



DECEMBER 2024 MONTHLY POLITICAL ANALYSIS

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RISING TENSION BETWEEN MARCOS AND DUTERTE, AMID ECONOMIC ISSUES, INCREASED US MILITARY PRESENCE

On December 30, 2024, President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. signed his Executive Order No. 81. The said order effectively revamped the composition of the National Security Council (NSC), to exclude the Vice President and former presidents from its membership. Marcos said the order was to strengthen the NSC to “address security challenges and ensure its members uphold national security and sovereignty, fostering effective governance and stability.”

This latest development has only added to the escalation of a significant political crisis marked by rising tensions between the camps of two erstwhile allies: President Marcos Jr. and Vice President Sara Duterte. Already, during the past few months, this discord has led to serious allegations, congressional investigations, and public confrontations, and has possible implications on the conduct and results of the upcoming 2025 midterm elections in the country.

Legislative investigations vs. Dutertes

The House of Representatives’ comprehensive investigation into former President Rodrigo Duterte's anti-drug campaign, focusing on alleged extrajudicial killings and human rights violations, has concluded. The inquiry, spearheaded by an array of administration and opposition lawmakers, uncovered damning evidence implicating key figures. The Quad Committee recommended charges against Duterte and his associates, including Senators Ronald dela Rosa and Christopher Go, for violations of the Philippine Act on Crimes Against International Humanitarian Law. These developments have reignited debates on accountability for the thousands of deaths linked to Duterte’s drug war.

Simultaneously, Vice President Sara Duterte faced scrutiny over the alleged misuse of ₱612.5 million in confidential funds during her tenure as Secretary of Education and in the Office of the Vice President (OVP). The House Committee on Good Government and Public Accountability has, by December 2024, conducted multiple hearings, uncovering dubious receipts and questionable projects. Critics allege that the funds were funneled into politically motivated initiatives rather than the intended purposes of education and social welfare. Despite the investigations, Duterte has consistently denied any wrongdoing, framing the allegations as part of a political witch hunt.



The previous month, in November 2024, the controversy reached a boiling point when Vice President Duterte made a controversial statement, suggesting she would have President Marcos Jr., his wife, and House Speaker Martin Romualdez assassinated if she were harmed. This incendiary comment led to widespread public outrage and calls for her impeachment. By December 2024, two formal impeachment complaints were filed, accusing her of constitutional violations, betrayal of public trust, and other high crimes. These complaints are now being debated in Congress, with the political ramifications reverberating across the nation.

President Marcos Jr. condemned Duterte's remarks as reckless and increased his security measures. However, he publicly opposed the impeachment efforts, describing them as a distraction from the administration's focus on economic recovery and infrastructure development. This stance has drawn criticism from both sides of the political spectrum, with some accusing him of trying to shield his former ally for political convenience.

A commissioned survey by Pulse Asia conducted in December 2024, meanwhile, revealed a significant dip in the trust ratings of both President Marcos and Vice President Duterte. The survey indicated growing public dissatisfaction with their leadership, with their approval ratings dropping by double digits compared to earlier in the year. Analysts attribute this decline to the unresolved controversies and the perception of self-serving governance by both leaders. This erosion of trust underscores the electorate's mounting frustrations and could play a pivotal role in shaping the 2025 midterm elections.

Evidently, public trust in both leaders has declined amid the controversies. The upcoming midterm elections in May 2025 are seen as a referendum on the leadership of Marcos and Duterte. These elections could significantly reshape the political landscape, determining the strength of their respective political bases and the trajectory of their careers in the coming months and years leading up to the 2028 Presidential Elections.

Meanwhile, the progressive opposition continues to face villification from the Marcos administration and its security sector. At the center of this continued campaign continues to be the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF ELCAC). Despite calls for its abolition from a broad spectrum of national and international pressure groups (including United Nations rapporteurs and international human rights groups) President Marcos has refused to do so.

