the Philippine foreign policy, and concludes with some remarks on the literature gap that the thesis attempts to fill. The third chapter presents the *Theoretical Framework* guiding the analysis, specifically the theoretical considerations introduced by the balance-of-threat theory, followed by Haacke's modified framework of hedging as a risk management strategy and, finally, the conceptual and theoretical distinction between security risks and security threats. The *Methodological approach* chapter lays down the ontological and epistemological assumptions, the research design of the study, the methods used for the data collection and analysis, as well as a subsection on reflexivity. The fifth chapter presents the *Findings and analysis* of the collected empirical data to answer the research questions in line with the employed framework, followed by the *Discussion of the findings*, which effectively answers the research question and sub-question. Lastly, the *Conclusions* chapter summarizes the results of the thesis research.

2. Literature Review

The present chapter reviews the literature on hedging. It covers the theoretical departure from the neorealist balancing-bandwagoning dichotomy within the balance-of-power theory, and the ways hedging has been understood in previous academic studies. The second subsection unpacks hedging and highlights common conceptualizations, the main assessment components, and some of the relevant conceptual and methodological contributions. The aim of this chapter is on the one hand to point to trace the evolution of hedging in the International Relations literature, and on the other hand, to point to notable disagreements regarding the concept, which may render its application ambiguous in the absence of a thoroughly developed operationalizing framework. In light of these aspects, the chapter ends with remarks on the literature gap that the thesis attempts to fill.

2.1 Departing from the balancing-bandwagoning dichotomy

In International Relations (IR), there has been a lot of scholarly attention directed at the behavior of states dealing with a power that is threatening to shift the international order. In the turbulent context of the twentieth century, the explanation advanced by the realist tradition represented the mainstream account for how secondary states approach a rising power. In the neorealist (structuralist) vein, as formulated largely by Kenneth N. Waltz (1979; 1990), the behavior of states is dictated by the anarchic character of the international system, where anarchy is understood as the absence of the hierarchical relationship found in domestic politics, and where the distribution of power is a result of the uneven distribution of capabilities across the system. In neorealist thinking, the natural state is that of war (Waltz, 1979, p.102), with states found in a self-help system that determines them to act in a balance-of-power logic (*ibid.*, p.118).

As a determinant factor for alliance behavior in the balance of power theory, Walt (1985) pointed to the aspect of threat. What the neorealist balance of power posits, then, is that states are likely to either balance – ally with others against the source of threat (external balancing) and strengthen their own military capabilities (internal balancing), or bandwagon – by aligning with the threatening power (Waltz, 1979).

The balancing-bandwagoning dichotomy has been extensively researched and went relatively unchallenged in the twentieth century and especially during the Cold War, in an age of polarized economic and ideological orders. In the decades since the end of the Cold War, however, which marked the end of the bipolar system, the international system has seen a surge in economic,

political, and military interdependence, and the rise of multilateral cooperation assisted by diplomatic forums. In the Asia-Pacific, the ascent of China in the context of the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the 2008-2009 global financial crisis have enabled the tectonic plates of great-power politics to shift (Ciorciari, 2008, p.158) and render the regional order multipolar and uncertain.

2.2 Conceptualizations of hedging

This context has seen the rise of hedging as a different strategic option for states facing a rising power, with many empirical studies focusing on the strategies of East and Southeast Asian states coping with uncertainty concerning China's intentions, Sino-American relations, but also the American commitment in the region (Kuik, 2016, p.506). As a theoretical concept embedded within the balance-of-power theory and distinct from the traditional alignment positions on the power-acceptance and power-rejection spectrum, hedging has attracted policy and scholarly attention alike. What is often referred to as hedging in IR is a type of foreign policy that takes a middle position between balancing and bandwagoning, where states coping with a rising power seek a strategically neutral ground between balancing and bandwagoning (Goh, 2007; Ciorciari, 2008; Koga, 2017). Notwithstanding the number of studies employing hedging in looking at inter-state relations, the absence of a clear conceptual and operational framework has led scholars to cast doubts over its analytic value (Ciorciari, 2008; Lim and Cooper, 2015; Kuik, 2016; Koga, 2017).

The literature on hedging has seen the concept used both in policy-making as well as academic analysis and referred to small and medium-power strategy. In earlier works, Foot (2006) claimed that in the post-Cold War unipolar system, China hedged vis-à-vis the U.S. by avoiding antagonizing Washington and through engagement with other states and state-based actors, while Medeiros argues that the dynamics between China and the U.S., both pursuing simultaneous economic engagement with each other as well as external security cooperation with other states, can be defined as mutual hedging (Medeiros, 2005, p.145). Goh, however, argued that hedging is rather a "luxury of the relatively weak only" (2006), an eloquent case being that of Southeast Asian states, which are hedging against both the risk of Chinese hegemony, and that of the US withdrawing from the region. In the same line, Ciorciari stresses that it is a dual-track strategy that entails governments hedging against security threats, as well as hedging with a powerful ally (2008, p.169).

Turning then to the understanding of hedging as characteristic of secondary states, it is most commonly conceptualized as a mixed policy approach, encompassing opposing and counteracting elements – economic engagement and security ties, meant to ensure stability in the region (Chung, 2004; Goh, 2006; 2007; Hiep, 2013; Kuik, 2016; Koga, 2017).

An essential aspect that is sometimes referred to in the literature on hedging is the stress placed on risk, contrasting with the traditional focus on threat in the balancing-bandwagoning model. In studies on hedging, risk is generally associated with structural uncertainty and the level of power competition in the international system, stemming from China's ascent and the erosion of American presence, which have rendered threats to become “more diffused and less straightforward” (Kuik, 2016, p.506). Relating to the risks associated with the current distribution of power, hedging is then a natural strategic option specific to circumstances of high stakes and high uncertainty (Kuik, 2008; 2016). Kuik argues that to be considered hedging, this behavior is dependent on three factors, specifically the absence of an immediate threat; the absence of ideological fault-lines; and the absence of great power competition (2008, p.165).

Another determinant factor for the hedging behavior employed by secondary states is found at the unit level, where domestic politics, more specifically elite legitimation, represents an intervening variable in the level of systemic pressure and opportunities perceived (ibid., p.514). Foreign policy analysis (FPA) studies have shown that the personalization of foreign policy decision-making is a unit-level phenomenon affecting security responses, that can be observed in states which are not economically dependent on a great power (Zha, 2015; Tran, 2019).

While in this thesis the stress placed upon the notion of risk represents a key feature of the hedging framework, this is not always the case in the larger body of literature on hedging, where it is often understood as a middle position between balancing and bandwagoning. Referring to the ASEAN states' responses to the challenge presented by China's rise, Kuik depicts them as “neither pure-balancing nor pure-bandwagoning, but a two-pronged and opposite approach” (Kuik, 2016, p.503).

The importance of material capabilities, specifically military and economic, is stressed in studies where hedging is conceptualized as a middle-position strategy on the balancing-bandwagoning axis, because material capabilities are a variable that is also found within the traditional balancing-bandwagoning theory (Koga, 2017). Hence, this approach takes economic and military cooperation as primary variables in strategic hedging, and the diplomatic variable becomes relevant when the former two do not provide a clear enough identification of either balancing or bandwagoning (ibid., p.641).

The importance of economic interaction has been further highlighted in research. In an FPA study on decision-making in Thailand and the Philippines, Zha (2015) found that economic dependence on a great power, namely China, places a political constraint on independent foreign policy-making. For the same reason, Koga argues that relative economic gain matters in determining the specificity of alignment (2017, p.641). Studying Vietnam's hedging towards China, Hiep also argues that favorable engagement with a great power for economic gains has security implications for the secondary state and should be considered an act of bandwagoning (Hiep, 2013, p.337). Hence, his assessment of Vietnam's hedging strategy is one based on "deference and defiance" (ibid., p.334) and made up of four components: economic pragmatism, direct engagement, hard balancing, and soft balancing – the former two refer to Vietnam's efforts to engage China economically and politically and enhance cooperation, while the latter refer to balancing in the form of military modernization and external multilateral agreements (ibid., p.335).

In the Southeast Asian context, engagement with China is frequently included as a component of strategic hedging. Goh's conceptual framework similarly highlights the multi-leveled engagement of China, indirect or soft balancing, and enmeshing of other regional powers, to ensure a stable regional order and hedge against Chinese domination (2007, p.825-826). However, Goh argues that China's ascent in the Asia-Pacific has determined the rise of a 'balance of influence' discourse, which minimizes the importance of hard power by contrast with 'soft influence' (ibid., p.829). Ciorciari's (2008) 'balance of influence' theory highlights the growing importance of military, economic, institutional, and ideational interaction as a key feature of the region in the context of a rising China. In Ciorciari's work, hedging is a form of limited alignment which makes it feasible for secondary states to pursue advantageous engagement with a great power's rivals while reducing risks.

