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The Philippines' Changing Foreign Policy Strategy toward China and the United States: the impact of domestic political factors on the foreign policy behaviour of weaker states

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Master Thesis

The Philippines' Changing Foreign Policy Strategy toward China and the United States:
the impact of domestic political factors on the foreign policy behaviour of weaker states

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Abstract

Due to their limited relative power and material capabilities, neorealism posits that weaker states can either pursue a balancing or bandwagoning strategy against the revisionist power threat. However, Southeast Asian states are not behaving as the neorealist expectations suggest. Instead, hedging explains why these smaller states opt for middle-ground strategies, but this framework fails to account for sudden shifts in foreign policy. Consequently, there is still no clear consensus on what explains varying foreign policy behaviour in weaker Southeast Asian states under similar systemic pressures from US-China competition. To fill this gap, this thesis seeks to answer the research question: ‘How do domestic political factors contribute to a change in a weaker state’s foreign policy strategy toward competing great powers?’ The thesis approaches this question by using Schweller’s (2006) neoclassical realist theory of underbalancing behaviour which provides a model of four intervening domestic-level factors to explain strategic changes. The four domestic-level factors: *elite consensus*, *elite cohesion*, *societal cohesion*, and *government vulnerability* are applied to a single case study of the Philippines under President Duterte and analysed through archival analysis and process tracing. The analysis demonstrates that the four domestic political factors had influenced the Philippines’ decision to restrengthen their US alliance and distance themselves from further alignment with China to an extent. It further found government vulnerability and social cohesion to be the most significant explanatory factors. These findings contribute to a better understanding of weaker state foreign policy behaviour amid great power rivalry and underlines the importance of a domestic-level analysis.

Table of contents

1	Introduction	4
2	Literature review	7
2.1	<i>Neorealism: balance-of-power theory.....</i>	7
2.2	<i>Hedging.....</i>	9
3	Theoretical framework	12
3.1	<i>The underbalancing theory</i>	14
4	Research design	18
4.1	<i>Methods of analysis.....</i>	18
4.2	<i>Case selection.....</i>	18
4.3	<i>Operationalisation and data collection.....</i>	19
5	Results	22
5.1	<i>Social cohesion.....</i>	22
5.2	<i>Government vulnerability.....</i>	23
5.3	<i>Elite cohesion</i>	25
5.4	<i>Elite consensus</i>	26
5.5	<i>Discussion</i>	26
6	Conclusion.....	29
7	References	31

1 Introduction

Great power competition between the United States (US) and China has become a highly debated topic among scholars (Murphy, 2017). The tension between the two great powers has heightened notably in the Indo-Pacific which holds important strategic value for its vital sea routes and densely populated nations (Das, 2019). The scholarly debate largely concerns whether China's rise forms a threat to the US-led liberal order by becoming a crucial trading partner in the Indo-Pacific, its growing geopolitical ambitions, and the relative decline of US presence in the region (Shambaugh, 2018; Kuik, 2021; Seah et al., 2021). An influential work by Allison (2017) compared US-China rivalry to a scenario of a Thucydides Trap in which a challenging rising power or revisionist power could potentially incite a war between the hegemon and the revisionist power. Although there is no clear definition, great powers are usually characterised by their strong position and ability to shape the international system (Prys, 2012).

The neorealist balance-of-power theory posits that weaker states facing a revisionist power will either balance against it with the support of another great power or bandwagon with the more powerful revisionist state (Waltz, 1979). Nevertheless, scholars observe that especially Southeast Asian states are using hedging strategies instead to preserve state autonomy and avoid choosing sides, benefit from economic cooperation, and maintain neutrality in the region (Goh, 2005; Kuik, 2021; Jones & Jenne, 2022). However, this strategy has become more difficult for several Southeast Asian states directly impacted by China's territorial claims and increased aggressions in the South China Sea. Despite these security threats, Indonesia and the Philippines continued to seek close economic engagement with China. Especially the case of the Philippines is noteworthy since it has a long-standing Mutual Defence Treaty with the US, making it an unusual hedger (Goh, 2016). The Philippines' lack of balancing behaviour and public criticism against the US at the start of President Duterte's term, despite multiple Chinese

attacks on its ship vessels in the South China Sea, was evidently striking from not only a neorealist balance-of-power perspective but also from a hedging perspective. However, the second half of Duterte's term showed a strategic shift which seemed to be in support of the US alliance and thus suggest balancing. Despite Duterte's previous anti-American sentiment and the continued engagement with China during previous security threats, what led to this strategic change? While the literature highlights systemic-structural factors such as security threats and economic benefits (Walt, 1987; Koga, 2018; Haacke, 2019), it fails to explain underlying processes that led to the foreign policy change and variations among hedging states (Kuik, 2021). The literature suggests for a more nuanced analysis that incorporates both system-level and domestic-level factors to explain specific strategic changes (Murphy, 2017; Lai & Kuik, 2020). Thus, the following research question emerges: 'How do domestic political factors contribute to a change in a weaker state's foreign policy strategy toward competing great powers?'

