

A Political and Economic Analysis of the Luzon Economic Corridor

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Abstract

This paper examines a trilateral initiative between the United States, Japan and the Philippines called the Luzon Economic Corridor (LEC) that aims to invest around \$100 billion USD into the Philippine economy and ultimately improve it in a number of sectors such as agriculture and energy. This paper examines why the U.S. specifically is powering this policy through the lens of wider Indo-Pacific tensions, specifically that of China-Philippines disputes. Looking at the LEC using classical and neo-realism, this paper contends that the U.S.'s motivation behind the LEC is to counter Chinese influence, using power-balancing as its mechanism. Gathering evidence from academic publications, government documents, and news outlets, this paper explores how the LEC is inherently a realist strategy. Although the program was created under the administration of former U.S. president Joe Biden and current president Donald Trump may appear to threaten the policy, this paper argues that Trump will still fund the LEC due to its strategic value.

29 Introduction

30 Within the Indo-Pacific region that houses critical trade routes and
31 developing nations, the Philippines is very important for geopolitical strategy as a
32 strong ally of the U.S. while being very close to China. In 2024, the US, through a
33 partnership with the Philippines and Japan, announced a plan to invest billions into
34 Philippine infrastructure and modernization through an initiative called the Luzon
35 Economic Corridor (LEC). China, as a main U.S. rival on the international stage, has
36 similarly attempted to establish the nation's dominance in the region through heavy
37 investments into the Philippines. More recently, under the current Trump
38 administration, it would seem that the LEC has been greatly disrupted due to his
39 policy of isolationism. However, this paper contends that, due to Trump's anti-
40 China tendencies, the LEC will continue as planned. This paper offers a realist
41 model for investigating U.S. foreign policy motivations in the Philippines to
42 counterbalance China's rising power, particularly in the context of tensions and
43 incidents in the South China Sea.

44 Such disputes have increased in frequency in the 2020s, with alleged
45 incidents of the Chinese Coast Guard boarding Philippine vessels and attacking
46 sailors with knives and axes near the disputed territory of Second Thomas Shoal
47 (Ratcliffe 2024). Other similar events of Chinese vessels assaulting those of other
48 nations include a reported occurrence of Chinese soldiers terrorizing Vietnamese
49 fishermen and destroying their property (Dinh 2024). In order to protect its
50 interests in the region — namely protecting commercial routes from Asia and
51 defending their allies — it would be beneficial for the U.S. to take action in the
52 region. The LEC, which has the potential to curb Chinese influence, represents the
53 US's efforts in this arena.

54 The use of the balance of power strategy has been prevalent in the Indo-
55 Pacific in the past few decades, especially regarding China. With China having built
56 up its military strength and becoming one of the leading militaries in the world —
57 designated as a top five military power by the Global Firepower Index in 2025 — its
58 smaller neighbors have reacted with alarm and attempted to balance this power
59 through both military investment and alliances with stronger powers. The U.S. is
60 one key power that such nations have flocked to, and due to the fact that China has
61 a reputation of ambitious expansion, these nations also have tended to not ally with
62 China in the past to avoid the potential of security and land concessions (Radtig
63 2015).

This paper examines the LEC as a case study for the overarching strategy of the U.S. within the South China Sea, specifically given its goals to deter China. Using both classical and neorealist perspectives, this paper argues that the US's intervention in the Philippines through the LEC is strategically framed to benefit U.S. interests abroad by counteracting China's power, a balancing action that would re-strengthen a key US-Philippine relationship and secure this vital nation from Chinese hegemony. The paper will first examine the Philippines within the context of its foreign policy in relation to the U.S. and China, considering key events that have defined its geopolitical trajectory. The paper then moves into the LEC's creation, its prospective impacts on the Philippines, and its implications for the U.S. and China were it to continue. The new Trump administration may seem like a threat to the LEC at a surface-level given his attempted reductions of U.S. foreign aid and federal spending suggesting that the LEC may be his crosshairs. However, the following section of this paper argues that Trump will continue the LEC even though it may appear to go against his ideals of isolationism. Overall, this paper conveys that the LEC is a strong offensive strategy for the West to deflect Chinese attempts at global influence. Examining academic and policy sources, this paper will explore how realist thought can be applied to this inherently anarchic system to analyze the motivations behind the LEC. Specifically, this paper relies on academic journals, monographs, news articles, official reports, press releases, and government statistics. Examining past information on the relations between the Philippines and the US, I sought to connect the LEC to the pattern of U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific and identified some incentives for the U.S. in this case.

Literature Review

Realist perspectives such as that of Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz — pioneers of classical realism and neorealism respectively — are especially applicable to the current South China Sea situation, including the LEC. According to classical realist thinker Morgenthau, actors make decisions based on some concept of power in order to further their own interests, focusing on their own gains in order to rationally advance themselves and their own power (Korab-Karpowicz 2023). Since in a classical realist perspective states aim to advance their own interests by any means possible, it logically follows that when some states get too powerful and threaten others' interests, actions to balance power may occur between weaker states in the region. After the United Nations ruled largely in favor

of the Philippines in a 2016 arbitration regarding Chinese aggression against the Philippines in the South China Sea, China refused — and continues to refuse — to comply with the ruling (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission 2016, Poling 2025), showing that Chinese aggression is not fully contained by peacekeepers. Since China does not engage with mediations by international bodies, the South China Sea situation can be viewed as inherently anarchical. This follows neorealist principles that support an anarchy-driven viewpoint of international relations, since violations of international law are not properly kept in check by enforcers. Thus, power balancing is a rational act by smaller nations.

Some argue that realism is not the most applicable to Asian relations and is more accurate for discussions of European relations since this school of thought inherently has European roots; such critics assert that actions by Asian powers are illogical when viewed through the lens of realism (Kang 2003). However, the current situation in the South China Sea fits the criteria for a realist perspective, with large powers — the U.S. and China — in a power struggle looking for support from smaller nations in the region to enhance their own power while the system does not properly check their aggressions. Additionally, the LEC is a clear-cut example of realism's applicability to the region at hand, since its counterbalancing initiatives already exemplify an American administration that battled with China over the alliance of the Philippines. Therefore, realism can be used as a framework within the seemingly anarchical China-Philippines standoff, and it can be understood as the motivation behind the U.S. legislation discussed in this paper.

China-Philippines relations have severely degraded in the past few decades due to Chinese claims to the South China Sea through their nine-dash line plan, often enforced through aggression. From China's perspective, the nine-dash line illustrates their claims to international waters, which often overlaps with neighboring nations. For example, in 2023, Philippine resupply missions to regions within their own exclusive economic zone were intercepted by the Chinese Coast Guard, and Chinese ramming of vessels has become increasingly common. In 2024, what has been called the most violent conflict between vessels from the two nations occurred, with the Chinese coast guard ramming Philippine supply ships near Second Thomas Shoal. However, a tentative agreement between the two was reached to stop further violence for a period of time, although it would appear that the Chinese have continued their attacks throughout 2025. These conflicts are not just between China and the Philippines, with similar instances of harassment being reported by Vietnam (Council on Foreign Relations 2024). In general, the South

China Sea remains a state of alarm and tension with Chinese claims over the geography included within the nine-dash line causing a myriad of territorial disputes with smaller nations, prompting U.S. involvement to prevent China's spread.

According to Congressional Research Service naval affairs analyst Ronald O'Rourke, for the U.S. to counter China's behavior in the South China Sea, it must prevent further harassment of Philippine sites and attempt to encourage China to accept the 2016 Hague ruling denying their claims over this territory (O'Rourke 2019). One key element of a U.S. strategy that O'Rourke does not discuss much is investment, though, which could be used to dissuade nations such as the Philippines from bandwagoning to China's side in an attempt to guarantee their own safety. The LEC is a perfect example of investment as a strategy to counter China.