In a comprehensive assessment framework, Lim and Cooper (2015) diverge from previous conceptualizations to define hedging as a costly strategy that is contingent on the trade-off element between interests of autonomy and alignment, and which is consequently dependent on signal ambiguity regarding great power alignment. An important distinction in their framework is that from the balancing-bandwagoning axis, hedging representing "another dimension" in secondary states' security choices "based on their intentional ambiguity" (ibid., p.712). Koga also highlights ambiguity as inherent to hedging, albeit in his view, it can come as an unintended consequence and can even prove counterproductive (2016, p.638-639). A further difference is that, while several studies have integrated economic and political factors

as alignment signals, Lim and Cooper see the current economic interdependence and diplomatic engagement as too ingrained in the current international system to effectively signal alignment (ibid., p.708).

2.3 Philippine foreign policy in the hedging literature

With the rise of China beginning at the end of the twentieth century, scholars have regarded hedging as “the melody of Southeast Asia’s international relations” (Haacke, 2019, p.385). However, in the aftermath of the 2008-2009 financial crisis and the relative erosion of American power in the region, the different conceptualizations and assessment methodologies have given way to different interpretations of whether and which Southeast Asian states are still employing strategic hedging.

There is a consensus in the earlier literature that hedging is the general regional strategy, given that Southeast Asian states acknowledge American military presence as a necessary stabilizing element in the region (Chung, 2004; Ciorciari, 2008). Ensuring military access for the US by treaty allies Philippines and Thailand as well as non-treaty partners is viewed as an inherent trait of hedging, which entails simultaneous engagement policies and indirect balancing policies Goh (2007).

Taking the case of the Philippines, Kuik (2016) finds that its foreign policy has shifted from a hedging strategy largely based on indirect balancing, to direct balancing after 2010, in the context of the increasing threat from China and the “stronger commitment of the US in the eyes of the ruling elite” (p.512). According to Kuik, the Philippines was the only ASEAN state which has shifted to balancing, while the others have continued to hedge (p.512).

In Zhao and Qi’s study (2016), the Philippines along with Vietnam and Japan are the East Asian countries that have responded to the rising China by engaging in geostrategic balance, rather than by pursuing a hedging strategy. In their analysis, geostrategic balance is a way of confronting China “directly to check China’s ambitions for territorial aggrandizement” (p.385).

In a recent study of Southeast Asian responses to China’s energy diplomacy in the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea, employing Kuik’s understanding of hedging as a mixed-policy approach of counteracting ‘risk contingency’ and ‘return-maximising’ policies, Strating (2020) claims that the Philippines, along with Vietnam, has maintained a hedging strategy in response to China. Nonetheless, the tensions in the South China Sea dispute have determined Vietnam to move increasingly into Washington’s orbit (p.102), while the Philippines has continued to

“operate in the middle ground of hedging”, albeit shifting its focus from military to economic priorities (p.109).

2.4 Identifying a literature gap

As can be seen in the previous sections, the responses of Southeast Asian states in the face of growing Chinese power and uncertainty regarding American commitment have been extensively researched. In the past decade, however, the intensifying rivalry between China and the United States has created a backdrop against which the policy strategies of individual countries have changed, and the line between hedging and balancing has become more difficult to define. Existing studies have often defined hedging in the same terms as those of the balance-of-power theory, thus composed of elements of both balancing and bandwagoning. Consequently, in a significant part of the literature, hedging behavior has been measured according to the same variables, related to material capabilities.

The modified conceptual and methodological framework proposed by Jürgen Haacke takes a different approach, understanding hedging as a risk-mitigating behavior, rather than as an overarching or quasi-grand strategy covering multiple policy domains (2019, p.392). Moreover, it acknowledges the distinction between hedging and balancing and reconsiders the indicators of assessment accordingly.

This modified framework presents an opportunity to analyze the policy response of secondary states when facing an environment of security risks. Employing the present conceptualization of hedging as a risk management strategy and referring to a period that includes two presidential administrations, I look at the Philippine response to developments in the South China Sea in an attempt to contribute to the understanding of the Southeast Asian state behavior with respect to security challenges. At the same time, the analysis attempts to identify factors that influence the implementation of a hedging strategy as risk mitigation.

This study aims to contribute to the literature on strategic behavior by offering both an empirical as well as a theoretical input to the framework of hedging as risk management. In Haacke’s modified conceptual and methodological framework, hedging is understood as a distinct dimension from balancing and bandwagoning, therefore it is not determined solely by material power considerations. While examining the rationale behind security and alignment strategies goes beyond the scope of this thesis, by analyzing the Philippine response, it aims to uncover some of the contributing factors.

3. Theoretical framework

As can be observed from the literature review, there is a certain extent of disagreement regarding the assessment of secondary state behavior in the face of a changing international power structure. These assessment variations occur on the one hand due to the absence of a clear, standardized conceptual and methodological framework where the behavior of secondary states in an increasingly multipolar world is concerned and, on the other hand, due to domestic conditions, which increase the number of variables and hence the complexity of particular cases. For this reason, Rosecrance asserts that explaining how nations behave has to include both international and domestic variables (2008).

Hence, the thesis aims to understand these responses by employing a hedging as risk management strategy perspective, embedded under neoclassical realism. As opposed to previous theoretical and empirical analyses, this approach heavily relies on the conceptual distinction between risk and threat and is, therefore, more sensitive to the intricate character of modern-day power politics.

The thesis situates itself more widely under realism and the balance-of-threat theory (Walt, 1985). According to Rosecrance, “even ‘appeasers’ are motivated by long-term power considerations” (ibid., p.717), in an international system that is undergoing changes, and where “power is probably becoming less tangible and maximization becoming more long term” (ibid., p.723). Therefore, the analysis is in agreement with the realist assumption that power considerations underlie even situations in which realist theory seems to have failed.

The current chapter elaborates on these theoretical considerations and is divided into three sections, accordingly. The first subsection revises the postulates of neorealism and Walt’s balance-of-threat theory. The second subsection explains Haacke’s conceptualization of hedging behavior as a risk management strategy, which is broken down into three criteria in the analysis. Finally, the third subsection addresses the conceptual difference between security risks and security threats, a fundamental aspect of the framework.

3.1 Neorealism and the balance-of-threat

The behavior of states dealing with power transitions and the rise of challenging powers has long been a focus of the realist vein. The twentieth century has also seen the advance of the neorealist school, largely formulated by Kenneth N. Waltz, who explicated how states behaved in the anarchical international system according to a balance of power logic (1979, 1990). As posited by Waltz, in an international system where states are governed by material capabilities

and a natural state of war (1979, p.102), states are “unitary actors who, at a minimum, seek their own preservation and, at a maximum, drive for universal domination” (ibid., p.118). Hence, in the pursuit of security, they either *balance* against, or *bandwagon* with the stronger power, and they do so “whether some or all states consciously aim to establish and maintain a balance, or whether some or all states aim for universal domination” (ibid., p.119).

Refining and adjusting neorealist thinking and the balance of power theory according to the new reality of the post-Cold War security environment, Walt argued instead that “rather than allying in response to power alone, it is more accurate to say that states will ally with or against the most *threatening* power” (1985, p.8-9). In this sense, Walt argued, material power is only one of the three key variables: aggregate capabilities (overall military and economic capabilities), geographical proximity, and the perception of aggressive intentions (Walt, 1985; Wohlforth, 2008).

While balancing is considered to be the dominant tendency in the system, according to neorealist beliefs, it is more likely the case for strong states (Waltz, 1979), whereas smaller and weaker states that are in close proximity to a rising or threatening power are more likely to accommodate it and bandwagon, especially in the absence of potential allies or sufficient capabilities (Walt, 1985, p.18).

Stemming from Walt's formulation of the balance of threat, this research departs from the assumption that China's actions and stance in the SCS represent a security concern and determines the Philippines to implement a certain foreign policy response. In terms of material capabilities, China has seen impressive economic growth in the past decades, leading to a massive accumulation of international economic influence as the world's second-largest economy, and hence raising political and military influence (Fu, cited in Glosny, 2016, p.34), reverberated worldwide and especially in the region. China also represents a potential challenge to the Philippines from the point of view of geographical proximity, which implies adjacent territories that have become focal points of dispute for sovereignty or access to natural resources. Finally, it is assumed that China is a potential threat to the Philippines in light of its assertive intentions in the South China Sea, perceived as aggressive by other claimant states.

3.2 Hedging as a risk management strategy

As elaborated before in the literature review, hedging is conceptualized in IR as a type of state behavior, a foreign policy approach (Korolev, 2019, p.423) that differs from traditional

alignment choices primarily because it is a result of sub-systemic intervening variables, rather than of systemic forces (ibid., p.421).

The working definition that this thesis adopts is the one proposed by Jürgen Haacke (2019), where hedging is seen as a “strategy to manage security risks” (ibid., p.393), hence a response to security risks, as opposed to balancing and bandwagoning, which are responses to security threats. This definition focuses on the concept of risk and stresses the essential distinction between security risks and security threats, which is decisive for the type of action that is taken. In this sense, rather than following an action-reaction dynamic, security risks are “probabilistic” and to manage them, an “anticipatory and proactive” approach is needed (ibid., p.394).

This definition diverges from previous conceptualizations, which most commonly understand hedging as a form of quasi-grand strategy, security strategy, or a “mixed policy” or “middle position” approach (ibid., p.392).