To address this gap, this thesis will undertake an in-depth analysis of domestic political factors contributing to the changing foreign policy behaviour toward a rising external security threat. The study will specifically conduct a single case study to analyse how domestic political factors shape the Philippines' changing foreign policy strategy under President Duterte regarding China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea and the US military alliance. By doing so, this thesis seeks to complement the existing literature on weaker states' foreign policy behaviour by advocating for more scholarly attention to the domestic political context.

Since this research centres around the risks that great power competition poses to weaker states' foreign policy decisions based on the realist notion that power is unevenly distributed within the international system, the definition for weaker states is derived from Waltz (1979), who adopts the term 'lesser states' to describe states that are "not system leaders or great powers in a system" (Waltz, 1979, p. 73). In this view, weaker states lack the resources and capabilities

to change the international order and tend to balance against a revisionist power with the support of a bigger power (ibid.). Following the example in the literature (Kuik, 2021; Jones & Jenne, 2022), the thesis will be using the terms weaker and smaller states interchangeably to describe Southeast Asian states.

The thesis will proceed by first providing a literature review on the foreign policy behaviour of weaker states in the context of great power competition. This is followed by a theoretical framework based on neoclassical realism and particularly Schweller's (2006) underbalancing theory. The subsequent section will elaborate on the research design through which the domestic-level factors will be analysed. Thereafter, the analysis will demonstrate the findings and discussion. Finally, the conclusion will summarise the findings, address the limitations of the study and recommendations for future studies.

2 Literature review

The literature in the field of International Relations (IR) have sought to explain the underlying factors driving the foreign policy choices of smaller states when confronted by competing great powers. Neorealism's balance of power theory offers an influential system-level perspective to explain lesser state behaviour based on the distribution of power in the international system. In the context of great power rivalry, weaker states are subject to the option to balance against or bandwagon with a rising great power (Waltz, 1979.). However, more recent studies observe that smaller states tend to prefer non-alignment to avoid dependency (Labs, 2003; Ciorciari, 2010). In light of this observation, hedging has become a prominent concept to explain the foreign policy behaviour of Southeast Asian states. The literature on hedging suggests that smaller states seek to preserve state autonomy by using a variety of middle ground strategies to mitigate risks that arise with the uncertainty of shifting structural conditions (Goh, 2005; Kuik, 2021). While hedging can explain trends in foreign policy, this framework fails to account for sudden shifts. The literature on balancing, hedging and weaker state foreign policy therefore suggests a need for a two-level analysis of foreign policy decisions by incorporating domestic political factors for a more holistic approach.

2.1 Neorealism: balance-of-power theory

The neorealist balance of power theory assumes that the world system is anarchic, and states are mainly driven by the need to survive (Waltz, 1979). Neorealism assumes that the system is led by the interaction between great powers and their pursuit of power (ibid.). However, a revisionist power can disrupt the balance of powers by seeking to change the status quo and pursue hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2001). When the status quo system is in danger, Waltz (1979) explains that states seeking to preserve the status quo may either pursue an 'internal balancing' strategy by increasing domestic economic and military capabilities, or 'external balancing' by

forming alliances against the revisionist power. Stephen Walt (1987) builds upon the balance of power theory by introducing a balance-of-threat theory and explains that states do not necessarily respond to power transitions but rather perceived threats that involve not only economic and military capabilities but also geographical proximity and perceived intentions. Moreover, realists deem internal balancing as the most preferable option for a state since it would not affect state autonomy, while alliances could lead to dependency on other states (Murphy, 2017). However, limited resources and capacity obstruct weaker states from effectively mobilising against a revisionist power through internal balancing (Rothstein, 1968). As a result, they can either maintain survival through balancing by forming alliances with preferably a bigger power against the revisionist threat, or bandwagoning by aligning themselves with the perceived threatening power (Walt, 1987). For smaller states, bandwagoning would enable the protection of national values, but this strategy also implies a disposition to accept potential illegitimate behaviour by the stronger power (Walt, 1988). Moreover, scholars generally agree that balancing and bandwagoning increases dependency and therefore decreases state autonomy (Murphy, 2017). Weaker states are therefore perpetually concerned with a trade-off between security and state autonomy. On the other hand, Schweller (1994) contends that bandwagoning behaviour is primarily driven by the benefits offered by the stronger state. This view affords weaker states with more strategic agency. Accordingly, great powers may provide certain economic opportunities and assistance that a weaker state would otherwise not have access to.

Although neorealism emphasises the importance of economic and security resources and incentives on a state-level, it does not explain how foreign policy executives specifically respond to changing structural conditions. It must be noted, however, that neorealism does not intend to explain a state's foreign policy (Waltz, 1979). This suggests that an analysis of specific foreign policy outcomes require an approach outside of neorealist theory. In addition,

neorealism tends to focus on great power perspectives since it assumes limited strategic opportunities for smaller states. However, a growing number of studies observe that smaller states are not behaving as the realist pure balancing and bandwagoning theory suggests, as small states prefer a non-aligned foreign policy to ensure state autonomy (Labs, 1992; Ciorciari, 2010; Kausikan, 2017). Instead, scholars argue that smaller states do have agency and pursue middle ground strategies to secure domestic needs to specific and uncertain situations (Goh, 2005; Kuik, 2016; Kausikan, 2017). The concept of hedging offers another explanation to the relation between the risks and threats of great power competition and subsequent weaker state foreign policy behaviour.