Analysis

Recent developments

The Philippines' economic status renders it open to outside influence and investment such as through initiatives like the LEC. Currently, the Philippines is deemed a developing country by the World Bank with the services sector comprising 62 percent of the GDP, which has been steadily growing between 5 and 7 percent a year since the COVID-19 pandemic. Around 17.5 million lived in poverty in 2023 — before the LEC was proposed — at a rate of 15.5 percent, and 44.7 percent of the population suffered from moderate to severe food insecurity (Philippines Department of the Economy, Planning, and Development 2023). Historically, the Philippines has been a strong ally to the more democratic West, which started with the U.S. granting this former colony independence in 1946 and establishing a Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) in 1951 (U.S. Department of State 2023). The MDT played an extremely important role in establishing a U.S. military presence in the Philippines, such as the Subic Bay Naval Base. In the past three decades, Filipino workers also have migrated to the U.S. and other more developed nations en masse, with remittances from overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) reaching around \$37.2 billion in 2023. Most OFWs are motivated to work abroad in order to sustain their family back home financially, and are seen as heroes by their culture. By spurring

consumer spending, remittances made up around 8.5 percent of the Philippine GDP in 2023 (Bangko Sentral Ng Pilipinas 2024).

Politically, while the Philippines has historically deferred to Western interests, one recent administration has altered the course of the Philippines' political allegiances: that of president Rodrigo Duterte (2016-2022), who ruled with an iron fist and criticized the U.S. and EU (France-Presse 2016). For instance, during the Philippine "War on Drugs" beginning in 2016, Duterte used so-called "death squads" made up of gangsters and mercenaries to kill thousands of Filipinos extrajudicially. For these actions, the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights found that Duterte implicitly incited murder through his strong rhetoric and beliefs against drug trafficking (Tan 2024). Duterte also alienated the country's long-time ally the U.S. and favored China instead. For instance, in 2019, the Duterte administration defended China against international accusations of persecution of Uyghurs via a petition to the UN Human Rights Council that was also signed by 36 other countries (France-Presse 2019). Additionally, Duterte increased Chinese investment to the Philippines through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an ambitious policy aiming for a network of massive infrastructure and transportation projects through Asia, Africa, and Europe, normally funded by Chinese state-owned enterprises (Rabena 2018). As political scientist and researcher Sypha Chanthavong has observed, the BRI has been criticized for using "debt trap diplomacy" to "obtain economic or political concessions" from its debtor countries, using massive loans to build projects and collecting collateral after an inevitable default (Chanthavong 2024). China pledged to invest \$24 billion into the Philippines (Lema and Petty 2018), which was partially delivered but ultimately canceled by Duterte's successor Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Duterte also sought to cancel the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), one of the pillars of the U.S.-Philippines relations that encourages their military alliance. Former U.S. Secretary Lloyd Austin ultimately convinced him to keep this bilateral military agreement in place in June 2021. After Duterte left office, Marcos Jr. gravitated back towards the American agenda in accordance with his father and former president Ferdinand Marcos' pro-Western policy, cutting ties with China by canceling BRI investments and congratulating Taiwan for its peaceful and democratic transfer of power to the Democratic Progressive Party in 2024 (Kurlantzick 2024). During their annual joint military Exercise Balikatan in April of 2024, the U.S. and Philippines trained over the South China Sea and practiced attacking a target ship, notably a Chinese vessel (U.S. Naval Institute 2024). The U.S. has also shored up its defenses in relation to the Philippines: in 2023, Marcos

202 moved to extend the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA)
203 established in 2014 that allowed the U.S. military to post personnel in Philippine
204 bases on different islands of the archipelago, creating four new EDCA sites. Former
205 president Joe Biden also warned China that “any attack on Philippine aircraft,
206 vessels, or armed forces in the South China Sea [would] invoke [the] Mutual
207 Defence Treaty” in 2024 in response to Chinese harassment of fishing boats in the
208 region (Heydarian 2024).

209 What is the LEC?

210 The Luzon Economic Corridor was developed in April of 2024 as a trilateral
211 initiative between the US, Japan, and Philippines to funnel \$100 billion from the U.S.
212 and Japan into various sections and industries of the Philippines, hoping to build
213 greater interconnectivity. Specifically, the plan develops green energy supply
214 chains, invests in the semiconductor industry, and improves infrastructure and
215 transportation. Major projects aim to connect parts of the Philippines crucial to
216 economic development. One such project is the Malolos-Clark Railway Project,
217 which would connect the Clark Economic Zone and Clark International Airport,
218 respectively generating 9 percent and 3 percent of the country’s GDP. The project
219 also would reduce travel time from Manila to Clark International by one hour,
220 reduce carbon emissions, and connect Metro Manila, responsible for 36 percent of
221 the country’s GDP, to these other economically intensive regions. The LEC came
222 from the efforts of former U.S. president Joe Biden’s administration, which regularly
223 used alliances with Indo-Pacific nations to counter possible Chinese influence
224 (Brands 2024).

225 In November 2024, after a joint meeting in Malacanang, other Western
226 nations expressed interest in foreign investment into the LEC. Australia specifically
227 discussed investing the equivalent of \$340 million USD into the project over a five-
228 year period. The UK also offered its aid in financing and producing mining
229 opportunities and sustainable development (Portcalls 2024). Moreover, Sweden
230 signed a memorandum of understanding with the Philippines, establishing Swedish
231 grants and export credits. Sweden’s development institution bank SwedFund
232 similarly agreed to finance a feasibility study of the Subic Clark-Manila-Batangas
233 highway (Isip 2024).

Political Motivations

One key motivation of the U.S. for the LEC is its current geopolitical competition with China in the Indo-Pacific. China's financing of large-scale projects and investments, particularly in developing nations, has allowed the CCP to extend its influence around the Global South, including across much of Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. In some cases, China also has managed to take ownership over infrastructure in the receiving nations. For instance, China's BRI initiative in Sri Lanka led to China Merchants Port Holdings, a Chinese SOE, effectively holding 85 percent of shares in Hambantota Port after funding its construction (Chanthavong 2024). BRI infrastructure loans have also encouraged Cambodia to reevaluate their diplomatic efforts with the U.S. as they moved closer to China, setting an ominous precedent that other Indo-Pacific nations may turn away from the U.S. and the West as a whole (Hillman 2018). Therefore, the BRI's wide and growing influence around the globe poses a threat to U.S. authority abroad. To rival the Chinese in investing into developing nations, G7 nations, consisting of the U.S., UK, Italy, Germany, Canada, France, and Japan, formed the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) in 2022 at a summit in Germany. This organization pledged to invest \$600 billion into construction and infrastructure in middle to low-income countries over five years, a parallel initiative to the Chinese BRI (Tan 2022). The LEC, as a project under the PGII, offers reassurance to the Philippines that the West has not abandoned them, securing and improving economic ties between the Philippines and G7 nations by overturning the political implications from Duterte's BRI integration.

It is of utmost importance for the U.S. to gain the Philippines back as an ally after Duterte's fervor for China. Having an increasingly powerful friend in the Indo-Pacific is beneficial for the U.S. in its political rivalry against China. Applying Morgenthau's principles of realism, nations constantly compete for increased influence and power (Korab-Karpowicz 2023). Therefore, in the U.S.-China standoff, whenever one side benefits, the other will likely be worse off. In the case of the Philippines, if the U.S. re-established strong political ties, China would lose its footing in influencing this pivotal nation.