The framework proposed by Haacke is consistent with the argument that hedging is inherently a separate dimension from balancing and bandwagoning due to the risk-threat distinction, as found also in Lim and Cooper (2015) and Korolev (2019), and therefore stresses that we should not “define one in terms of the other” (Haacke, 2019, p.393). This being said, he acknowledges that ways of mitigating security risk vary from context to context and may involve self-help measures, engagement with the actor who poses the risk, or with other actors to minimize the prospect of the risk materializing (ibid., p.393).

Haacke’s framework offers three indicators for the assessment of secondary state behavior in response to security challenges, as follows (ibid., p.394-396):

Indicator 1 is the way in which developments in the matter under discussion are depicted at an official level, including by security and foreign policy executives; specifically, whether they are constructed as potential security risks, as indicated by documents such as security and defense white papers. However, if the matter is clearly approached as a challenge that compromises state security interests, for instance in public discourse, it is an indicator of a perceived security threat and hence more illustrative of balancing.

Indicator 2 is the nature of a state’s measures of military capabilities enhancement (MCE), where we look at both internal MCE measures, such as improvements to the weapons systems and technologies, as well as external MCE measures, among which those aimed at improving interoperability. Beyond the internal or external nature of MCE measures, the analysis should also look at the rationale behind the MCE measures, which in the case of hedging would concern

ascertaining and mitigating risks. If they are instead taken on an action-reaction basis, as a response to particular threats, it would imply that the state is balancing rather than hedging.

Indicator 3 is whether the secondary state signals ambiguity about future alignment decisions, with the aim of reducing a security risk. This indicator draws on Lim and Cooper's (2015) work, where hedging is an active trade-off between autonomy and alignment. In this framework, a state is hedging if it sends ambiguous signals to the competing powers regarding alignment, as opposed to what a part of the hedging literature suggests (Haacke, 2019, p.396). Ambiguity is lacking, however, if a state is considering an internal balancing strategy to contain a security threat posed by a challenging power, or if it signals the intent to either bandwagon or opt for alignment with a competing power, in the event that the security threat materializes (*ibid.*, p.396).

3.3 Security risks and security threats

The theory on the nature of the security environment in the post-Cold War and globalization era posits that it has undergone significant changes towards the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first, especially in what concerns security thinking, leading to a "reconceptualization of security" (Brauch, 2011, p.61). This is due to the fact that Western countries now became "more concerned with averting possible negative futures than attaining historically driven futures and utopias" (Heng, 2006, p.33), thus shifting the focus toward a risk management paradigm, where risk management is largely construed as "anticipatory self-defense" (*ibid.*, p.20).

This thesis relies mostly on Heng's (2006) and Brauch's (2011) works to understand and guide the interpretation and analysis, specifically using their conceptualizations of security risks and security threats.

Brauch approaches the concept of security challenges by explaining that in the realist vein, "objective security is achieved when the dangers posed by manifold threats, challenges, vulnerabilities and risks are avoided, prevented, managed, coped with, mitigated and adapted to by individuals, societal groups, the state or regional or global international organizations" (2011, p.61). Hence, from a risk management perspective, the success of mitigating risks is difficult to quantify, as "non-events are indicators of success" (Heng, 2006, p.54).

Another aspect to be noted is the constructivist nature of risk, as something socially and culturally constructed through speech acts, an idea that lay at the foundation of the Copenhagen School's securitization theory (*ibid.*, p.41). Furthermore, in this thesis, the concept of risk is

approached from a “realist constructivist perspective” influenced by Beck’s *World Risk Society* (1999, cited in *ibid.*), where real, objective risks exist, but they “do not simply exist ‘in themselves’”, and the manner in which the nature of risk is conceptualized differs among societies (*ibid.*, p.41). In practice, according to Beck, risks being very much reliant on speech acts, they become political issues also when people are made aware of them by the media or by politicians. Hence, the focus of this research is on how secondary states perceive, construct, and consequently act in response to security challenges in the South China Sea, and to this end, the following paragraphs lay down the theoretical and conceptual differences between security risks and security threats.

When it comes to threats, in security studies and in policy, the concept is often discussed within the national security paradigm, stemming from the Cold War tradition of threat assessment (Brauch, 2011). In that particular context, Buzan differentiated between military, economic, and ecological threats, remarking that military threats “occupy the traditional heart of national security concerns” (1983, p.75-76). There is an extensive classification that Buzan proposes for threat analysis, from the level of threat – understood as the range of possible effects – to the range of objectives – specific or general – to whether it is a direct or an indirect threat, and so on; moreover, Buzan remarks, strong states tend to encounter challenges coming from the outside, while weaker states can be challenged from the outside as well as inside factors (*ibid.*, p.75-83).

On the other hand, risks have a broader scope conceptually. Heng explains (2006) how, in contrast to the Old Security Paradigm, which defined threat in military terms according to the balance of power, risk incorporates “the likely scale of unwanted consequences, probability, frequency and duration” and emphasizes “the probability and magnitude of consequences” (*ibid.*, p.48-49). In the ‘new risk paradigm’, the focus shifts from the immediate to the level of “potentiality and probable magnitude of consequences” (*ibid.*, p.49).

Considering the points above, the following conceptual differences indicated by Heng (2006, p.50) can be underscored so as to assist the assessment of the Philippine position vis-à-vis the situation in the SCS. First and foremost, risk is based on probabilities and consequences, while threat entails capabilities and intentions. Secondly, in terms of the type of dynamic that they elicit, threat is inherently based on an action-reaction dynamic (specific to the security dilemma), while risk is more “imprecise and uncertain, requiring proactive management” (*ibid.*, p.50). Thirdly, they differ in light of the psychological reactions that they generate – threat

generates fear, which tends to be “more immediate, specific and focused”, while risk generates anxiety, which “thrives on uncertainty” (ibid., p.50).

4. Methodological approach

The present chapter lies down the methodological considerations of this study, and is divided into five subsections. The first subsection indicates the research question and sub-question guiding the thesis, and is followed by reflections on the ontological and epistemological approach to the research problem. The research design of the study is discussed in the third subsection, followed by a presentation of the methods of data collection and analysis that were employed. Finally, the fifth subsection is dedicated to methodological challenges and ethical considerations.

4.1 Research question

The research question that this thesis aims to answer is: *How has the behavior of the Philippines evolved from 2011 to 2021, in light of developments in the South China Sea?* This particular question was formulated based on criteria suggested by A. Bryman, namely that research questions should be clear, researchable, neither too broad nor too narrow, and, last but not least, they should allow for the possibility to make an original contribution to the topic (2012, p.90). In order to contribute to the analysis of Philippine strategic behavior, the following sub-question was also addressed:

- What considerations determined the Philippines to employ hedging behavior?

4.2 Ontological and epistemological positioning

The philosophical assumptions underlying this research stem from two considerations: first, the exploratory nature of this study on social behavior, and secondly, the nature of the topic under discussion, which is the behavior of states in the face of changes at the systemic- and sub-systemic-level.

From an ontological perspective, which refers to how the nature of reality is understood (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p.54), this thesis takes a constructivist approach, which posits that “social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors”, and hence that social phenomena, such as state behavior, are “not only produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision” (Bryman, 2012, p.33). This philosophical positioning is opposed to objectivism, and thus compatible with the direction of this study, given that the latter deals with concepts such as *threat* and *risk*, which “do not have built-in essences” (ibid., p.34), but are constructed socially, through interaction.

Epistemology, on the other hand, refers to the question of what should be regarded as knowledge (Bryman, 2012; Creswell and Poth, 2018); in social research such as this thesis, interpretivism is taken as a framework that “respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action” (Bryman, 2012, p.30). Hence, the present thesis employs an interpretivist perspective to look at how systemic- and sub-systemic-level variables influence the manner in which reality is constructed.

4.3 Research design

This thesis is designed as a single case study, covering the time frame 2011 to 2021, where the unit of analysis is the nation-state. Specifically, it examines the state behavior of the Philippines in light of security developments in the South China Sea, over two presidential administrations.

The case study was chosen as research design with several considerations in mind, relating to both research goals as well as empirical aspects. First, the case study method is often used for answering to ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions and identifying an underlying process (Kaarbo and Beasley, 1999, p.389). In this, it is compatible with the aim and focus of this particular research problem, which is to examine the evolution of state behavior under changing conditions at both the unit level and within the international system. The issue of context is the second aspect justifying the use of the case study design, as “the phenomenon is studied as it occurs within its context, and neither the phenomenon nor the context are directly manipulated by the researcher” (ibid., p.373). A third advantage of the single and small-N case study method is that it allows for depth of analysis in a way that is more difficult to accomplish through large-N cross-case analysis (Gerring, 2009, p.106). In this sense, it does not aim only to explain the occurrence of a phenomenon, but also to understand “why it occurred when it did and in the way that it did” (ibid., p.106), therefore offering a more holistic approach (Kaarbo and Beasley, 1999; Gerring, 2009).

4.4 Methods and data collection

The thesis employs qualitative methods to examine the strategic behavior of the Philippines. Specifically, qualitative content analysis was used to look at the data, which consists of recorded human communications on the foreign policy of the Philippines with respect to the SCS, from 2011 to 2021.