2.2 Hedging

The IR literature has subjected the concept of hedging to extensive scrutiny, sparking diverse interpretations and scholarly debates (Kuik, 2008; Lim & Cooper, 2015; Koga, 2018; Ciorciari & Haacke, 2022). Evelyn Goh (2005) coined the term in relation to the Asia Pacific, describing it as strategies used by Southeast Asian states to navigate situations where straightforward options of balancing, bandwagoning or neutrality are not viable. Consequently, hedging “forestalls or avoids having to choose one side (or one straightforward policy stance) at the obvious expense of another” (Goh, 2005, p. 2-3). Hedging has since become a key concept to analyse the foreign policy behaviour of Southeast Asian states in the context of regional uncertainty caused by US-China competition. The literature on hedging reveals that Southeast Asia’s strong cooperation with both China and the US, and the uncertain strategic relationship between the great powers causes fluctuating structural conditions in the Indo-Pacific (Medeiros, 2006; Van Jackson, 2014; Lim and Cooper, 2015; Kuik, 2016; Haacke, 2019; Jones & Jenne, 2022). These uncertainties include unclear security commitments from the US despite Obama’s

Indo-pacific pivot, China's increased aggression in the South China Sea, and China becoming the primary trading partner to Asean states (Kuik, 2021; Seah et al., 2021).

For further clarification, Haacke (2019) differentiates hedging from balancing or bandwagoning by viewing the latter two as a response to immediate security threats and the former to security risks. This is in line with other scholars who argue hedging involves a pragmatic, mixed policy strategy of engagement with both competing great powers to mitigate the risks associated with strict alignment and to preserve strategic autonomy (Goh, 2005; Van Jackson, 2014; Koga, 2018; Kuik, 2021). To situate the differences in hedging styles, some scholars propose a framework of different levels to hedging which range from limited balancing to limited bandwagoning depending on security and economic concerns (Kuik, 2008; Koga, 2018).

Similarly, existing studies view weaker state hedging as a rational decision which concerns a cost-benefit analysis of economic and security considerations (Jackson, 2014; Kuik, 2016; 2021; Lim and Mukherjee, 2019). Similarly, Kausikan (2017) regards hedging as a deliberate tactic leveraging great power rivalry to further self-interests while maintaining a high level of independence. For instance, some scholars believe hedging is driven by the fear of a Thucydides trap (Allison, 2017), where strong alignment with one great power poses risks to smaller states as it could potentially entangle them in a war between competing great powers (Medeiros, 2006; Jones & Jenne, 2022). Other accounts emphasise that the lack of military resources require weaker states to safeguard domestic security from an aggressive rising power, but to also consider the economic opportunities that the rising power presents (Goh, 2016; Kuik, 2021). Similar to Schweller's 'bandwagoning for profit'-argument, Kuik (2016; 2021) argues that weaker states hedge to further the self-interest of the ruling elite to gain domestic legitimacy through development and economic growth which potentially increases political support. Murphy (2017) emphasises that this is particularly the case in states with a high level of

domestic political contestation among political actors. Furthermore, ideational factors may also contribute to hedging behaviour as Ciorciari (2010) points to Southeast Asia's historical colonial pasts and political ideology as reasons for limited alignment with a great power. Similarly, Kuik (2015) argues that the degree of Southeast Asian states' hedging behaviour depend not only on the economic dependency and perceived strategic challenge of China, but also the closeness and similarity in values with the US.

Despite extensive research on hedging in Southeast Asian politics, scholars note that strategic hedging and economic and security considerations cannot fully explain the reasons behind variations in foreign policy choices while states face similar structural pressures from US-China competition (Murphy, 2017; Kuik, 2016; Lai & Kuik, 2020). For instance, Lai and Kuik's (2020) case study on Malaysia demonstrates that US-China rivalry may affect hedging, but a state's hedging style is ultimately shaped by domestic factors. Relatedly, Jones and Jenne (2022, p. 216) disagree with the contention that hedging is a coherent, long-term risk management strategy, and instead argue that strengthening relations with China is based on "short-term political goals". In addition, hedging remains a vague concept that scholars ascribe different definitions to which makes its analytical value contentious (Haacke, 2019). Recent contributions to the literature therefore argue for consideration of domestic political factors such as elite and societal perceptions and state capacity to understand short-term changes in foreign policy choices (Murphy, 2017; Kuik, 2021; Haacke & Ciorciari, 2022).

To sum up, the neorealist system-level focus, the literature on weaker states' foreign policy, and hedging suggest the need for an analysis of domestic-level factors to understand specific foreign policy outcomes. This thesis seeks to fill this gap by focusing on domestic political factors. This not only uncovers how smaller states behave toward great power rivalry, but also how domestic political factors contribute to specific foreign policy changes.

3 Theoretical framework

The literature has demonstrated a significant focus on hedging when it comes to the foreign policy of smaller states and especially those in the Asia Pacific. However, as the literature suggests, understanding specific foreign policy outcomes requires an in-depth analysis of domestic-level factors. Within the field of IR, two prominent theoretical approaches incorporate domestic variables into their explanation of foreign policy decision-making.