But apart from their long-term ties, why is the Philippines so enticing for the U.S.? One reason lies in the shipping lanes. The South China Sea constitutes the biggest trade route to and from East Asia, and it is estimated that around one-third of total maritime shipping heads through it (U.S. Energy Information Administration

2024). The Philippines claim sovereignty over the Luzon Strait, which is a route used by 44 percent of the global fleet when navigating the South China Sea (U.S. Naval Institute 2023). However, China claims almost the entirety of these waters under its nine-dash line plan, leading to disputes over the line's boundaries and Chinese hegemony. Chinese claims also overlap with Philippine territories at Scarborough Shoal. Chinese aggression in its desired territory is worrisome for Western interests, as Chinese influence over the region would allow the CCP to control distribution of goods globally, not to mention threaten allies in the region. For example, around 10 billion barrels of petroleum passed through the South China Sea in 2023, which represents around 30 percent of total oil trade (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2024). As they already have shown aggression towards foreign vessels on the waters, it is very likely that China will continue to escalate such tensions if allowed to expand unchecked. Trade in the South China Sea therefore holds great significance: nations that manage to act as middlemen in the region or hold large swaths of these waters have more say over large amounts of resources, allowing them to inherently advance their own interests by holding leverage over other nations. Morgenthau argued that nations use net benefits to rationally make decisions to improve their own power, and applying this theory to the aforementioned situation, the most powerful nations with high stakes in the area — the U.S. and China — would definitely act in order to secure the South China Sea for their own profit. The LEC, by enhancing the economic relations between the U.S. and Philippines, therefore helps strengthen American ties to such a crucial region, advancing Western power and ideals while repelling China's similar past efforts. Realist thought is applicable to such analyses of political economics and trade, since a nation's economy will dictate its overall strength and ability to build a strong military.

This aspect of balancing power in international relations is key when discussing US-China relations. According to realist ideals, alliances and political ties are extremely important in protecting nations from external threats, namely those of other aggressive nations. This form of balancing implies that actors will join forces with one another against some superior threat (Klinger 2008). Applying this framework to the current Philippine dilemma, the U.S. and Philippines, through the LEC, invigorate their alliance and stance against Chinese aggression.

For instance, China has called for the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (U.S. Department of Defense 2024) as one of its largest goals, implying a likely military invasion of Taiwan. In such an event, the Taiwan Strait could become

compromised. According to former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner, “a major conflict in the [Taiwan Strait] would result in thousands of casualties and jeopardize more than \$2 trillion dollars in global economic activity, igniting a global economic depression” (U.S. Department of Defense 2023). The LEC indirectly secures an alternative trade route — the Luzon Strait — and, in an insurance-like manner, protects U.S. shipping within the region. The LEC also aims to reduce Chinese intervention in the Philippines, showing that the U.S. is willing to invest at the same level that China did during the Duterte administration. Specifically, the energy and electricity projects within the LEC provide strong competition to Chinese energy investments. The State Grid Corporation of China, a Chinese SOE, owns around 40% of the National Grid Corporation of the Philippines, which is the nation’s main state-owned power grid. China also accounted for about 28.1 percent of the Philippines’ petroleum imports in 2024 (Maderazo 2025). The energy sector, key to developing a first-world country by providing a higher quality of life to inhabitants, is currently influenced by China, meaning that China can gain leverage over the Philippine economy. This is not good for the U.S. regarding the Philippines, since in the established U.S.-China zero-sum game, China’s gains in the Philippines are likely a detriment to U.S. influence. To counteract China’s dominant role within the energy sector, the U.S. supplies its own. The LEC announcement promises clean energy deployment, which would reduce the Filipino dependence on fossil fuels and Chinese companies. USAID has already planned to invest \$750 million into the Philippines from 2020 through 2025 for energy security means, implying that the U.S. is more than capable of upping their investments (Poling 2025). The LEC plants an American stake in Philippine development by allowing the latter access to better and cleaner technologies to fuel their energy demands. Whether or not these efforts will effectively thwart Chinese influence remains to be seen.

China also could strike a crucial blow in a successful Taiwanese invasion by gaining control of Taiwan’s lucrative semiconductor industry. The U.S. imports 44 percent of their logic chips — crucial parts of all electronics — from Taiwan, meaning that the U.S. would face extreme shortages in digital devices and be left ruined in this sector (Jones et al. 2023). The Philippines are also a valuable Pacific ally for Taiwan in this respect. At a joint press conference with the Philippines on July 30, 2024, former Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s remarks implied the importance of the Philippines to the U.S. due to its engagement in the semiconductor industry: “the Philippines is a priority partner on semiconductor

manufacturing” with “twenty percent of global assembly, testing, and packaging [taking] place here in the Philippines” (U.S. Department of Defense 2024). The LEC projects the future revamping of supply chain flows for semiconductors. In such a case, with the Philippine semiconductor industry becoming a prominent and reliable source, the U.S. could cash in early, as the Philippines only exported \$221 million worth of semiconductors in 2023 compared to the \$62.3 billion of China in 2023, but is expected to grow 10 to 15 percent per year until 2027 (YCP Holdings 2025). The example of the semiconductor industry illustrates how the LEC is projected more broadly to enhance U.S.-Philippine military cooperation and methods of reducing dependence on China.

The Trump Update

The second U.S. administration under Donald Trump has led to uncertainty around U.S. foreign policy, implying some variability over the LEC’s fate. As an international global leader, he is definitely a volatile character, and it is difficult to categorize his foreign policy. In some cases, he alienates allies with tariffs, and it’s not far-fetched to think that he would also push developing nations to the side in line with his isolationist rhetoric. For instance, during his inauguration week, Trump signed 37 executive orders, including “Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid.” This executive order stated that all foreign aid and development would pause for 90 days, with each case of foreign aid being examined over this time period by its respective departments or agencies to gauge whether they should be continued, modified, or ended (White House 2025). His attempted dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development also further implied radical isolationism in his new term, but constitutionality issues along with checks and balances may limit his ability to pass legislation down the line.

Nonetheless, there is some precedent to suggest that Trump will keep the LEC around. Specifically, Trump has been very anti-China so far. During his campaign, he pledged tariff increases on China due to their large numbers of imports and buildup of dependency, levying a massive 145 percent tariff on Chinese goods in April (Mangan et al. 2025). His rhetoric and actions imply a bullish attitude when it comes to China, such that he is unwilling to yield any possible gains if it means that China will profit instead. Therefore, Trump is likely to take any action that may mitigate Chinese hegemony, such as continuing the LEC. Trump’s

Secretary of State Marco Rubio also promised “ironclad” support to the Philippines in its issues with China. According to Philippine National Security Council representative Jonathan Malaya, Philippine projects will likely withstand the storm, stating that “all their projects here are aligned with Trump’s vision of making the U.S. more secure” (Heydarian 2025). Shoring up the US’s implicit defenses in the Pacific is too good of an opportunity to resist, even if it was brought in by Trump’s rival Joe Biden. If Trump sees the LEC as an ability to re-establish the Philippines as a political partner, and take advantage of its economic and natural resources, he will likely continue the initiative. Trump was somewhat of an isolationist on the campaign trail, emphasizing the theory of “America First” — a term advocating for focusing on American interests in foreign affairs. This means that Trump would likely support the Philippines, since it is definitely an American interest to counter whatever influence China attempts to exert. Additionally, in his first term, Trump favored Philippine interests as a whole and also recognized the geographic and strategic value that the Philippines holds in relation to China (Aspinwall 2025). For instance, Trump backed the Philippines through the Drug War and its extrajudicial nature, looking to reinforce their alliance when Duterte attempted to move away (Pennington 2017). Therefore, the precedent shows that Trump acts mainly to advance the U.S. on the world stage in regards to the Philippines, such that he adheres to realist ideals when taking action on matters regarding this ally.