In order to examine the nature and rationale of Philippine strategic behavior in terms of whether or not it displays hedging behavior, security and defense white papers, position papers, and

policy statements, as well as official press communications and presidential interviews have been studied as primary data. The process relied on qualitative content analysis to assess the hedging criteria proposed by Haacke (2019), as explained in the previous sections, with the aim of answering the research question. The analysis also attempted to identify the factors which influenced the adoption of hedging as a risk management strategy and thus answer the sub-question.

The data collection was preceded by a close reading of developments in the SCS from 2011 to 2021, in order to get a good grasp of the timeline and the way in which claimant states – including the Philippines – are involved in the dispute. The necessary empirical data was collected mainly from the National Government Portal of the Philippines – GOV.PH, which is a single website reuniting all online government content and web pages (GOVPH, n.d.), including that of the Presidential Communications Operations Office, the Department of National Defense, and the Department of Foreign Affairs. GOV.PH was especially useful because it contains official translations for much of the published content, therefore diminishing the limitations posed by the language barrier. Two methods have been used in order to find relevant empirical sources: first, a search query was done on GOV.PH using keywords such as *West Philippine Sea*, *China*, and *South China Sea*, in order to bring up data related to the focus issue of the research. Afterward, a closer query was done by selecting published communications that were particularly related to important developments in the issue, for instance, official speeches in which the President and other foreign affairs executives offered an official position on China's actions. Additional sources were considered relevant and used in the analysis – the annual State Of the Nation Addresses (SONA) made by the incumbent President, which are important because, as the name suggests, they elaborate on the most relevant domestic and external issues impacting the Philippines, and the manner in which the SCS issue is touched upon (or avoided altogether) offers notable insights for the analysis; as previously mentioned, white papers were also collected as essential sources, and they consisted in the National Security Policy documents for 2011-2016 and 2017-2022, the 2012 Defense White Paper, the National Defense Strategy for 2018-2022, and the 2018 National Security Strategy. Other published documents included in the analysis were administrative orders, reports, position papers, and the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement signed between the Philippines and the US. Last but not least, the thesis used news pieces from reputable local and international newspapers such as Bloomberg, Foreign Affairs, The New York Times, PhilStar, Rappler, and Reuters, where they covered relevant official statements which were not otherwise

accessible through GOV.PH. The data collection process explained above yielded 58 selected sources in all, from 2011 to 2021, with an average of five sources per year.

With respect to methods, the research was done using qualitative content analysis (CA), with several merits in this case. On the one hand, CA allows the researcher to study certain processes – foreign policy changes, in this case – which occur over a longer period (Babbie, 2010, p.344). Moreover, by employing data that is already available, CA allows the researcher to correct errors more easily, if necessary, having to redo only a part of the project, in contrast to field methods for instance (ibid.). Finally, the strength of content analysis lies in the fact that it is an unobtrusive method, meaning that the researcher studies social behavior without affecting it in any way (ibid.), where research can be done in a systematic and replicable manner, using predetermined categories for the analysis of the empirical data (Bryman, 2012, p.590).

To ensure that both depth (validity), and specificity (reliability) were preserved in the coding and study of the material, the thesis employed both manifest and latent analysis (Babbie, 2010, p.339); in other words, where official sources are concerned, both the concrete terms, as well as the underlying meaning of communications, were examined.

The analysis of the Philippine response and strategic behavior towards the SCS was based on a coding process assisted by the NVivo software. To this end, the analysis of state behavior relied on both deductive and inductive coding. In the first instance, a series of codes were produced after examining the theory, derived specifically from Haacke's proposed framework on hedging as risk management, as well as Lim and Cooper's spectrum of alignment behavior and, finally, from the theoretical conceptualization of risk as opposed to threat, relying mainly on Heng and Buzan. Upon perusing the collected data, several other codes emerged, all of which assigned to particular and repeating instances and themes identified in the documents; this was particularly the case with codes related to the rhetoric on China and the US respectively, such as *acknowledgment of great power status, financial dependency, or lack of trust*.

4.5 Reflexivity: challenges and ethical considerations

As previously explained, where the method of data collection and analysis is concerned, using qualitative content analysis has many advantages. As an unobtrusive research method, the potential for bias is reduced, in contrast to participant-reliant methods (Halperin and Heath, 2012, p.318). However, several aspects have come across as challenges.

Where the selected data is concerned, ethical considerations arise when working with published documents, and hence it is imperative that they are assessed to some extent before using them

in a study. Scott's four criteria of assessment for the quality of documents (1990, cited in Bryman, 2012, p.544) were taken into consideration for this thesis: authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning.

Credibility and representativeness are worth paying close attention to in the case of official documents (ibid., p.550). However, as potential leadership biases are of interest in this thesis, and due to the qualitative nature of the study, neither of the two criteria present particular challenges. While the issue of authenticity does not come up with official documents published on government websites, it is of great importance in the collection of material derived from other private sources and the internet. For this reason, the assessment of the textual material according to the issues of authenticity and credibility represented an important part of the data collection process.

Another challenge that arose is related to data accessibility and language fluency. It is very rarely the case that the researcher employing content analysis would have unrestricted access to archives, databases, and all the data that is required. Moreover, "even when complete access is possible, documents only give you a glimpse into those items that were recorded into an organization's institutional memory" (Lamont, 2015, p.99). The language aspect contributes as a challenge to the data collection, as it is even more difficult for the researcher to have access to sufficient material when they are not fluent in the respective language. In the case of texts collected for this study, official documents, reports, and white papers are often published along with the official English translation; hence, there is no doubt that they are relevant for the analysis. However, lacking any knowledge of Tagalog presented a notable obstacle in the selection of statements, press outlets, and news pieces that are not specifically aimed at the international public and which are not accompanied by an official English translation.

The problem of data accessibility represented a significant one as in the early days of this research, I intended to conduct a comparative case study analysis on the Philippines and Vietnam, the two most actively involved claimant states in the South China Sea dispute with China, selected based on Przeworski and Teune's (1970) 'Most Similar Systems' Design. However, I decided to focus this study solely on the Philippine case, due to significant difficulties that came about in accessing the Vietnamese government websites and relevant written communications with a reliable English translation, which would have potentially led to an imbalanced account of the two states' behavior, given the notable differences in the body of collected data.

Bearing these points in mind, my own status as a Western student doing research on Philippine foreign policy without language skills in Tagalog or access to proficient translation is to be considered a limitation of this study.

5. Findings and analysis

The following section presents the results of the data collection, processed through qualitative content analysis and guided by the theoretical framework of hedging as a risk management strategy. Operationalizing this modified framework entailed using a set of pre-defined codes based on the methodological guidelines, specifically related to the three Indicators, and underlying attitudes related to the risk/threat differentiation. The process of coding and analysis was assisted by the NVivo software and consisted in breaking down the selected data sources to identify the measures and attitudes underpinning the Philippine foreign policy on China and the South China Sea. As explained in the previous sections, the collected data will be presented starting from the assumption that at the leadership level, a clear foreign policy shift can be observed beginning with 2016, characterized by the pursuit of closer ties with China, a lukewarm response to the favorable Arbitration award, and distancing from the strong Philippine-US cooperation; hence, the foreign policy response of the Philippines towards the SCS issue will be examined under two timespans and the respective subsections: 2011 to 2016 and 2016 to 2021, in order to highlight the elements of change and the underlying conditions that can account for it. The empirical material that was retrieved will be subjected to analysis using the three Indicators – the rhetoric on SCS developments, MCE measures, and alignment signals – to highlight shifting attitudes where they occur, supported in this Findings chapter with relevant fragments from the selected sources.

5.1 The period 2011 to 2016: Aquino confronting China

After the end of the Cold War and the termination of the 1947 Military Base Agreement with the United States, the Philippines' relationship with China has seen ups and downs, while generally, incumbent administrations struggled to maintain close relations with the US and advance the American strategic presence in the region. In 2010, Benigno Aquino III took over the presidential mandate in the aftermath of a “golden age of partnership” with China (Macapagal-Arroyo, 2005) under President Macapagal-Arroyo. President Aquino's mandate coincided with a revival of the crisis in the South China Sea, involving Vietnam and the Philippines as the forefront opponents to Chinese advancing actions, which offered the context for the Aquino's 180-degree foreign policy shift from his predecessor's.

5.1.1 *The perception of developments in the South China Sea*

By 2011, stand-offs in the contested areas of SCS, including several incidents where Chinese paramilitary harassed Vietnamese and Philippine ships (Heydarian, 2016, p.348), have also

prompted the US to step in and announce its commitment to maintaining security in the region, urging for a rules-based resolution. In mid-2010, US Secretary of State Clinton affirmed the freedom of navigation as an issue of national interest for Washington (ibid., p.348).

In June 2011, following the incident involving the harassment of a Philippine seismic survey ship by Chinese patrol boats at Reed Bank, 85 nautical miles off the coast of Palawan, Foreign Secretary Del Rosario referred to the necessity of a “rules-based regime in the South China Sea” in the context of what he named an aggressive violation of the 2002 Declaration of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea provision on refraining from actions that would complicate disputes (Del Rosario, 2011).