The first explanation can be derived from liberal theory. Moravcsik (1997, p. 513) posits that state behaviour in world politics is influenced by state preferences which are shaped by “societal ideas, interests and institutions ideas”. This bottom-up theoretical approach emphasises that state leaders and their administration are not the most important determinants of foreign policy changes but are guided by “the transformation of domestic and transnational social values, interests, and institutions” (Moravcsik, 1997, p. 547). Accordingly, foreign policy changes need to be viewed in the context of changing societal and political preferences. However, the theory assumes a perfectly functioning pluralistic democracy model which may not accurately capture the complexities and dynamics within smaller states facing security risks or threats as it also assumes that state preferences are generally stable (Moravcsik, 1997). Moreover, measuring state preferences in the context of strategic changes toward revisionist threats may be less appropriate due to the gradual and lengthy process of integrating changing societal preferences into foreign policy.

Neoclassical realism (NCR), on the other hand, adopts the realist assumption that a state’s foreign policy is primarily determined by its relative power and position in the international system, which are then “translated through intervening unit-level variables” (Rose, 1998, p. 146). In other words, NCR assumes that foreign policy outcomes are ultimately determined by the interplay between both international and domestic factors (Rose, 1998). Moravcsik’s liberal theory and NCR both emphasise the governing elite’s ability to cause

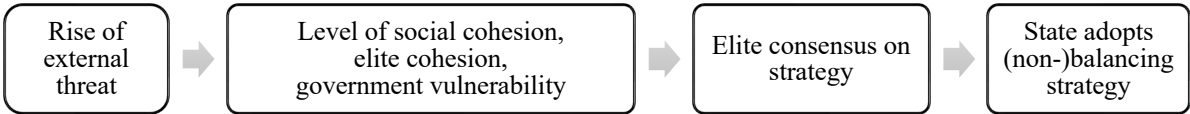
foreign policy incoherence when external security threats arise. However, a neoclassical realist approach not only considers state preferences, but also includes leadership beliefs, strategic cultures, state-society relations, and domestic institutions (Ripsman et al., 2016). This approach therefore allows for a more comprehensive understanding of weaker state foreign policy behaviour. NCR further contends that while states prioritise long-term security interests, short-term decisions can be affected by governing miscalculations and internal pressures (Rose, 1998; Schweller, 2004; Thorhallsson, 2018).

A prominent neoclassical realist theory by Randall Schweller's (2004; 2006) argues that "incoherent states, whether great powers or small ones, often cannot balance against threats as the balance-of-power theory predicts because they are constrained by domestic political considerations" (Schweller, 2006, p. 68). In this context, underbalancing can be understood as a state that "does not balance or does so inefficiently in response to a dangerous aggressor" (Ripsman et al., 2016 p. 74). The theory posits four intervening domestic-level variables that determine a state's foreign policy strategy in response to an external threat: *social cohesion*, *government vulnerability*, *elite cohesion*, and *elite consensus* (Schweller, 2004). Moreover, the literature highlighted the importance of the ruling elite in determining the foreign policy outcomes in Southeast Asian states amid US-China rivalry (Murphy, 2017; Kuik, 2016; 2021). The underbalancing theory underlines the importance of the governing elite. It specifically argues that the pursuit of a balancing or non-balancing strategy primarily depends on elite calculations of the costs and risks of balancing (Schweller, 2006). These calculations are influenced by the levels of social cohesion, elite cohesion, and government vulnerability (ibid.). Since the underbalancing theory offers comprehensive domestic-level factors to understand changing foreign policy decisions, it is especially useful in meeting this thesis' aim: to uncover how domestic political factors can explain changing foreign policy strategies of weaker states toward competing great powers. It also addresses when states employ a balancing or non-

balancing strategy based on the system-level context and domestic-level factors which neorealism does not account for.

A recent study by Syailendra (2017) applies Schweller’s underbalancing theory to the case of Indonesia’s inability to develop a stronger foreign policy response to China’s maritime threat and found this was due to elite factionalism and opposing bureaucratic interests. This shows that the application of this theory is highly relevant in the context of weaker states facing great power competition, and security threats from a great power in the Indo-Pacific. Syailendra’s study specifically focused on differences within the ruling elite’s perceptions and excluded the factors: social cohesion, and government vulnerability. This approach is based on the conclusion that elite cohesion and consensus are the final determinants of foreign policy changes (Schweller, 2006). However, since this research seeks to analyse how different domestic political factors contribute to changing strategies, it will continue to follow Schweller’s model, including all four intervening variables. The following section will further elaborate on these four variables and how they influence foreign policy changes within weaker states.

Figure 1 Causal model based on Schweller’s (2006, p. 63) underbalancing theory



3.1 The underbalancing theory

Schweller (2006) suggests a causal model in which the intervening domestic-level variables influence a state to balance or underbalance against an external threat. This causal model considers “the possibility that some of the intervening variables will not be present in all cases

of (under)balancing behaviour” (Schweller, 2006, p. 63), and can therefore be used as a guiding model in the form of: $X \rightarrow A + B + C \rightarrow D \rightarrow Y$ (see Figure 1).