The Trump administration has altered the norms of U.S. foreign policy, opting to reject multilateralism throughout his first and second terms, calling NATO’s mutual defense clause into question (The Guardian 2025) and beginning the process of removing the U.S. from the World Health Organization (Yamey and Titanji 2025). Therefore, one could argue that the LEC will be similarly cut, perhaps to save costs for the US. However, through a realist lens, actors do not always adhere to their apparent principles, since in an anarchic world, nations acting in their own self-interest seek to improve their standing through many different methods. Therefore, Trump will most likely make concessions for the geopolitical benefit of the U.S. For instance, Trump helped form the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement during his first term, a multilateral deal that lowered tariffs in order for the U.S.’s gain (Schweller 2021).

Conclusion

The LEC isn't just a method for the Philippines to accelerate their economic growth, but instead is part of the U.S. strategy to reaffirm their strength in the South China Sea, especially in the face of growing Chinese aggression in the region. Through a realist point of view, the LEC is an action that attempts to balance the power dynamic of the region by bringing the U.S. up to par to China in terms of investment and hegemony, aiming to reinforce an alliance with the Philippines after Duterte turned to China from 2016 to 2022.

With the key factors and problems discussed above regarding the LEC, there exist a few outcomes with the US's role in the second Trump administration: the U.S. completely pulls out of the deal, reduces its funding, or delivers as promised. The burden of ensuring that the deal runs smoothly is currently resting on the Marcos administration, but President Marcos has stated publicly that he has confidence in the plan continuing. This confidence from the Philippines' side, combined with Trump's pattern of anti-China action by any means possible, implies that the LEC has enough strategic value and therefore be kept around.

The LEC is a part of a broader strategy within an overarching political rivalry in the South China Sea between the U.S. and China. With recent events such as Chinese harassment of Philippine vessels, it is clear that the Philippines, one of the U.S.'s longtime allies but also a geographical neighbor of China, may be caught in the crossfire. Thus, the U.S.'s utilization of the Philippines as a deterrent to China represents an offensive move against China in their game of chess.

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Convergence Journal Review of

“A Political and Economic Analysis of the Luzon 2 Economic Corridor”

What an interesting paper! Very impressive for the high school level. This paper sets out to examine a specific policy, the Luzon Economic Corridor, through two paradigmatic realist lenses in academic international relations: classical realism and neorealism.

This paper does a great job identifying some of the key thinkers in the realist tradition. One consideration for an improved paper would be increased reliance on the work of the realist thinkers it describes. For example, when referencing Morgenthau or Waltz, it might be helpful to use as source material some examples from their work, rather than just the tertiary source of the Stanford Encyclopedia of Political Philosophy. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Political Philosophy is one of many fantastic sources, but their strength lies in their ability to give the reader a survey of relevant sources and information that the reader can then use to delve into deeper analysis.

The example of China ignoring the UN arbitration decision is an excellent example of what a realist would use to demonstrate their assumptions and views about international relations. Classical realism is about more than just the idea that states use available means for power purposes. A major distinction between classical realism and neorealism (often called structural realism) is in what they think is *causing* states to focus so much on power considerations. For a classical realist, things such as human nature are prime drivers of this behavior. However, for a neorealist, it is the structure of anarchy (which this paper mentions) that is a prime drive of this behavior.

Some areas of the literature review really shine. For example, a quality literature review highlights gaps or tensions among existing theories in the field. Reference Kang's identification of the debate among realists regarding the global generalizability of realism exemplifies a great example of identifying these tensions. Indeed, this entire paper stands as a further analysis of this tension. This overview of the information applicable to the analysis of work in the field of international relations should be the focus of any international relations literature review. Theories about debt trap diplomacy might be more appropriate for the literature review section.

Sometimes further specificity might enhance the paper. For example, in Line 115 there is reference to the LEC's counterbalancing initiatives. What are some of these? Even if brief, occasionally it would benefit the paper to be more concrete. Elsewhere in the paper, this is better done. For example, in Line 124, the 2023 Philippine-Chinese Coast Guard conflict illustrate degrading past China-Philippines relations well.

In the analysis section, the paper might benefit from more clear and cohesive structure. From the abstract, it appears that the LEC is going to be analyzed through two lenses: neorealism and classical realism. However, as of the analysis section, very little has focused on that. Lines 168 through 208, while interesting are a very long paragraph that could benefit from break-up into paragraphs that each focus on a more specific aspect of the analysis.

In the description of the LEC, the write does a great job offering examples of *how* the LEC claims to build interconnectivity, such as Malolos-Clark Railway Project. As a minor suggestion, it would help later to specify for readers unaware of what an SOE is.

The Political Motivations section offers a great opportunity to showcase the LEC through the two lenses. It does some of this, but this section more than any other would benefit from more nuanced analysis of the assumptions and views of these two paradigms. Remember, a paradigm, lens, school of thought, etc. in any field is a set of assumptions and views condensed into a useful shorthand term. The details of what gets condensed, however, is the nuance of analysis for paradigmatic approaches to international relations events. In Line 285, for example, the author brings up the rational approach to decision-making by countries. Neorealism focuses more on this, but it isn't unique in this approach, so it would be helpful to say more about how this analysis is uniquely classical realist and neorealist. How do Morgenthau's principles seemingly operate in the LEC. It would be helpful to read them in the original *Politics Among Nations*. The writer doesn't have to read the entire book, but take a look at the principles the writer is referring to instead of indirectly citing a thinker – this would enhance the analysis. Similarly, when referencing Kenneth Waltz, it would be helpful to take a look at *Theory of International Politics*. These are not the only two pieces by the thinkers, but they are where the write of this paper is indirectly taking ideas from, and by knowing those source ideas better, the paper can focus more on analysis. This would make an already strong paper stronger. Remember the *science* in political science is at its heart interested in identifying causes of effects, not in giving policy recommendations. That is also a part, but not the main part, of political science.

Line 299 offers a great opportunity – the claim made by the write here is that the U.S. and the Philippines are using the LEC to strengthen ties and balance against China. Here you can say what realist assumptions are being exemplified, go into detail about those assumptions and contrast how a classical and neorealist (or perhaps even another paradigm) might explain this. Focusing on that type of stuff throughout the paper more would improve it. Is Chinese behavior also explained using realist lenses? If so, how? If not, why not? There is notably little analysis of neorealism here, but the abstract indicated there would be. That would be a great opportunity to enhance the paper. Line 322's reference to zero-sum games is a framework for how a neorealist would approach a cooperative/competitive analysis. Power for one is a relative change for another. This is in contrast to other paradigms in international relations theory.

The section on the Trump Administration is coherent. However, keep in mind the overall project of a political science/academic piece, even one that is policy-oriented, is to explain the behavior of politics among, between and across countries more than to prescribe policy. How does the current administration offer an opportunity to showcase, or possibly exemplify weaknesses of, classical and neorealist assumptions and views?

Perhaps the project of the paper is different than one is currently written. Perhaps the goal is to analyze policies. However, even if it does focus on that, the goal is to look at causes, effects and mechanisms of policy and to try to explain and describe them. When revising this draft, keep in mind what you want the overall project to be about, and remember to orient the finished project around that.