The violation of sovereignty and jurisdiction is a theme that also resurfaces, beginning with 2011, in President Aquino’s speeches, recurring throughout his State of the Nation Addresses, specifically in three of the five analyzed SONAs of the Aquino administration, where he depicts the SCS as an issue of national security, albeit not naming China directly. In particular, a definite and drastic change of tone can be observed during the President’s Second SONA, when he associates the Chinese incursion into Reed (Recto) Bank with a “threat in our own backyard”:

“There was a time when we couldn’t appropriately respond to threats in our own backyard. Now, our message to the world is clear: What is ours is ours; setting foot on Recto Bank is no different from setting foot on Recto Avenue.” (cited in Official Gazette, 2011)

In the same Address, President Aquino hinted for the first time at the “possibility of elevating the case on the West Philippine Sea to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea” and declared that the Philippines is “ready to protect what is ours” (ibid.), a strong and clear departure from the Arroyo administration’s preference of economic interests over SCS disputes (Tran, 2019, p.627).

The April 2012 stand-off in the Scarborough Shoal (Bajo de Masinloc), when the Philippine guards found Chinese fishermen exploiting marine resources (Heydarian, 2016, p.349), represented one of the most serious incidents in the West Philippine Sea – the maritime area on the western part of the Philippine archipelago (Official Gazette, 2012a) – and resulted in the Philippines’ loss of effective control over the reef. The Philippines forces withdrew, after a deal mediated by the US, with respect to which both sides were to leave, but which the Chinese ignored, remaining and taking control of the reef instead (Bradsher, 2014). This prompted

Manila to file a formal objection via the international arbitration mechanism, backed by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Following the Scarborough Shoal incident, the nature of the official perception and rhetoric on the SCS dispute, as surfaced in the collected data from this period, related to an action-reaction dynamic, characteristic of a security threat, a dynamic which is reinforced in many of the analyzed pieces in relation with the Philippine justification for initiating the arbitration:

“There are those who say that we should let Bajo de Masinloc go; we should avoid the trouble. But if someone entered your yard and told you he owned it, would you agree? Would it be right to give away that which is rightfully ours?”
(Aquino III, cited in Official Gazette, 2012a)

In the same line, the position paper published by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) after the Scarborough Shoal incident asserts the legal basis of the Philippine claim over the rocks of the Shoal as well as 12 nautical miles of adjacent waters, the former on the basis of “effective occupation and effective jurisdiction” (Official Gazette, 2012c), and the latter governed by UNCLOS. As before, Manila’s position on the security developments in the SCS is reinforced by references to the international law, and China’s actions are interpreted from this perspective, as can be seen from the frequent use of the term “violation”/“violated” with respect to sovereignty and jurisdiction, precisely seven times throughout the paper, e.g. (Official Gazette, 2012c):

“The actions of the Chinese fishing vessels are a serious violation of the Philippines’ sovereignty and maritime jurisdiction”

“(…) poaching of endangered marine resources is in violation of the Fisheries Code”

“(…) the current action of the Chinese surveillance vessels (...) is obviously inconsistent with its [the Philippines’] right of freedom of navigation and in violation of the sovereign rights of the Philippines under UNCLOS”

“(…) these poachers have likewise violated the sovereign rights of the Philippines under UNCLOS.”

“Said actions by the Chinese vessels are in violation of the sovereign right and jurisdiction of the Philippines to conduct marine research or studies in its EEZ.”

Importantly, under the Aquino administration, the confrontational message sent by the President, of China's actions as a serious threat to national sovereignty, was a unitary one across the political and diplomatic levels, and one which was articulated clearly and unequivocally not only at a discourse level, but also in official documents. The 2012 Defense White Paper features the issues in the SCS as a top priority to national security. The document specifies that "how perpetrators violate Philippine maritime policies and jurisdiction" is one of the concerns for which the capabilities of the armed forces are to be enhanced (Department of National Defense, 2012). This position is once again employed in the Guide Q & A on the Legal Track of the UNCLOS Arbitral Proceedings (Official Gazette, 2013a) published by the DFA following the UNCLOS Arbitral Proceedings against China: the legal action taken by the Philippines is justified with a sense of urgency, reviving the idea of an intruder in one's own home, and a need for solidarity with the President and his leadership:

"(...) we feel the time to act is now. If we do not act now, we will be in default."

"If someone forces himself into your house and tries to unlawfully take away what belongs to you, should you not take action against the intruder?"

"All Filipinos should stand behind the President to defend what is ours in accordance with the Philippine Constitution. (...) We should all stand united as one before the whole world to manifest the President's leadership on this issue."

Following the incidents at the Second Thomas Shoal (Ayungin Shoal) and Half Moon Shoal in 2014 and China's carrying out of construction on disputed islands and reefs, at the level of public discourse, Manila's confrontational tone towards China grew even more acute. The Philippine leader drew an indirect comparison to the situation in 1938, when the West failed to support Czechoslovakia in resisting the territorial demands of Nazi Germany, in remarks that "outraged Beijing" (Kiyoshi, 2015). Aquino made this reference twice, in 2014 and 2015:

"At what point do you say, 'Enough is enough'? Well, the world has to say it — remember that the Sudetenland was given in an attempt to appease Hitler to prevent World War II." (cited in Bradsher, 2014)

"If there was a vacuum, if the United States, which is the superpower, says 'We are not interested', perhaps there is no brake to ambitions of other countries. (...) The commentators on these documentaries were saying, 'If somebody said stop to (Adolf) Hitler at that point in time, or to Germany at that time, could we have avoided World War Two?'" (cited in Kiyoshi, 2015)

Later in 2015, the President's message was restated by Foreign Secretary Del Rosario, highlighting again the Philippines' unitary and unambiguous response to China's actions at a discourse level. Del Rosario reiterated the perception of an "obvious" expansionist agenda on China's part, "both economic and military", for which "they have selected the South China Sea as their lake" (cited in Weymouth, 2015), and which comes as a threat to the international order dominated by the US as the incumbent superpower:

"I think the international community should be vigilant (...) because it has the potential to change the international order. (...) You now have one superpower, which is the United States. I think if China's expansionist agenda, which is unlawful, is not curtailed, that could bring change." (cited in Weymouth, 2015).

Taking these aspects into account, evidence from the 2011-2016 period confirms that at the level of perception of developments in the SCS, the rhetoric both in public discourse and in official documents, including position papers and security and defense papers, was one defined by the presence of not a potential, but of a real threat to national security.

5.1.2 MCE measures

From 2011 to 2016, the Philippines implemented both internal and external MCE measures, and these reflected the same approach that was taken in public discourse in response to developments in the SCS, specifically in an effort to counter China's maritime expansion. In his Second SONA, when he referred to China's actions as a "threat in our backyard", President Aquino announced that "that time is over" when the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) did not have the capabilities to properly respond (cited in Official Gazette, 2011), announcing at the same time an upcoming process of upgrading and modernizing the AFP.

Both the 2011-2016 National Security Policy (NSP) and the 2012 Defense White Paper affirmed the protection of national integrity and strategic maritime interests as forefront security objectives (National Security Council of the Republic of the Philippines, 2011; Department of National Defense, 2012) and as a rationale for military capabilities enhancement. In this sense, the Defense White Paper indicates that the AFP Modernization Program and the Philippines Defense Reform (PDR) Program are to be synergized and enhanced through the Philippine Defense Transformation Program (PDT) (Department of National Defense, 2012, p.1).

In what concerns internal MCE measures, the PDT Program would thus cover the comprehensive augmentation of "appropriate strategic response forces", including the development of a three-tiered Navy fleet, strategic air strike force, missile-based and mine

warfare capabilities (ibid., p.10-11), qualitative improvements in command and control communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance (C4ISTAR) (ibid., p.20), as well as developing the defense and security infrastructure on islands occupied by the Philippines in disputed areas “in order to support and strengthen the PH claim to PH-occupied islands” (p.11). Furthermore, later in 2012, the Revised AFP Modernization Act was passed by Congress, galvanized by the Scarborough Shoal incident (Ortuoste, 2013, p.241). The Act provided for the enhancement of military capabilities to ensure that the AFP is able to address not only internal but also external security threats, to this end allocating supplementary resources for Air Force and Navy (Official Gazette, 2012d).

The Aquino administration also adopted significant external MCE measures. In this regard, the Defense White Paper refers to the development of interoperability with allied forces by “strengthening of international defense and security engagements” (Department of National Defense, 2012, p.12) and the expansion of “International Defense-Military Cooperation” for individual country and common interests in the protection of economic activities developed in international waters, but also for addressing “concerns on global geo-political dynamics, and major power rivalries” (ibid., p.18). Importantly, the document acknowledges the rise of challenges and concerns posed by an increasingly multipolar security context in the region characterized by “how claimant countries will behave in the West Philippine Sea (WPS), (...) how perpetrators violate Philippine maritime policies and jurisdiction; and, the high state of uncertainty” (ibid., p.10).