The underbalancing theory posits that the decision to adopt a costly balancing strategy requires a high degree of agreement among the elite on the seriousness of the threat and the necessity to take action (Schweller, 2006). Balancing poses a domestic political and costly risk to the ruling elite as it demands substantial material and human resources and may require states to give up full strategic autonomy to an alliance partner (Walz, 1979; Schweller, 2006). Therefore, a state will only balance if the governing elite agrees that the threat requires this approach. Elite consensus can thus be understood as the level of shared perceptions among foreign policy decisionmakers on the appropriate strategic response (Schweller, 2006). The theory further argues that elite consensus is influenced by elite cohesion, social cohesion, and government vulnerability.

Elite cohesion refers to level of unity within the ruling political elite regarding the perceived threats. The level of cohesion ranges from extreme polarisation to uniform ideology, in which governing elites are usually somewhere in between (Schweller, 2006). Potential divisions within the ruling party may stem from “ideological, cultural, or religious differences, bureaucratic interests, party factions, regional and sectoral interests, or ethnic group and class loyalties” (Schweller, 2006, p. 54). The theory assumes that a lack of elite cohesion will hinder the adoption of a coherent balancing strategy as divided elite groups will prioritise different threats and resource allocations.

Moreover, social cohesion refers to the level of political and social unity within a society and the level of cohesion regarding domestic institutional legitimacy (Schweller, 2004; Ripsman et al., 2016). This factor accounts for the role of society and public opinion in the foreign policy decision-making process. The theoretical expectation is that states experiencing higher levels of social cohesion are more likely to balance against an external threat and

experience more public support and public compliance (Schweller, 2006). Social fragmentation will make balancing unlikely due to the threat being perceived as non-significant among the public, and the ruling elite will view balancing as too costly (ibid.). This assumption is based on the argument that societal unity increases when states face a serious external threat (Coser, 1956).

Lastly, government vulnerability entails a state that experiences a high level of opposition and a lack of political legitimacy from ‘domestic challengers’ (Schweller, 2004). These domestic challengers may take form in “the military, opposition parties, and interest groups” (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 74). If the government fears removal from office due to severe opposition, the theory expects that the government is unable to mobilise resources needed for (internal) balancing and more likely to forge alliances (Schweller, 2006). This assumption builds upon Zakaria’s (1998) argument that a low level of institutional strength will decrease a state’s ability to extract resources from society. Since weaker states have limited military capacity (Rothstein, 1968; Walt, 1987), a high degree of government vulnerability would deplete its military resources to fight off domestic challengers and require weaker states to opt for external balancing when it faces an external threat. According to the underbalancing theory, the loss of strategic autonomy and inability to remain neutral in the context of great power competition weighs lower than the cost of government removal. In this view, a stable government will give the elite a wider range of options to respond to an external threat, based on their own interests and society’s threat perceptions.

This theoretical framework allows the thesis to explore the presence of the domestic intervening variables and evaluate Schweller’s argument. Drawing upon the underbalancing theory, this thesis therefore seeks to test the following guiding hypothesis:

H1: A weaker state's decision to pursue a balancing strategy against a revisionist power depends primarily on elite consensus, which is influenced by a high degree of social cohesion, elite cohesion, and government vulnerability.

4 Research design

4.1 Methods of analysis

This thesis will analyse a single case study using archival analysis and process tracing (PT) to make within-case inferences of the presence or absence of Schweller's (2006) domestic-level factors (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). The aim of this thesis is to uncover how domestic political factors influence changes in foreign policy strategy of weaker states in the context of a risky environment caused by great power competition. Therefore, this thesis particularly uses 'explaining-outcome process tracing' to make inferences about whether the domestic-level factors derived from Schweller's underbalancing theory can provide a sufficient explanation for the interesting outcome of the Philippines' foreign policy change (Beach & Pederson, 2013). Explaining-outcome process tracing using a deductive path enables the evaluation of the presence of the causal mechanism in general, and the presence of the intervening variables in particular since it is still unclear how and if the intervening variables interact with each other, considering the causal scheme of $X \rightarrow A + B + C \rightarrow D \rightarrow Y$. Moreover, archival analysis allows for an in-depth analysis and interpretation of a wide variety of documents and aims to analyse the factors contributing to historical developments (Lee, 2022). This approach complements process tracing in gathering sequence evidence (Beach & Pedersen, 2013), as well as providing a historical narrative and analysis of the process of foreign policy change.

4.2 Case selection

Since the research is more problem-driven and theory-informed, the case selection is based on the problem of how domestic factors influence strategic changes in weaker states that are confronted by great power competition. Due to their position in the international system and power asymmetry with great powers, it is not ideal for weaker states to strictly align with one of the competing great powers (Kuik, 2016; 2021). This makes the Philippines' changing

strategy under President Duterte from close engagement with China to restrengthening the alliance with the US an interesting strategic choice from a hedging perspective, and thus an outlier case (Van Evera, 2016). Furthermore, the case of the Philippines and the underbalancing theory share the following case attributes derived from Van Evera (2016, p. 77-78): “extreme values on the independent variable”, and “appropriateness for replication of previous tests”. The independent variable concerns China’s maritime threat in the South China Sea and West Philippine Sea due to territorial disputes to which the Philippines is among the claimant states. The underbalancing theory has also been previously applied to the case of Indonesia and China’s maritime threat (Syailendra, 2017). Considering Indonesia views itself as a non-claimant state and the Philippines brought the South China Sea arbitration against China in 2013 and experiences increased aggressions, the independent variable ‘rising external threat’ is especially present in the case of the Philippines.