As the paper stands, it's a great, ambitious piece that analyzes a current event, uses sources well and is coherent enough. An even stronger paper will focus more on explanatory analysis through international relations theories. Nice work. Keep up the thoughtful writing and thinking!

I recommend **revise and resubmit**, but it is a strong paper that doesn't need to be completely redone. Consider these suggestions and keep making progress!

The article is original and creative, structure coherently, somewhat engages with the literature and uses evidence well throughout. The draft is polished with minimal grammatical and formatting issues. Great job so far!

Review of “A Political and Economic Analysis of the Luzon Economic Corridor”

9 Aug 2025

Overall Feedback

Thanks for this interesting read, I learned a lot about the Philippines, the LEC, and relations with China.

Overall, I think it's great to use case studies to probe the applicability of core theories of International Relations. With further improvements and deeper theoretical engagement, I think this paper could be publishable in this or a similar journal.

With the following revisions and improving in these areas—particularly in sharpening your theoretical comparisons and selecting evidence that directly tests competing hypotheses—your paper will present a more convincing and publishable argument.

Strengthening the Theoretical Framework

You conclude that realism is the only viable lens, but empirical social science demands comparing multiple hypotheses against the evidence. You need to spend more time doing the following:

- At regular intervals of your paper, explain why realism outperforms other approaches (e.g., liberalism, constructivism) in explaining the LEC and its (likely/possible) durability.
- Clarify whether you are deploying neorealism specifically, and justify why this strand is preferable to classical or other versions of realism.
- Expand on the brief mention of critics who argue realism fits European or U.S. behaviour better than Asian powers. Why might realism appear illogical in this region's foreign relations activity, and what alternative frameworks could apply? This is really important and the area you need to focus on most when revising your paper.

Refining the Case Study Sections

Some aspects of the case study elaboration, for example the part on the Philippines (pp. 5–7), cover relevant developments but read as too broad and ranging.

- For example, merge and streamline the “Background” and “What is the LEC?” sections to focus only on facts directly tied to your argument. Remove superfluous detail not core to the case study.

Evidence Selection and Theoretical Assessment

At times, the evidence you select seems at odds with a realist interpretation.

- The claim that the LEC “offers reassurance to the Philippines” reads not like a realist argument, where actors expect concrete power moves, not reassurance. This sounds more ideational or constructivist?!
- When you note President Marcos’s need to act (p.13), ask whether the Philippines is truly passive or an active agent. This distinction has significant theoretical implications – again, either these are two Great Powers in the form of the US and China acting, or the Philippines has a role to play. If it has a role to play, how should we expect it to act in this three-player game?
- Crucially, avoid assumptions that your realist framework is correct; instead, present counterhypotheses and show why they fall short. E.g. “This is not good for the U.S. regarding the Philippines, since in the established U.S.China zero-sum game, China’s gains in the Philippines are likely a detriment to U.S. influence.” This is one vision of IR, not the objective truth, so you need to be much more exploratory and self-doubting at points (this is the job of a social scientist!).

Trump Section

The update on Trump’s potential role on the future of the LEC feels speculative and inconsistent.

- For example, in some areas you say that one should expect to see the LEC continued, in others that you think “Trump will most likely make concessions for the geopolitical benefit of the U.S.” What would this look like? What evidence would we be able to present to make your realist version of events more likely than another countervailing theory? It’s perfectly acceptable to have some elaboration of the Trump case, but I think right now it doesn’t serve a good purpose and could be made much more tight.
- If you keep this section, specify the observable indicators you would use to test realist predictions versus other theories. This is what you need to convince your reader of.

Language and Formatting

Your prose is generally clear, but occasionally veers into casual phrasing.

- Replace non-specific phrases like “be kept around” with precise academic language.
- Maintain a consistent formal tone throughout.
- Proofread for minor stylistic lapses to ensure a polished final draft.

References and Citations

Some citations lack necessary details.

- Ensure every reference (e.g., Campbell and Salidjanova) follows your chosen citation style and includes source type, title, and retrieval information.
- Double-check formatting consistency across your bibliography.

A Political and Economic Analysis of the Luzon Economic Corridor

Acknowledgements

Thank you so much to [REDACTED] who mentored me throughout the research process and taught me quite a lot about the framework of the academic paper. By providing structured and flexible feedback, [REDACTED] challenged me to be intellectually curious and delve into the topic in a detailed manner. [REDACTED] also helped me refine my research to have a more articulate and rooted angle that was well-supported by evidence. [REDACTED] treated me as the lead, giving me overall independence to take the paper in the direction that I wanted but also ensuring that it remained academically viable. Being very patient and caring along this journey, [REDACTED] provided support and gave out suggestions during our numerous meetings. I am confident that with [REDACTED] help, I produced a strong research paper that follows academic norms and guidelines.

Abstract

This paper examines a trilateral initiative between the United States, Japan and the Philippines called the Luzon Economic Corridor that aims to invest around \$100 billion USD into the Philippine economy and ultimately improve it in a number of sectors such as agriculture and energy. This paper examines why the U.S. specifically is powering this policy through the lens of wider Indo-Pacific tensions, specifically that of China-Philippines disputes. Looking at the LEC using neorealism and continuously comparing it to the alternative frameworks of liberalism and constructivism in multiple aspects, this paper contends that the U.S.'s motivation behind the LEC is to counter Chinese influence, using power-balancing as its mechanism. Gathering evidence from academic publications, government documents, and news outlets, this paper explores how the LEC is inherently a realist strategy. Although the program was created under the administration of former U.S. president Joe Biden and current president Donald Trump may appear

to threaten the policy, this paper argues that Trump will still fund the LEC due to its strategic value and shares indicators proving that the LEC is inherently realist.

Introduction

Within the Indo-Pacific region that houses critical trade routes and developing nations, the Philippines is very important for geopolitical strategy as a strong ally of the U.S. while being very close to China. In 2024, the U.S., through a partnership with the Philippines and Japan, announced a plan to invest billions into Philippine infrastructure and modernization through an initiative called the Luzon Economic Corridor (LEC) (Brands, 2024). China, as a main U.S. rival on the international stage, has similarly attempted to establish the nation's dominance in the region through heavy investments into the Philippines. More recently, under the current Trump administration, it would seem that the LEC has been greatly disrupted due to his policy of isolationism. This paper contends that the LEC will continue as planned under its realist framework. This paper offers a realist model for investigating U.S. foreign policy motivations in the Philippines to counterbalance China's rising power, particularly in the context of tensions and incidents in the South China Sea.

Violence in the South China Sea has increased in frequency in the 2020s, with alleged incidents of the Chinese Coast Guard boarding Philippine vessels and attacking sailors with knives and axes near the disputed territory of Second Thomas Shoal (Al Jazeera, 2024). Other similar events of Chinese vessels assaulting those of other nations include a reported occurrence of Chinese soldiers terrorizing Vietnamese fishermen and destroying their property (Dinh, 2024). In order to protect its interests in the region — namely protecting commercial routes from Asia and balancing against China — it would be beneficial for the U.S. to take action in the region. The LEC, which has the potential to curb Chinese influence, represents the U.S.'s efforts in this arena.

The use of the balance of power strategy has been prevalent in the Indo-Pacific in the past few decades, especially regarding China. With China having built up its military strength and becoming one of the leading militaries in the world — designated as a top five military power by the Global Firepower Index in 2025 (Global Firepower, 2025) — its smaller neighbors have reacted with alarm and attempted to balance this power through both military investment and alliances with stronger powers. The U.S. is one key power that such nations have flocked to,

and due to the fact that China has a reputation of ambitious expansion, these nations also have tended to not ally with China in the past to avoid the potential of security and land concessions.