Still the said task force has recently faced setbacks. In December 2024, human rights activists gained a significant victory against the task force, as prominent journalist Atom Araullo won a red-tagging civil suit against former NTF ELCAC spokespersons Lorraine Badoy and Jeffrey Celiz. This legal win marks a blow to the task force's practice of accusing critics and activists of being affiliated with communist insurgents, which has led to widespread harassment and violence.



The court ruling emphasizes the importance of accountability and due process in government actions, particularly when labeling individuals and organizations as enemies of the state without substantial evidence. Araullo's case is one of many that have been filed against NTF ELCAC officials, highlighting the legal and public relations risks the task force faces due to its controversial tactics.

On the other hand, NTF ELCAC continues to assert its stance, with its officials proclaiming that the communist insurgency, which they have framed as a persistent threat to national security, is nearing its end. This claim, however, has been met with skepticism from various sectors, given the enduring presence of insurgent groups in many parts of the country, as well as the widespread concerns about the task force's heavy-handed approach.

2025 National Budget: Same old problems

Despite claims of economic growth, deepening inequality and limited opportunities for social development, particularly in the areas of education, healthcare, and welfare services, continue to plague the country.

On December 31, 2024, President Marcos signed the 2025 General Appropriations Act, or the national budget. He claimed that the ₱6.33 trillion (roughly \$109.2 billion – a record-setting figure) national budget aims to transform “economic gains into meaningful outcomes for every Filipino.”

But a look into the budget reveals the administration's priorities, with massive allocations for infrastructure and defense, as well as for pork barrel projects, confidential and intelligence funds, and other allocations that are known to be used for self-enrichment or patronage. Meanwhile, crucial social sectors such as healthcare and social welfare continue to receive inadequate funding. For instance, the Department of Education, which has long struggled with issues such as underfunding and outdated facilities, will receive less than 10% of the total budget.

Government economists continue to claim that the Philippine economy has experienced steady growth. But much of this growth has been driven by foreign investment and the export sector, often at the expense of the domestic workforce. The World Bank has revised its 2024 GDP growth forecast for the country down to 5.9%, a slight dip from previous expectations. This has been attributed to the effects of typhoons and natural disasters, but it also underscores the fragility of an economy that is overly reliant on external factors such as trade and remittances.

The record-setting budget, according to progressive critics, continues to fail to address the staggering rise in poverty, with 19 million families now struggling and over six million going hungry. Meanwhile, manufacturing has dwindled to its lowest economic share since 1949, and agriculture has reached a historic low.



Growth has failed to translate into meaningful improvements for the vast majority of Filipinos, particularly the working class, who are still struggling with stagnant wages and rising costs of living. Meanwhile, inflation, while easing in late 2024, remains a significant concern, with both headline and core inflation rates hovering around 2.3%.

At the same time, the government has maintained its focus on infrastructure development as a key driver of growth, including the ongoing “Build Better More” program (a continuation of the previous president’s “Build Build Build” program). While these projects are touted as job creators, they largely benefit large construction firms and foreign investors, with minimal benefits for local communities. Furthermore, the environmental costs of these projects, particularly in areas prone to natural disasters, have raised concerns about sustainability and the long-term viability of such developments.

Dispute in South China Sea

Tensions in the disputed South China Sea (SCS) have only further increased with the United States’ ever-increasing military presence in the region.

In the morning of December 29, 2024, a United States Naval Ship (USNS) shadowed the Luzon coastline, according to SeaLight, a West Philippine Sea monitor. The USNS Victorious, a surveillance ship, loomed just outside the Philippines’ 12-nautical-mile territorial sea at 1:37 a.m. of that day.

It was not an unusual activity, claimed retired US Air Force Colonel Ray Powell, SeaLight’s director, in a report by the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* that day. Powell added that the Victorious had been spotted in the same waters in September 2024. Curiously, though, this happened to coincide with a “high-profile patrol” of Chinese Coast Guard near Panatag (Scarborough/ Huangyan Dao) Shoal that day, as reported by Chinese state broadcaster CCTV.