Moreover, the Philippines is characterised as a weaker state as the literature has characterised the Philippines and other Southeast Asian states sometimes as a small/weak power and a middle power (Jones & Jenne, 2022). This research however focuses on the power asymmetry between the Philippines and the great powers and therefore does not specify. Lastly, the single case study uses the timeframe of the start and end of Duterte’s presidency from 2016 to 2022.

4.3 Operationalisation and data collection

The use of archival analysis and explaining-outcome process tracing encourages the collection of a wide range of primary and secondary sources to extract relevant information as it seeks to uncover the process and sequence of an outcome (Beach & Pedersen, 2013; Lee, 2022). To assess why state decision makers chose certain policy strategies over others, neoclassical realists similarly suggest the analysis of both primary sources and secondary sources, and

especially “government documents, speeches, decision-maker interviews, memoirs and oral histories” (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 133). The primary source findings will therefore be complemented by academic journal articles on Philippine foreign policy in the relevant timeframe.

To analyse the theoretical expectation of *social cohesion*, the research will assess the level of political and social unity within the Philippines. For the presence of the hypothesis, the data would show an increased public perception of China as a security threat and government actions or statements in support of this. This is assessed by investigating social-political dynamics within the Philippines and public opinion on China’s security threat. The analysis will therefore make use of data retrieved from survey reports by ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute – a renowned research centre dedicated to Southeast Asian affairs, opinion polls, and online Philippine newspaper articles on public discourse on the security threat of China and the viability of the Philippine-US alliance.

To analyse *government vulnerability*, this thesis will evaluate the government’s ability to resist challenges from domestic actors and whether this influenced elite calculations to balance. The actors include the military, opposition parties and interest groups (Schweller, 2006). It will therefore examine if there were specific instances where the Duterte administration faced domestic political challengers in the context of China’s maritime threat, if vulnerability grew, and if the government was able to mitigate these vulnerabilities. The research will collect data from government documents, policy statements, speeches, public and official statements, and news articles that indicate significant political opposition and the government response.

Syailendra (2017) uses the following key variables derived from the underbalancing theory to analyse elite perceptions: “agreement on the existence of threat, nature and extent of external threat, most effective and appropriate policy remedy, domestic political risks and costs

of action” (Syailendra, 2017, p. 248). To evaluate the theoretical expectation of *elite cohesion*, the analysis therefore focuses on elite perceptions during Duterte’s presidency drawing from the variables used in Syailendra’s (2017) study. In this case, it concerns the perceptions on the nature and extent of China’s maritime threat and the balancing option (policy remedy) of strengthening the US alliance. The presence of the hypothesis would need to indicate a change from low to high levels of elite cohesion within the ruling party and among its politicians.

Finally, *elite consensus* will be analysed by the presence or absence of agreement among the governing elite to balance against China by restrengthening the US alliance. Since balancing requires a high level of agreement, the data should show agreement among all key foreign policymakers to confirm this part of the mechanism. The presence of the hypothesis is analysed through sequence evidence that indicate that an elite balancing consensus took place after the abovementioned variables. It will specifically evaluate policy positions, government documents, public and official statements.

5 Results

5.1 Social cohesion

During his presidential campaign, Rodrigo Duterte gained popularity for his violent approach toward criminality and was elected with approximately 40 percent of the votes (Holmes, 2016). Throughout his presidency from 2016 to 2022, the president maintained relatively high approval and trust rates among the public (Valente, 2021).

Despite these high ratings, survey reports and public opinion polls reveal high threat perceptions among Philippine respondents. The Social Weather Stations (SWS), a Philippine research institution, conducted a public survey on Philippine-China relations in 2018 and found that 84 percent opposed the government's lack of action toward China's aggressions in the West Philippine Sea (Social Weather Stations, 2018). The 2018 survey showed increased awareness among respondents surrounding the SCS dispute between China and the Philippines, and high percentages on statements that encouraged the government to increase its military capability to protect its territorial waters and regain control over several lost islands (*ibid.*). The SWS survey in the following year revealed that 78 percent of the respondents regarded US-Philippine relations as more important than Philippine-China relations, and 54 percent had little trust in China compared to 21 per cent who had much trust (Social Weather Station, 2019). This mirrored the findings of an earlier Philippines-based survey which indicated that, following the incident involving a Philippine and Chinese ship vessel, 74 per cent of the respondents urged the Philippines to not trust China (Pulse Asia, 2019).