Specifically, the increased international defense and security cooperation with allied forces as external MCE consisted of military aid and procurements, including a bilateral visiting forces agreement (VFA) with Australia and procurement of supersonic fighter jets from South Korea (Takagi, 2022, p.7), and transfer of defense equipment and technology and a joint military drill with Japan (Tang, 2021, p.104). Last but not least, facilitated by the US Pivot to Asia strategy, President Aquino sought closer security relations with the US, as defined by the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). Signed in 2014, the EDCA offered access to American forces on a rotational basis for “security cooperation exercises; joint and combined training activities” and “humanitarian assistance and disaster relief activities”, while excluding the establishment of a “permanent military presence or base in the territory of the Philippines” (Philippines-US, 2014, p.1-3). Essentially, the Agreement aimed to constrain China’s expansion in the SCS by providing the US forces “a strategic footprint in Southeast Asia through rotational presence in Philippine territory” (Cruz De Castro, 2017).

Therefore, summing up the observations that can be made upon internal and external MCE measures implemented from 2011 to 2016, as reflected in the collected data, the Philippines pursued a strategic enhancement of its own capabilities on the one hand and an increased international security and defense cooperation on the other hand. Notably, these measures were taken as part of the Aquino III administration's security strategy in response to developments in the SCS, hence in an effort to contain China that is most illustrative of balancing and not of risk mitigation.

5.1.3 Alignment signals

Notwithstanding the Scarborough Shoal incident having set off the AFP modernization program for developing a "minimum credible defense posture" (Aquino, cited in Official Gazette, 2013b), the Philippines military is still among the weakest in the Asian region (Tran, 2019, p.633), which places significant constraints on its space for navigating this security dilemma.

Drawing on the previously presented findings, from the perspective of alignment, the signals that Manila has sent from 2011 to 2016 are defined by two important elements; first, the initiation of legal proceedings at the Arbitral Tribunal in 2013 to challenge the validity of China's maritime claims, and secondly, the signing of the EDCA to strengthen the US military presence in Southeast Asia and the SCS.

The US has long been perceived as a "positive stabilizing force" in the region (National Security Council of the Republic of the Philippines, 2011, p.12), and under the Aquino administration, strengthening the US-Philippines alliance was an important instrument in the strategy for acquiring security in the face of Chinese assertiveness, part of the "three major tools" Aquino relied on: "alliance, ASEAN, and international law" (Tomotaka and Hideo, 2016, p.159). The EDCA stood out as an opportunity for the two parties to further the 1951 MDT by establishing new means of military cooperation for an additional 10-year period (Philippines-US, 2014). However, during the Aquino administration and the 'rebalancing to Asia' strategy, Manila and Washington have taken many occasions to express their mutual commitment to the treaty, while making clear that strengthening the Philippine-US alliance is vital in the context of concerning developments in the SCS, including Scarborough Shoal (US Department of State, 2012). The Philippines has often reinforced the deep security partnership with its strategic ally and friend, and upheld the continuing relevance of the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT):

"The Philippines–U.S. alliance is stronger than ever, reflecting the deep and abiding ties linking our two nations." (Philippines-US, 2012)

“Our alliance remains an anchor for peace, stability, and prosperity in the Asia Pacific region.” (ibid.)

“The United States is a key ally, a strategic partner, and a reliable friend of the Philippines. With this visit, we reaffirm the deep partnership between our countries” (Aquino, cited in Official Gazette, 2014)

There is however a caveat, specifically the exact treaty obligations triggered in the event of aggression – the MDT specifies that a response is triggered in the case of an armed attack “on the metropolitan territory of either of the Parties, or on the Island territories under its jurisdiction in the Pacific Ocean, its armed forces, public vessels or aircraft in the Pacific” (Philippines-US, 1951), but it does not elaborate on what Philippine “metropolitan territory” consists of, hence allowing a certain extent of interpretation as to the limits of intervention (Ortuoste, 2013, p.244). Moreover, it was the US that refrained from offering a firm statement of opposition toward China. After signing the EDCA, when asked whether the US would intervene to defend the Philippines in case the situation in the SCS escalates, President Obama answered that “Our goal is not to counter China; our goal is not to contain China. Our goal is to make sure that international rules and norms are respected, and that includes in the area of maritime disputes” (cited in Sabillo, 2014), welcoming China’s “peaceful rise”, making clear that the Agreement is not directed at China, and affirming the importance of upholding the international law. Later in 2014, Foreign Secretary Del Rosario echoed a similar position, acknowledging and appreciating the positive role of China as a global actor, and stating that the Philippines “support its peaceful rise”, while underscoring its role in adhering to the rule of law as a responsible stakeholder (cited in Department Of Foreign Affairs, 2014).

Notwithstanding the above, the alignment signals sent by the Philippines from 2011 to 2016 can hardly be considered ambiguous, having ultimately been part of the Aquino administration’s confrontational stance against China’s actions, as part of a balancing strategy also facilitated by the US Pivot to Asia. Amid increasing tensions in the SCS, the Philippines also sought out closer security cooperation with Japan. The two states elevated their bilateral relations to a Strategic Partnership in 2011, which affirmed their shared security interests in what concerns maritime security based on compliance with the international law (Philippines-Japan, 2011). In 2015, the two governments upgraded the relationship to a Strengthened Strategic Partnership and affirmed their shared concerns with regard to “unilateral actions to change the status quo in the South China Sea”, stressing again the requirement that, under

international law, coastal states “refrain from unilateral actions that would cause permanent physical change (...) in areas pending final delimitation” (Philippines-Japan, 2015).

5.2 The period 2016 to 2021: Duterte hedging to manage security risks

In the months leading to the Presidential election, during the campaign, Rodrigo Roa Duterte took a tough position vis-a-vis China’s advances in the SCS, even pledging to ride a jet ski to the disputed Spratly Islands and plant the Philippine flag there (Paddock, 2016). In the same context, he also claimed that he would turn to Beijing for help in building a railway project to link Manila to his home region Mindanao and hinted at intentions of bilateral talks with China (ibid.). This may be considered a foretelling instance of Duterte’s approach to handling relations with China as President and Chief Architect of the country’s foreign relations, which has largely been considered “puzzling” (Tan, 2021, p.4), especially with respect to former President Aquino’s.

5.2.1 *The perception of developments in the South China Sea*

In contrast to his predecessor’s explicit opposition to Chinese encroachments and commitment to prioritize the defense of Philippine territories, Rodrigo Duterte made it clear soon after being sworn-in that going forward, the Philippine attitude toward the SCS issue would be much more tempered.

The analyzed empirical evidence suggests that on a rhetorical level, this shift consisted in avoiding affirming an official state position towards developments in the SCS and especially avoiding depicting them as potential threats to national security. The close analysis of Duterte’s annual SONA addresses reveals a subtle effort to counterbalance the reiteration of territorial and maritime sovereignty and jurisdiction as a forefront national interest with an evasive attitude towards China’s involvement in the dispute. For instance, after the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) concluded in July 2016 that China’s historical nine-dash-line claim to the SCS was not valid and that its construction of artificial islands in the Spratlys violated UNCLOS, thus providing the Philippines with “normative armour” (Tang, 2021, p.107), Duterte instead displayed a restrained approach. In his first SONA, addressed merely two weeks after the PCA ruling, the President stated that “we strongly affirm and respect the outcome of the case (...) as an important contribution to the ongoing efforts to pursue a peaceful resolution and management of our disputes”, while refraining from demanding that China comply with the decision (cited in Official Gazette, 2016b). Moreover, a few months later, Duterte expressed to the Chinese Ambassador that he would “keep silent” and “not use the judgment arbitral now”

(cited in Presidential Communications Operations Office, 2016c), and further asserted that “China, it’s not worthy, I don’t go to war” (cited in *ibid.*), signaling an emerging and recurrent theme in many of his subsequent statements throughout the mandate, namely the downplaying of developments in the SCS issue from actual threats to national sovereignty essentially to non-events. Indeed, during his participation at the ASEAN Summits in Laos in September 2016, Duterte briefly mentioned that he had “expressed the Philippines’ concern over the developments in South China Sea” (cited in Presidential Communications Operations Office, 2016a), and in 2017, asked by the press whether he would discuss China’s latest actions in the SCS at the ASEAN Summit held in April in Manila, he replied:

“Arbitral is simply entitlement. It’s not even a territorial thing. The only question at arbitral was entitlement, not jurisdiction, not even territory.” (cited in Serapio and Petty, 2017)

Accordingly, in the Chairman’s Statement, Duterte refrained from nominating China and softened ASEAN’s joint statement by affirming that “We took note of concerns expressed by some Leaders over recent developments in the area” (ASEAN, 2017). Later that year, suspicions were raised over the intensification of the presence of Chinese ships in Sandy Cay, a sandbar located in the West Philippine Sea. This event was again downplayed by Duterte with a rhetorical question: “Why should I defend a sandbar and kill the Filipinos because of a sandbar?” (cited in Ranada, 2017). He then argued that the Chinese ships are there to “patrol”, as they are “friends”, and further asserted “What invade? It’s not true, what they are saying. They are just there but they are not claiming anything.” (cited in *ibid.*).

Three aspects should be considered in understanding the nature and rationale of the positioning presented above. First, they occurred in tandem with increasingly antagonistic rhetoric on the US, albeit largely based on Duterte’s personal attitudes. Secondly, they occurred in the context of Duterte’s efforts to foster stronger economic as well as political relations with China, as indicated in official statements ever since the visit paid to Beijing at the Philippines-China Trade and Investment Forum in October, 2016. Third, Duterte’s statements of appeasement regarding China’s actions are often accompanied by remarks on the Philippines’ lack of comparable military power, which would render any opposition redundant and counterproductive.