Earlier in December, the US Navy announced the presence of the US Carrier Strike Group One, led by the nuclear-powered USS Carl Vinson, “transiting the legendary Surigao Strait in the Philippine Islands”. This prompted a condemnation from progressive lawmakers, who called the recent passage a “blatant violation of Philippine sovereignty”.

“This is not just ships passing in the night,” Brosas said, labeling the strike group’s presence as a symbol of ongoing US military aggression and intervention in the country’s affairs. She warned that the nuclear-capable warship and its escorts—USS William P. Lawrence, USS Sterett, and USS Princeton—pose grave risks to Filipino communities. “The US is turning our country into a massive military outpost, and President Marcos Jr. is complicit, allowing war games and dangerous military activities



within our territory,” she added, criticizing the storage of US weapons systems and the granting of extraterritorial rights to American forces.

This recent show of US force came in the wake of China’s submission of its baseline territorial charts to the United Nations on December 13, 2024. China’s submission to the UN is aimed at reinforcing its maritime claims over large parts of the SCS, including parts of what the Philippine government claims are its exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

The submission has evidently added another layer to the already-strained relations between the Philippines and China. The Philippines, of course, has accused China of continuously harassing Filipino vessels that venture into the SCS, while China has accused the Philippines of “provoking trouble” with the latter’s highly publicized ventures into the area, with the backing and military presence of the United States.

On December 18, 2024, it was reported in Philippine media that Filipino fishermen discovered what has been claimed as a “suspected Chinese submarine drone” near San Pascual, Masbate province. The device, labeled “HY-119,” is claimed to be possibly an underwater navigation and communication system used for monitoring and reconnaissance. This incident has raised national security concerns in the Philippines amid ongoing tensions in the SCS.

The Philippines has responded to these developments with more joint military exercises with the United States. The deployment of a US medium-range missile system in early December underscored this ever-deepening military cooperation. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin earlier reaffirmed Washington’s commitment to Manila during his November visit to Palawan.

The Philippines, meanwhile, claims that this increased cooperation with the US is in line with defending the former’s extensive maritime territories. At the same time, however, President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. has previously walked back some of its aggressive posturing.

During the 2nd Joint National Peace and Order Council (NPOC)-Regional Peace and Order Councils (RPOCs) this December 2024, President Marcos said that his administration continues to adhere to a policy of non-escalation in SCS. He reaffirmed that the Philippines will not deploy Navy warships in the WPS, focusing instead on resupply missions and safeguarding territorial rights while advocating for peaceful resolutions.

President Marcos released Executive Order No. 773 that sought to reorganize the NPOC, supposedly to facilitate integrated peace and order efforts, while the RPOC was established to recommend improvements to public safety and coordinate internal security initiatives among civil authorities, military, and police.



Meanwhile, though, its continued cooperation in the expansion of the US military foothold in the region seems to undermine this policy. The US Navy's multiple freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), for instance, have a clear intention of challenging China and its extensive territorial claims in SCS. The Philippines has also intensified its military exercise engagements with other US allies such as Australia and Japan. For instance, in a courtesy call by Japan's National Security Adviser Akiba Takeo at the Malacañan Palace, President Marcos said that the two countries will continue to "strongly cooperate" on regional security concerns, "particularly in terms of sharing, interoperability, and exercises in strengthening the position of both nations in the South China Sea," according to a Malacañan press release.

For its part, while China has continued to insist on its territorial claims over SCS – and has engaged in activities that the Philippines considered "aggressive" – it has also nevertheless reiterated its call for "peaceful development" in the region and expressed concern over the risk of an arms race. It has consistently viewed the increased US-Philippine military activities as provocations that could destabilize regional security.

Still, there are indications that avenues for a peaceful and diplomatic resolution to the conflict between the Philippines and China are still open. Multilateral frameworks like the ASEAN-China Code of Conduct remain critical in de-escalating tensions and fostering a stable maritime environment. For its part, the Philippines must carefully navigate its alliances and assert its sovereignty without exacerbating hostilities.###