An ISEAS' 2021 public opinion poll shows that among other Asean states, Filipino respondents scored the highest on concerns over 'China's encroachments in the exclusive economic zones and continental shelves of other littoral states', and second highest on concerns over 'China's militarisation and assertive actions in the South China Sea' (Seah et al., 2021, p. 15). In the same survey, only 4.5% of Filipino respondents view 'US' increased military

presence' as their top two concerns (ibid.). Moreover, the survey shows heightened worries about China's 'growing regional political and strategic influence', while the US' influence in the region is viewed as more welcoming compared to the year before (ibid., p. 23).

Also, the military has voiced its suspicions toward Chinese-funded infrastructure projects and closer Philippine-China relations (De Castro, 2022a). These findings reveal an increased negative view of China's maritime threat among the public, but more positive outlook on US presence in the region.

5.2 Government vulnerability

Since taking office in June 2016, Duterte's bloody 'war on drugs' has received strong criticism from its western partners, and especially the US (Heydarian, 2017). In September 2016, President Duterte urged US Special Operation Forces in Mindanao to withdraw from the Philippines immediately (Cagabastian, 2016). Not long after, Duterte publicly announced a military, social and economic separation from the US in a speech during the Philippines-China Trade and Investment Forum (Presidential Communications Operations Office, 2016). The argument was that the region would not experience peace with US military presence (Cagabastian, 2016). These decisions alarmed the Philippine military especially in the context of the growing threat of Islamic State (ISIS) in Mindanao (Moss, 2016; De Castro, 2022b). In response to the domestic problem of communist insurgencies and illegal drugs, Duterte said in a speech at the 2020 Ani ng Dangal Awards, "[If we can't do it], we have no business being a Republic. We can be a territory of the Americans, or we can be a province of China" (Merez, 2020). However, following a siege in Marawi City in 2017, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) felt the need to oppose Duterte's plan and urged him to reconsider US military support in Mindanao to which Duterte eventually allowed back 200 to 300 US troops to aid counterinsurgency missions (Simon, 2017).

Besides domestic military opposition, the Philippine Congress have also expressed their criticisms toward Duterte's South China Sea approach. Through press statements, senators have questioned Duterte's close engagement with China despite increased attacks in the West Philippine Sea and asked the government to let Western partners keep an eye on China's behaviour in the SCS (Senate of the Philippines, 2019). Other senators have called out the government for its selective sovereignty and lack of response to Chinese attacks in territorial waters (Placido, 2019; Medillo, 2020).

5.3 Elite cohesion

It can be observed that president Duterte downplayed China's threat in the South China Sea to pursue his own interests. In one of his first speeches, President Duterte stated that he was willing to repair relations with China through Chinese investments in the Philippines and joint resource exploration missions in the South China Sea but stated that he would not abandon the Philippine claims (De Castro, 2022a). A month later, Duterte chose China as his first foreign visit which differs from the tradition of his predecessors who visited Washington or Tokyo (Heydarian, 2017). Duterte's aim to strengthen economic and diplomatic ties with China was in part to finance his infrastructure development goals in transportation, energy, and water (De Castro, 2022a; Villegas & Manzano, 2016).

Moreover, Duterte's anti-American sentiments can be viewed in the context of US criticism on his war on drugs and the incident where the US cancelled the visa of a Philippine senator who helped construct the Duterte's campaign against illegal drugs (Rey, 2020). The plan to separate from the US included the termination of the 1997 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) that allows for US-PH joint military trainings, and abrogation of the 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty (MDT) (De Castro, 2022b). In support of Duterte's threat to terminate the MDT, the defence secretary, Delfine Lorenzana, argued that the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) was still able to exist without military and economic US support (Simon & Baker, 2017). The National Security Strategy (2018) reiterated Duterte's aim of an independent foreign policy.

However, Chinese stand-offs and incidents in the SCS continued to increase and coincided with the lack of economic investments and infrastructure projects that Duterte had hoped for (De Castro, 2022b). In response to Chinese trawlers nearby the Philippines occupied Thitu island in 2019, President Duterte threatened China to 'lay off' or face Philippine soldiers (Lema, 2019). This was followed up by lodging a diplomatic protest and an official statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which labeled the nearby presence of trawlers as illegal.

At the same time, the US alliance was also under harsh review. In an interview with *Russia Today*, Duterte shares that he fears the consequences of US-China conflict for the Philippines and a potential US intervention (Aurelio, 2020). Not too long after, Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin files a notice of termination for the VFA with the US, despite warning the president of undermining the US alliance (Locsin, 2020a). According to procedure, the official termination takes place 180 days after the submitted notice. However, on June 1st, 2020, Locsin suspends the termination for another six months, due to “political and other developments in the region” (Castro, 2022a). The VFA termination is eventually suspended for another six months (Locsin, 2020b). In the meantime, Duterte was able to negotiate for an increase in US military aid for the AFP, to which the VFA was eventually revived (Dalpino, 2021). In 2021, President Duterte rejected Biden’s efforts to support its ally against another Chinese standoff and responded by doubting whether the Philippines could count on the alliance in the case of a serious threat (Dalpino, 2021).

5.4 Elite consensus

As observed under elite cohesion, the Philippines showed a shift toward restrengthening the US alliance only toward the end of Duterte’s presidency through the renewal of the VFA in 2021. This suggests that the intervening variables could have influenced this strategic change. The next section will evaluate to what extent the variables could have influenced the outcome.