This paper examines the LEC as a case study for the overarching strategy of the U.S. within the South China Sea, specifically given its goals to deter China. Using neorealist perspectives, this paper argues that the US's intervention in the Philippines through the LEC is strategically framed to benefit U.S. interests abroad by counteracting China's power, a balancing action that would re-strengthen a key US-Philippine relationship and secure this vital nation from Chinese hegemony. The paper will first examine the Philippines within the context of its foreign policy in relation to the U.S. and China, considering key events that have defined its geopolitical trajectory. The paper then moves into the LEC's creation, its prospective impacts on the Philippines, and its implications for the U.S. and China were it to continue. The new Trump administration may seem like a threat to the LEC at a surface-level given his attempted reductions of U.S. foreign aid and federal spending suggesting that the LEC may be his crosshairs. However, the following section of this paper argues that Trump will continue the LEC even though it may appear to go against his ideals of isolationism since the LEC's underlying logic is realist and therefore offers Trump an opportunity to advance the U.S. 's power. Overall, this paper conveys that the LEC is a strong offensive strategy for the West to deflect Chinese attempts at global influence. Examining academic and policy sources, this paper will explore how realist thought can be applied to this inherently anarchic system to analyze the motivations behind the LEC. Specifically, this paper relies on academic journals, monographs, news articles, official reports, press releases, and government statistics. Examining past information on the relations between the Philippines and the US, I sought to connect the LEC to the pattern of U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific and identified some incentives for the U.S. in this case.

Literature Review

Realist perspectives such as that of Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz — pioneers of classical realism and neorealism respectively — are especially applicable to the current South China Sea situation, including the LEC. According to Morgenthau, actors make decisions based on some concept of power along with aspects of human nature such as greed and fear in order to further their own

interests, focusing on their own gains in order to rationally advance themselves and their own power (Morgenthau, 1948). Since, in a neorealist perspective, states aim to advance their own interests by any means possible due to a lack of regulation in an anarchical system, it logically follows that when some states get too powerful and threaten others' interests, actions to balance power may occur between weaker states in the region (Waltz, 1979). After an international tribunal ruled largely in favor of the Philippines in a 2016 arbitration regarding Chinese aggression against the Philippines in the South China Sea and its violations of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, China refused — and continues to refuse — to comply with the ruling (Campbell & Salidjanova, 2016). Therefore, Chinese aggression is not fully contained by peacekeepers. Since China does not engage with mediations by international bodies, the South China Sea situation can be viewed as inherently anarchical. This follows neorealist principles that support an anarchy-driven viewpoint of international relations, since violations of international law are not properly kept in check by enforcers. Thus, power balancing is a rational act by smaller nations through neorealism since China is viewed as a threat to their security.

Some argue that realism is not the most applicable to Asian relations and is more accurate for discussions of European relations since this school of thought inherently has European roots; such critics, such as David C. Kang, assert that actions by Asian powers are illogical when viewed through the lens of realism since Asia stands as a China-centered hierarchy where balancing is less appealing compared to bandwagoning. For instance, Kang argues that under realism, the Taiwan-China conflict merits a larger reaction from Japan and South Korea in support of Taiwan to protect themselves from Chinese hegemony — a reaction that has not occurred for decades — and historical bandwagoning towards China pre-1900s (Kang, 2003). However, Kang's evidence is largely outdated, and new evidence actually specifically supports neorealism due to China's disregarding of the 2016 arbitration ruling and continued harassment of foreign vessels that point to anarchy's dominance in the status quo.

Alternative schools of thought such as liberalism and constructivism offer differing interpretations to the Asian region. Liberals typically believe in international cooperation and enforcement of international law and that state preferences' differences lead to certain consequences, both positive and negative (Moravcsik, 1997). They also argue that differences or similarities in values and preferences among states will cause a variety of relationships to form, with

134 similarly-minded states being more likely to work together to simultaneously
135 benefit. One could argue that liberalism could rationalize the LEC as an example of
136 the Philippines seeking to forge strong connections with the U.S. since both nations
137 share democratic values. Constructivists support the notion that international
138 relations depend upon norms and social constructs, such that states take on
139 identities shaped by their history, culture, government, etc. that others can
140 recognize (Hopf, 1998). China's history as the most powerful nation in Asia could
141 therefore motivate it to reclaim its former glory.

142 While liberalism and constructivism may seem compelling, neorealism
143 prevails as the most accurate and logical theory in the China-Philippines situation
144 simply because of China's position as the major power within the anarchical Indo-
145 Pacific. The security concerns presented by China are not restricted by any
146 international peacekeeping body, and the asymmetrical power dynamic of China
147 compared to the Philippines militarily and economically has led to power balancing
148 with the Philippines seeking reliance upon the U.S. for help. Liberalism, on the
149 other hand, relies upon the U.N.'s ability to prevent conflict within the region,
150 which it has been unable to do so far. Its emphasis on cooperation would imply that
151 China and the Philippines should work together to solve this issue, which seems
152 unrealistic under the current Filipino administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. that
153 has already made efforts to power balance towards the U.S. (Kurlantzick, 2024).
154 Constructivism correctly assumes China's motives for its expansion, since China
155 claims that large swaths of the South China Sea are its historical inheritance.
156 However, China's threat to the Philippines is not social and instead regards security
157 and coercion. This does not fit into the constructivist narrative that the standoff is
158 between two nations with a shared history and complex societal relations.

159 Additionally, the LEC is a clear-cut example of neorealism's applicability to
160 the region at hand, since its counterbalancing initiatives already exemplify an
161 American administration that battled with China over the alliance of the
162 Philippines. For instance, transportation and infrastructure projects such as the
163 Malolos-Clark Railway connect major economic centers and protect trade from
164 Chinese influence, securing the Philippines as an ally instead of China (Malolos-
165 Clark Railway Project, 2024). Therefore, realism can be used as a framework within
166 the seemingly anarchical China-Philippines standoff, and it can be understood as
167 the motivation behind the U.S. legislation discussed in this paper.

168 China-Philippines relations have severely degraded in the past few decades
169 due to China's expansive and ambitious claims to the South China Sea through the

nine-dash line plan — a controversial maritime boundary that has led to many land disputes with their neighbors along with violence (Caruana, 2023). For example, in 2023, Philippine resupply missions to regions within their own exclusive economic zone were intercepted by the Chinese Coast Guard, and Chinese ramming of vessels has become increasingly common. In 2024, what has been called the most violent conflict between vessels from the two nations occurred, with the Chinese coast guard ramming Philippine supply ships near Second Thomas Shoal. A tentative agreement between the two was reached to stop further violence for a period of time, although it would appear that the Chinese have continued their attacks throughout 2025. These conflicts are not just between China and the Philippines, with similar instances of harassment being reported by Vietnam (Timeline: China's Maritime Disputes, n.d.). In general, the South China Sea remains a state of alarm and tension with Chinese claims over the geography included within the nine-dash line causing a myriad of territorial disputes with smaller nations, prompting U.S. involvement to prevent China's spread (Ratcliffe, 2024).

China's highly controversial Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) also exemplifies Chinese expansion, only around the globe through an ambitious network of massive infrastructure and transportation projects through Asia, Africa, and Europe that are normally funded by Chinese state-owned enterprises — government-owned businesses that work in specific economic sectors such as infrastructure (Hillman, 2018). As political scientist and researcher Sypha Chanthavong has observed, the BRI has been criticized for using “debt trap diplomacy” to “obtain economic or political concessions” from its debtor countries, using massive loans to build projects and collecting collateral after an inevitable default (Chanthavong, 2024). The BRI fits into a neorealist, anarchical view of Chinese relations, since with no international mediator preventing its investments and contentious actions, China can expand its power through any means it can afford. Smaller states will also be likely to accept said loans due to their potential relative gain in power.