On the one hand, Duterte framed the SCS dispute with China as an issue exacerbated by the US, claiming that it “hasn’t really exploded until the Americans made it to be” (cited in Serapio

and Petty, 2017) and that China is the one “who came first”, while “it’s only America who’s worried because they lost a territory” (Romero, 2018).

On the other hand, President Duterte’s approach toward China was strongly based on financial dependency, both in rhetoric and in policy. During the President’s visit to Beijing in October 2016, a significant part of his speech aimed at acknowledging China’s status as a “sincere” and “generous” economic superpower and at securing financial engagement with China as a loaner and partner in investment projects (cited in Presidential Communications Operations Office, 2016b). Following the visit, China pledged approximately \$24 billion in investment and loans as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Cheng, 2016).

Additionally, references made by Duterte with regards to the SCS are often related to the potential risk of escalating tensions if Manila adopts too assertive a stance on China’s behavior, leading to a military conflict in which the Philippines has no chance to prevail due to asymmetrical military power:

“Maybe give us time to build our forces also [laughter]. You have so much superiority but if it comes to a parity (...), maybe just maybe.” (cited in Official Gazette, 2016b)

“Why would I give away the lives of my soldiers and policemen in a battle which I cannot win?” (cited in Romero, 2018)

“I am not ready or inclined to accept the occurrence of more destruction, more widows and more orphans, should war, even on a limited scale, breaks out.” (cited in Official Gazette, 2019)

In light of the above, Duterte explained that the Philippine position – a “delicate balancing act” – is compelled by the necessity to avoid conflict and protect national waters and resources (cited in *ibid.*). Hence, at the level of discourse, developments in the SCS are constructed as security risks that are to be mitigated by employing a tempered approach, adjusted to “the times and the realities that we face today” (Duterte, cited in *ibid.*).

A change of tone away from the prevalence of the SCS issue is visible in security papers as well. While the 2011-2016 NSP openly called on China’s “clear encroachments into the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone” and the conflict in the West Philippine Sea (National Security Council of the Republic of the Philippines, 2011, p.13), the 2017-2022 NSP merely affirms the victory at the Arbitral Tribunal and states that the Philippines “will tread with prudence on this complex and delicate issue and will carefully calibrate its diplomatic moves

to avert the costly consequences of any potential outbreak of armed confrontations” (National Security Council of the Republic of the Philippines, 2017, p.13). Likewise, while the 2012 Defense White Paper underscored the real threat posed in the SCS by “perpetrators” who violate Philippine sovereignty, neither the 2018-2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS) (Department of National Defense, 2019b), nor the 2018 National Security Strategy (NSS) (National Security Council of the Republic of the Philippines, 2018) take a similarly oppositional stance, but focus on the need to create a legislative framework for defining sovereignty over the Philippines’ islands and reefs.

The year 2020 did, however, seem to signal a shift once again with regards to the Philippine position on the Arbitration Award and its interests in the SCS. On July 12th, 2020, on the Fourth Anniversary of the Award, the Department of Foreign Affairs issued a statement by Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin, in which he stated that the arbitration case is “a contribution of great significance and consequence to the peaceful settlement of disputes in the South China Sea”, that “China’s claim of historic rights to resources within the sea areas falling within the ‘nine-dash line’ had no basis in law”, and that “the award is non-negotiable” (Department Of Foreign Affairs, 2020b). The relevance of Secretary Locsin’s statement is that for the first time under the Duterte administration, the Philippines raised the Arbitration Award to officially ask China to comply. This position was further confirmed by President Duterte, in the official address to the United Nations General Assembly (Department Of Foreign Affairs, 2020a), as well as in 2021, when he echoed his predecessor by claiming that “gone are the days when the Philippines decides and acts in the shadows of great powers. We will assert what is rightfully ours and fight for what is rightfully due to the Filipino people” (Official Gazette, 2021). However, this seemingly more definite stance on the SCS issue was put under question again in 2021 following a new stand-off with Chinese fishing vessels massed at Whitsun Reef. In the aftermath of the incident, which had been met with clear opposition by both both Defense Secretary Locsin and Defense Secretary Lorenzana (Cruz De Castro, 2021), Duterte reverted to a more conciliatory tone, expressing his belief that “friendly relations between the Philippines and China will result in the peaceful resolution of this impasse” (cited in *ibid.*).

5.2.2 *MCE measures*

Under the Duterte administration, continuing the AFP Modernization Program was a highlight in what concerns MCE measures. As per the original plan implemented by President Aquino under the Armed Forces Modernization Act, the AFP Modernization Program was divided into three five-year phases called ‘horizons’, whereby the first would end in 2017, the second

horizon to be implemented from 2018 to 2022, and the third one from 2023 to 2028 (Cruz De Castro, 2018b). While under the Aquino administration, the foremost objective of the Program was enhancing the AFP's capacity for responding to external threats, after President Duterte took over the 'first horizon', the focus of these MCE measures shifted to domestic challenges, namely internal armed conflicts, as presented in the 2018 NSS (National Security Council of the Republic of the Philippines, 2018, p.8). Nonetheless, while departing from the previous administration's outlook, the NSS acknowledges that the geographical localization of the Philippines as "strategically straddled" in a point of "competing interests of superpowers" is a vulnerability, and in this sense reiterates the need to develop a "credible defense capacity" (ibid., p.9-10), the latter to entail increasing the capacity as well as deterrent capability of the Air Force and the Navy (ibid., p.34).

With regards to internal MCE measures, these have largely targeted the aforementioned modernization of the AFP and the Philippine National Police (PNP) (Maralit, 2022). Specific enhancements were qualitative measures such as Military Pilot Training programs, increased capability via acquisitions of an Air Defense Radar System and a flight simulator, and procurement projects under the Revised AFP Modernization Program to include "utility vehicles, drones, and other command and control fixed-wing aircraft" (Presidential Communications Operations Office, 2019). Transitioning to 'the second horizon', Duterte approved a \$5.6 billion allocation – over 3 times larger than the \$1.7 billion spent during the Aquino administration (Mogato, 2018) – to fund arms acquisitions for territorial defense as well. These included "amphibious assault vehicles, anti-submarine helicopters, multi-role vessels, and submarines" (Cruz De Castro, 2018b), six close-air support aircraft, 15 "Black Hawk" helicopters, and two new missile frigates, BRP Jose Rizal and BRP Antonio Luna (Nepomuceno, 2021). The Philippines has also improved its capacities for disaster response and domestic insurgencies and pirates with donations of military hardware, received from Australia, China, Japan, Russia, and the US (Mogato, 2017; 2018).

When it comes to external MCE measures, President Duterte has made significant attempts at reducing security cooperation with the US, no less than attempting to undo the EDCA, the VFA, and putting the MDT under question (Castro, 2020). However, these are aspects relating to the third criterion, pertaining to Philippine-US and Philippine-China relations, which will be dwelled upon in the next subsection. Effectively, the objective of 'independent foreign policy' seems to have consisted in continuing external MCE measures to improve interoperability and security response under the Duterte administration. These included the regular joint exercises

with the US, including the annual bilateral Balikatan exercise, which in 2018 was the largest of its kind up until that moment (Parameswaran, 2022); however, an important aspect to note here is that Duterte attempted to appease China at the expense of the Philippine-US alliance (Cruz De Castro, 2018a) by focusing the exercises on humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, cybersecurity, and counter-terrorism, essentially rendering the alliance “useless in constraining and deterring Chinese maritime expansion into the South China Sea” (ibid.). MCE measures have also included the launch of joint patrols in the Sulu Sea with Indonesia and Malaysia to counter piracy and terrorism (Official Gazette, 2018), in a joint mechanism that involves “information sharing, the exchange of liaison officers, sharing of assets and the forming of joint headquarters” (Philstar.com, 2017). Throughout the year 2018, the Philippines has also participated in joint exercises with China as well as other ASEAN member states and Australia, in the context of deepening involvement in the region (Matsuura and Tomikawa, 2019, p.110).

5.2.3 Alignment signals

In regards to the third indicator, there are the following central elements to consider: the objective of an ‘independent foreign policy’, and the pursuit of a ‘charm offensive’ towards China simultaneously with distancing from the traditional security cooperation with the United States.