5.5 Discussion

The analysis of the intervening variables of the underbalancing theory created a better contextual understanding on what drove the Duterte administration to change its strategy, but it is not sufficient enough to explain the whole outcome as was expected by the explaining-outcome process tracing method.

Nevertheless, the study revealed that social cohesion has potential explanatory value in explaining strategic changes within governments. Especially in the later years, the change in threat perceptions in society was prevalent and the VFA renewal took place around the time when the public viewed China as a threat to the region and especially to the Philippines.

The mechanism of government vulnerability found potential evidence in the case study. If the government perceived the opposition as detrimental to its normal functioning, it was observed that it could be persuaded to change its strategy toward balancing. For instance, the strong voices within the military were especially able to influence the Duterte administration to allow US troops into Mindanao.

The process of changing elite cohesion was limited in the case of the Philippines due to President Duterte's power to maintain ambiguous practices such as terminating and suspending the VFA despite warnings from his own government.

Moreover, only limited inferences could be made to confirm whether there were stark divisions within the ruling elite. However, this could be overcome through interviews with key policymakers to determine what drives their preferences in strategic choices and whose matter most in crisis situations. In addition, the findings of elite cohesion demonstrates that Duterte was especially responsible for the more rigorous policy changes. This finding finds more support in Foreign Policy Analysis literature which provide a deep understanding of leadership preferences (Tran, 2019). This approach posits that leader's preferences are shaped by their personality, motivations, and perceptions, and tend to ignore foreign policy advisors especially during crises (Medillo, 2020).

For the variable elite consensus, the renegotiations of the VFA shows that Duterte remained unsure about the alliance despite increased aggressions and standoffs in the South China Sea. Despite Duterte's leadership position and popularity, the former president did not

have complete authority in shaping foreign policy, as there were strong opposing voices from various sectors of society.

Based on the findings of this case study, the explanation of this outcome based on the underbalancing theory leaves wanting. The findings suggest that the theory does not account for Duterte's continued distancing from the US alliance despite the security threats. It could be the case however, that these threats were not detrimental to Duterte, but significant enough to the government and 'to save face'. The lack of clear observable manifestations in elite cohesion and fragmentation makes it difficult to make inferences. However, it must be noted that Moravcsik's (1997) liberal theory on state preferences could account for the process of social cohesion to foreign policy change as social fragmentation could also be understood from the perspective of changing ideas and state preferences. This theory may also account for the effect of government vulnerabilities to key actors that help inform and shape societal ideas and needs, which in turn shapes state behaviour in world politics.

6 Conclusion

This thesis sought to understand why the Duterte administration made the strategic change from close engagement with China in Duterte's first half of his presidency to restrengthening the US alliance in the second half of his term. To explain this specific outcome, the literature pointed to the need for a domestic-level analysis. Therefore, the following research question emerged: 'How do domestic political factors contribute to a change in a weaker state's foreign policy strategy toward competing great powers?'

Consequently, the thesis drew upon the underbalancing theory and the four intervening variables: social cohesion, elite cohesion, government vulnerability and elite consensus, to understand how China's maritime threat in the South China Sea influenced the Philippines' change in strategy toward balancing. The analysis used outcome-explaining process tracing and archival analysis to explain whether the theory's proposed domestic-level intervening variables were sufficient in explaining this strategic change.

The thesis found promising evidence for the influence of government vulnerability and social cohesion on the government's decision to adopt a balancing approach toward China's increased aggressions in the West Philippine Sea. However, the findings found limited evidence for the factor elite cohesion since it was not able to find clear evidence on internal divisions among key policymakers and the leadership.

Although it was not able to explain the outcome fully, the findings underline the importance of an analysis of the domestic-level factors in explaining specific foreign policy outcomes and changes. Since the literature has generally focused on systemic stimuli, this approach not only provides a more comprehensive understanding of what shapes the strategic choices of weaker states toward bigger powers, but also contributes to the understanding of different hedging styles among and within smaller powers.

Moreover, this enhanced understanding of weaker state foreign policy behaviour in a high-risk environment due to great power competition is vital in reminding the strategic policymakers of bigger powers of their responsibility to not destabilise regional politics. Understanding how domestic processes influences the likelihood of balancing or bandwagoning behaviour is also useful to weaker states. Increased external threats and consequent balancing among weaker states will further polarise the region into two camps, which in the case of Southeast Asian politics would be detrimental to the unity within Asean.

Nevertheless, the study's main limitations are the focus on a single case which limits the generalisability of the findings. Although the purpose of this study was in part to understand the interesting foreign policy changes in the Philippines, a comparison across cases beyond the Philippines and Indonesia would help enhance the theoretical validity of whether balancing and non-balancing strategies in Southeast Asian states are led by elite cohesion and consensus. Moreover, the validity of this mechanism in the case of the Philippines could have been complemented by interviews with key foreign policy actors or informants which would enhance the explanatory variable of elite cohesion and elite consensus. These recommendations could be potential avenues for future research into the relation between weaker state foreign policy strategy, threatening great powers, and great power competition.

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