Constructivists would argue that the BRI fits the Chinese narrative of restoring its historical grandeur in the modern era and liberals would assume mutual economic benefits for all parties involved. However, China has coercively managed to take ownership over infrastructure projects in the receiving nations in some cases. For instance, China's BRI initiative in Sri Lanka led to China Merchants Port Holdings, a Chinese SOE, effectively holding 85 percent of shares in Hambantota Port after funding its construction (Chanthavong, 2024). Therefore, Chinese loans may have an ulterior motive of creating dependence, and China can dominate nations'

economies around the world as a result. Neorealism therefore best explains China's aggression since no international body can prevent its expansion, so they have free rein to expand their power.

According to Congressional Research Service naval affairs analyst Ronald O'Rourke, for the U.S. to counter China's behavior in the South China Sea, it must prevent further harassment of Philippine sites and encourage China to accept the 2016 arbitration ruling denying their claims over this territory (O'Rourke, 2020). One key element of a U.S. strategy that O'Rourke does not discuss much is investment, which could be used to dissuade nations such as the Philippines from bandwagoning to China's side in an attempt to guarantee their own safety. The LEC is a perfect example of investment as a strategy to counter China.

Analysis

Recent developments

The Philippines' economic status renders it open to outside influence and investment such as through initiatives like the LEC. Currently, it is deemed a developing country by the World Bank with the services sector comprising 62 percent of the GDP. Economic growth has been steady with the GDP consistently increasing by between 5 and 7 percent a year since the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank, n.d.). Historically, the Philippines has been a strong ally to the more democratic West, which started with the U.S. granting its former colony independence in 1946 and establishing a Mutual Defense Treaty in 1951. The MDT played an extremely important role in establishing a U.S. military presence in the Philippines, such as the Subic Bay Naval Base. In the past three decades, Filipino workers also have migrated to the U.S. and other more developed nations en masse, with remittances from overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) reaching around \$37.2 billion in 2023. Most OFWs are motivated to work abroad in order to sustain their family back home financially, and are seen as heroes by their culture. By spurring consumer spending, remittances made up around 8.5 percent of the Philippine GDP in 2023 (Fintech News Philippines, 2025).

While the Philippines has historically deferred to Western interests, one recent administration has altered the course of the Philippines' political allegiances: that of president Rodrigo Duterte (2016-2022), who ruled with an iron fist and

criticized the U.S. and E.U while supporting China (Lema & Petty, 2018). For instance, in 2019, the Duterte administration defended China against international accusations of persecution of Uyghurs via a petition to the UN Human Rights Council that was also signed by 36 other countries (France-Presse, 2019).

Additionally, Duterte increased Chinese investment to the Philippines through the BRI with China pledging to invest \$24 billion into the Philippines (Lema & Petty, 2018). This amount was partially delivered but ultimately canceled by Duterte's successor Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Duterte also sought to cancel the Visiting Forces Agreement, one of the pillars of the U.S.-Philippines relations that encourages their military alliance. Former U.S. Secretary Lloyd Austin ultimately convinced him to keep this bilateral military agreement in place in June 2021. After Duterte left office, Marcos Jr. gravitated back towards the American agenda in accordance with his father and former president Ferdinand Marcos' pro-Western policy, cutting ties with China by canceling BRI investments (Kurlantzick, 2024). The U.S. has also shored up its defenses in relation to the Philippines: in 2023, Marcos moved to extend the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) established in 2014 that allowed the U.S. military to post personnel in Philippine bases on different islands of the archipelago, creating four new EDCA sites (Fact Sheet: U.S.-Philippines Bilateral Defense Guidelines, 2023). Former U.S. president Joe Biden also warned China that "any attack on Philippine aircraft, vessels, or armed forces in the South China Sea [would] invoke [the] Mutual Defence Treaty" in 2024 in response to Chinese harassment of fishing boats in the region (Heydarian, 2024). Constructivists would interpret these shifts in domestic policy as a national identity crisis due to Duterte's anti-Western rhetoric being a complete opposite of the pro-U.S. Marcos'. Liberals would imply that Marcos' return to U.S. support was likely due to their shared values of democracy. However, neither of these theories fully explain the material problems at hand: with Chinese investment being inefficient and harassment on the South China Sea continuing despite Duterte's bandwagoning to the strong and hegemonic China, Marcos' pivot to balancing seems more of a realist action to improve national security.

The Luzon Economic Corridor was developed in April of 2024 as a trilateral initiative between the U.S., Japan, and Philippines to funnel \$100 billion from the U.S. and Japan into various sections and industries of the Philippines, hoping to build greater interconnectivity (Philippines Luzon Economic Corridor, 2024). Specifically, the plan develops green energy supply chains, invests in the semiconductor industry, and improves infrastructure and transportation. Major

projects aim to connect parts of the Philippines crucial to economic development. Coming from the efforts of former U.S. president Joe Biden's administration, it reflects Biden's policy of using alliances with Indo-Pacific nations to counter possible Chinese influence. Realist interpretations of the LEC outperform that of liberals and constructivists, seeing as the LEC specifically invests into sectors that China has leverage in, strengthens the regional bloc against China, and therefore reduces Chinese control over the Philippines' resources. Liberals would stress the win-win coming from such economic cooperation and constructivists would argue that the LEC signals democracy's reinvigoration in the region, but neither of these arguments address the fact that particularly contentious sectors regarding China were selected for investment as well as realist balancing principles can.

Political Motivations

One key motivation of the U.S. for the LEC is its current geopolitical competition with China in the Indo-Pacific. China's financing of large-scale projects and investments, particularly in developing nations, has allowed the CCP to extend its influence around the Global South, including across much of Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. BRI infrastructure loans have encouraged Cambodia to reevaluate their diplomatic efforts with the U.S. as they moved closer to China, setting an ominous precedent that other Indo-Pacific nations may turn away from the U.S. and the West as a whole (Hillman, 2018). Therefore, the BRI's wide and growing influence around the globe poses a threat to U.S. authority abroad. To rival the Chinese in investing into developing nations, G7 nations, consisting of the U.S., UK, Italy, Germany, Canada, France, and Japan, formed the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) in 2022 at a summit in Germany. This organization pledged to invest \$600 billion into construction and infrastructure in middle to low-income countries over five years, a parallel initiative to the Chinese BRI (Tan, 2022). The LEC, as a project under the PGII, secures and improves ties between the Philippines and G7 nations by overturning the political implications from Duterte's BRI integration while simultaneously securing a foothold for U.S. influence and reducing Philippine reliance on China in infrastructure and energy.

It is of utmost importance for the U.S. to gain the Philippines back as an ally after Duterte's fervor for China. Having an increasingly powerful friend in the Indo-Pacific is beneficial for the U.S. in its political rivalry against China. Applying Morgenthau's principles of realism, nations constantly compete for increased

influence and power (Morgenthau, 1948). Therefore, in the U.S.-China standoff, whenever one side benefits, the other will likely be worse off. In the case of the Philippines, if the U.S. re-established strong political ties, China would lose its footing in influencing this pivotal nation.