First, the ‘independent foreign policy’ has been the leitmotif of the Duterte administration in terms of conducting relations with other states, but especially with the two competing powers. President Duterte first hinted at the essence of this approach in his Inaugural address, using the phrase “I have no friends to serve, I have no enemies to harm” (Official Gazette, 2016a), reiterated later in almost identical words by Foreign Secretary Cayetano (Department Of Foreign Affairs, 2017). The prominence of an independent foreign policy as objective of the new administration is illustrated by the fact that President Duterte employed the term in four of his six SONA addresses (Official Gazette, 2017; 2018; 2020; 2021), as well as by the fact that it appears in both the National Defense Strategy (Department of National Defense, 2019b) and the National Security Strategy (National Security Council of the Republic of the Philippines, 2018). Looking at the context in which President Duterte has used the concept serves the understanding of what is visioned through this approach:

“We pursue good relations with all nations anchored (...) on an independent foreign policy (...) and the basic tenets of sovereign equality, mutual respect and non-interference.” (cited in Official Gazette, 2017)

“We shall continue to reach out to all nations regardless of their prevailing political persuasions or proximity to or distance from our shores so long as these nations wish us well.” (cited in Official Gazette, 2018)

“We worked without fail to protect our rights in the South China Sea, neither beholden nor a pawn to anyone.” (cited in Official Gazette, 2020)

“(…) we continue to work with all nations and seek partnerships that work. Because despite differences, it still is an interdependent world where interests and objectives intersect.” (cited in Official Gazette, 2021)

Taking the above into consideration, we can see that at the level of discourse, the Duterte administration’s independent foreign policy is understood as an equidistant positioning vis-à-vis competing powers China and the US. Essentially, this is suggested by the intention to distance from the traditional Philippine-US alliance and, at the same time, seek improved relations and a more stable ground with China, in an equation where the Philippines is “neither beholden nor a pawn to anyone”.

Looking at what this approach entailed in practice, relations with the US were significantly strained under the Duterte administration due to unpredictable decisions such as announcing the Philippine separation from the United States “both the military but economics also” (cited in Presidential Communications Operations Office, 2016b), announcing that he would put an end to joint Philippine-US military drills so as not to upset China (cited in Associated Press, 2016), and moving to terminate the 1999 Visiting Forces Agreement (cited in Neuman and McCarthy, 2020). At the same time, while the aforementioned decisions put the implementation of the EDCA and MDT under question (Castro, 2020), both President Duterte and Foreign Secretary Lorenzana confirmed that the agreement remained in effect, albeit shifting its focus from maritime defense to humanitarian assistance and counterterrorism (Lorenzana cited in Fonbuena, 2017), as was the case with the annual Balikatan exercise (Cruz De Castro, 2018a).

When it comes to the alignment signals that the Philippines has sent towards Beijing, these were part of Duterte’s approach of accommodating China, an intention which he expressed early in his mandate, specifically during the October 2016 visit to Beijing: besides distancing from the US, the ‘corrupt former colonizer’, Duterte announced that he’d “realigned myself in your ideological flow and maybe I will also go to Russia to talk to Putin and tell him that there are three of us against the world: China, Philippines and Russia” (cited in Presidential Communications Operations Office, 2016b). Furthermore, the Philippines increased

cooperation with China through the Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on issues related to the SCS (Department of National Defense, 2019a), opportunities used to reiterate the Philippine commitment to settle disputes through diplomacy (Duterte cited in Official Gazette, 2021) and advance national interests (Duterte cited in Official Gazette, 2020).

6. Discussion of the findings

This chapter seeks to put together the observations that can be drawn based on the findings presented above in accordance with the framework of hedging as a risk management strategy. Moreover, it aims to offer an answer to the research question addressed in the previous chapters: *How has the behavior of the Philippines evolved from 2011 to 2021, in light of developments in the South China Sea?*, complemented by the sub-question “What considerations determined the Philippines to employ hedging behavior?”

Summing up the findings related to the strategic behavior employed by the Philippines under the Benigno Aquino III administration, empirical data analyzed against the three criteria of the hedging as a risk management framework reveal an active balancing behavior, consistent with previous analyses of Philippine strategy during the timeframe 2011-2016. The main points to be made are that in the context of Chinese encroachments and military developments in the region, Benigno Aquino III adopted an explicit, publicly-communicated confrontational stance that covered, as follows: depicting Beijing’s territorial claims and actions in the SCS as threats of utmost importance to national security; extensive MCE measures, both internal and external, aimed at countering China by increasing the capabilities of the AFP and changing its focus “from domestic security to territorial defence” (Cruz De Castro, 2017); and stronger security cooperation based on shared security interests with the US, primarily by strengthening the alliance with the signing of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement aimed at maritime defense.

After the election and swearing-in of Rodrigo Roa Duterte as President in June 2016, the balancing behavior shifted to a confusing and apparently contradictory approach towards the SCS dispute. His response towards China and developments in the SCS can be summed up by an expression used by Duterte himself regarding the Philippine position, namely that it is similar to “walking on a tightrope” (Punzalan, 2021).

Referring to the first indicator, namely the manner in which the issue has been framed in public discourse and official documents, under the Duterte administration, the Philippine response was primarily characterized by an anxiety-filled downplaying of events and avoidance of constructing China’s actions as security threats, in order to mitigate the risk of potentially antagonizing Beijing and escalating conflict. This is thoroughly supported by Duterte’s remarks regarding the useless and potentially dangerous perspective of demanding that China uphold the provisions of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling, referring to a prohibiting

asymmetry in military power. At the same time, given the administration's focus on engaging China economically to promote BRI investments in his 'Build, Build, Build!' infrastructure program (Cruz De Castro, 2021), we also have to consider Duterte's hedging behavior as a strategy to mitigate the risk of missing out economically.

Where the second criterion is concerned, in contrast to the Aquino administration's implementation of MCE measures, both internal and external, in response to the evolving situation in the SCS and China's actions in particular, under President Duterte, measures of increasing capability were aimed at ascertaining and managing potential risks in the region, rather than based on an action-reaction dynamic, hence without being directed at containing China. Thus, the Duterte administration's approach regarding MCE measures is illustrative of hedging behavior, understood as a strategy to proactively mitigate potential risks.

Third, the alignment signals sent by the Philippines toward both Beijing and Washington can be summed up as perfunctory and inconsistent, by virtue of an 'independent foreign policy' as an objective upheld by the Duterte administration. President Duterte sought to manage the risk of SCS escalation through a 'pivot to China' policy, which also entailed employing an aggressive anti-US rhetoric, limiting the area of security cooperation with the US mainly to humanitarian relief and counterterrorism, and putting the treaty alliance under question.

It is important to note that Duterte's lack of trust in US commitment (Official Gazette, 2021) and efforts to minimize dependence on American security assistance occurred in a context determined by systemic changes as well. Specifically, regional security environment changes brought about by leadership change in the United States, which also implied a changing Southeast Asia strategy to the Trump administration's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific', characterized by a shift from economic cooperation to contestation vis-à-vis China and seemingly less interest in maintaining the strategic regional balance in Southeast Asia (Storey and Cook, 2018). In this environment of increasing US-China rivalry, secondary states such as the Philippines are compelled to choose sides (Kaplan, 2015, p.65; Storey and Cook, 2018, p.6) and hence resort to ambiguous alignment signals in an effort to manage risks associated with a potential conflict materializing.

7. Conclusion

This thesis attempted to examine the behavior of secondary states in the face of a rising China and increasing power rivalry concentrated in the Southeast Asia region, by looking at the Philippine response employed in light of developments in the South China Sea from 2011 to 2021. The thesis addressed the following research question: *How has the behavior of the Philippines evolved from 2011 to 2021, in light of developments in the South China Sea?*, complemented by the sub-question “What considerations determined the Philippines to employ hedging behavior?”

The analysis used J. Haacke’s modified theoretical framework of hedging as a risk management strategy, rather than as a middle position on the traditional balancing-bandwagoning axis, and revealed a significant shift in the foreign policy approach towards the SCS dispute from the Aquino III to the Duterte administration. Specifically, using the previously mentioned framework, which consisted in three indicators used for ascertaining whether a state’s behavior is illustrative or hedging or balancing, showed that the Philippines under President Aquino was pursuing a balancing strategy towards China, based on constructing the SCS dispute as a threat to national security, implementing internal as well as external military capabilities enhancement measures to counter China, and strengthening security cooperation with the US. The foreign policy strategy evolved during the specified time frame in the sense that President Duterte implemented an approach consisting of the downplaying developments to ‘de-securitize’ the SCS dispute and the pursuit of closer ties with Beijing while distancing from the Philippine-US alliance, in an effort to mitigate the risks that the Philippines would face, should a potential escalation of the dispute materialize. With respect to the sub-question, namely the considerations that determined the use of strategic hedging, these are related on the one hand to the prevalence of economic interests over the range of potential gains that could derive from the adoption of a confrontational stance in the said context. On the other hand, the hedging employed by Duterte can also be linked to the administration’s perception of an uncertain commitment on the part of the United States to maintain its role as a ‘stabilizing force’ in the region, which is all the more complicated by increasing multipolarity.

Therefore, by discussing the Philippine case, the thesis aimed to contribute to the literature on secondary state foreign policy under changing systemic- and sub-systemic-level conditions, while also bringing an empirical contribution to the modified theoretical and operationalizational framework proposed by Haacke on hedging theory in International

Relations. The results of this analysis are limited, however, by certain methodological aspects. On the one hand, the analysis was based only on empirical evidence available in English, limited by my status as a Western student conducting research on Southeast Asia from afar, without the necessary language skills or assistance in translating documents published in Tagalog. Furthermore, due to this being a qualitative single-case study, there are limited possibilities for generalization regarding the previously presented findings.

Considering all of the above, future lines of research departing from the results (and limitations) of the present thesis could see further examination of secondary states employing hedging behavior, especially where it comes to intervening variables that allow or limit the use of hedging as a risk management strategy.

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