But apart from their long-term ties, why is the Philippines so enticing for the U.S.? One reason lies in the shipping lanes. The South China Sea constitutes the biggest trade route to and from East Asia, and it is estimated that around one-third of total maritime shipping heads through it (EIA, 2024). The Philippines claim sovereignty over the Luzon Strait, which is a route used by 44 percent of the global fleet when navigating the South China Sea. However, China claims almost the entirety of these waters under its nine-dash line plan, leading to disputes over the line's boundaries and Chinese hegemony (Caruana, 2023). Chinese claims also overlap with Philippine territories at Scarborough Shoal. Chinese aggression in its desired territory is worrisome for Western interests, as Chinese influence over the region would allow the CCP to control distribution of goods globally, not to mention threaten allies in the region. For example, around 10 billion barrels of petroleum passed through the South China Sea in 2023, which represents around 30 percent of total oil trade (EIA, 2024). As they already have shown aggression towards foreign vessels on the waters, it is very likely that China will continue to escalate such tensions if allowed to expand unchecked. Trade in the South China Sea therefore holds great significance: nations that manage to act as middlemen in the region or hold large swaths of these waters have more say over large amounts of resources, allowing them to inherently advance their own interests by holding leverage over other nations. Waltz argued that nations in anarchical situations would rationally make decisions to improve their own power and enhance national security (Waltz, 1979). This situation is uniquely neorealist in that no international body has come to physically prevent China's aggression, so the anarchy in the South China Sea pushes regional nations to rationally balance. Applying this theory to the aforementioned situation, the LEC, by enhancing the economic relations between the U.S. and Philippines, is rational since it balances in a manner that is encouraged by the anarchy it faces.

This aspect of balancing power in international relations is key when discussing U.S.-China relations. According to neorealist ideals, alliances and political ties are extremely important in protecting nations from external threats, namely those of other aggressive nations. Specifically, neorealist thought assumes that power is essential to a nation's survival, and with the world being in a state of

inherent anarchy, alliances are necessary to balance against some superior threats. Applying this framework to the current Philippine dilemma, the U.S. and Philippines, through the LEC, invigorate their alliance and stance against Chinese aggression. Chinese behavior can also be seen as rational through neorealism. As one of the major powers in Asia, its expansion of power through any means necessary, controversial or not, exemplifies a reaction to enhance its survival in an anarchical world.

For instance, China has called for the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” as one of its largest goals, implying a likely military invasion of Taiwan (Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2024). In such an event, the Taiwan Strait could become compromised. According to U.S. Department of Defense reporter Jim Garamone, “a major conflict in the [Taiwan Strait] would result in thousands of casualties and jeopardize more than \$2 trillion dollars in global economic activity, igniting a global economic depression” (Garamone 2023). The LEC indirectly secures an alternative trade route — the Luzon Strait — and, in an insurance-like manner, protects U.S. shipping within the region.

The LEC also aims to reduce Chinese intervention in the Philippines, showing that the U.S. is willing to invest at the same level that China did during the Duterte administration. Specifically, the energy and electricity projects within the LEC provide strong competition to Chinese energy investments. The State Grid Corporation of China, a Chinese SOE, owns around 40% of the National Grid Corporation of the Philippines, which is the nation’s main state-owned power grid (Maderazo, 2025). The energy sector, key to developing a first-world country by providing a higher quality of life to inhabitants, is currently influenced by China, meaning that China can gain leverage over the Philippine economy. The LEC announcement promises clean energy deployment, which would reduce the Filipino dependence on fossil fuels and Chinese companies. USAID had planned to invest \$750 million into the Philippines from 2020 through 2025 for energy security means, implying that the U.S. is more than capable of upping their investments (Quitzon & Poling, 2024). The LEC plants an American stake in Philippine development by allowing the latter access to better and cleaner technologies to fuel their energy demands. Realism would stress the existence of a zero-sum game between the U.S. and China where gains for one nation in their relations with the Philippines result in losses for the other, such as weakened influence on the economy. Alternatively, liberals would find that the economic relationship between

the Philippines and China could bring the two together, likely with China being the dominant party, and constructivists would find that the Philippines metaphorically recognizes and accepts China's influences. Neorealism still prevails as the best perspective regarding energy in this scenario, though, since it frames energy dependence on China as a security concern where the U.S.'s actions are necessary as counterbalance. Whether or not these efforts will effectively thwart Chinese influence remains to be seen.

China also could strike a crucial blow in a successful Taiwanese invasion by gaining control of Taiwan's lucrative semiconductor industry. The U.S. imports 44 percent of their logic chips — crucial parts of all electronics — from Taiwan, meaning that the U.S. would face extreme shortages in digital devices and be left ruined in this sector (Jones et al., 2023). The Philippines are also a valuable Pacific ally for Taiwan in this respect. At a joint press conference with the Philippines on July 30, 2024, former Secretary of State Antony Blinken's remarks implied the importance of the Philippines to the U.S. due to its engagement in the semiconductor industry: "the Philippines is a priority partner on semiconductor manufacturing" with "twenty percent of global assembly, testing, and packaging [taking] place here in the Philippines" (Joint Statement on the Philippines-United States Fourth 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, 2024). The LEC projects the future revamping of supply chain flows for semiconductors. In such a case, with the Philippine semiconductor industry becoming a prominent and reliable source, the U.S. could cash in early, as the Philippines only exported \$2.96 billion worth of semiconductors in 2023 compared to the \$62.3 billion of China in 2023, but is expected to grow 10 to 15 percent per year until 2027 (YCP, 2024). The example of the semiconductor industry illustrates how the LEC is projected more broadly to enhance U.S.-Philippine military cooperation and methods of reducing dependence on China.

The Trump Update

The second U.S. administration under Donald Trump has led to uncertainty around U.S. foreign policy, implying some variability over the LEC's fate. As an international global leader, he is definitely a volatile character, and it is difficult to categorize his foreign policy. His actions, in some cases, cede U.S. power and influence by weakening relations with other nations, seemingly contradicting realist ideals that argue that states will expand their power through any means

necessary. For instance, Trump has called NATO's mutual defense clause into question (The Guardian, 2025) and began the process of removing the U.S. from the World Health Organization (Yamey & Titanji, 2025). Additionally, during his inauguration week, Trump signed 37 executive orders, including "Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid." This executive order stated that all foreign aid and development would pause for 90 days, with each case of foreign aid being examined over this time period by its respective departments or agencies to gauge whether they should be continued, modified, or ended (White House, 2025).

Relative to Trump, a few indicators exist to test whether neorealism is the logic underneath the LEC instead of other frameworks: firstly, Trump would continue the LEC due to its counterbalancing initiatives that reduce Philippine reliance on China in key sectors such as energy. Another indicator would be if Trump prioritizes projects that have logistical and military benefits, since in a neorealist framework, infrastructure aims to enhance a nation's power and security. Since Trump prioritizes U.S. gains over economic cooperation and mutual benefit, if liberalism was perceived to be at the core of the LEC, Trump would reduce the LEC's funding or cancel the project entirely due to his dislike of foreign aid if there is no strategic benefit for the U.S. If constructivism was at the forefront, the promotion of the U.S. and Philippines' shared value of democracy would be overtly stressed. Trump, who maintains a transactional foreign policy, does not center his actions around the promotion of U.S. values such that he would likely reject constructivist logic and embrace his campaign slogan of "America First" to promote U.S. growth (Frum, 2020).

Indeed, there is some precedent to suggest that neorealism is the most accurate theory behind Trump's actions regarding the LEC. Specifically, Trump's Secretary of State Marco Rubio confirmed that the U.S. would proceed with the LEC (Talosig-Bartolome, 2025). Philippine National Security Council representative Jonathan Malaya echoed this sentiment, stating that "all their projects here are aligned with Trump's vision of making the U.S. more secure" (Heydarian, 2025)

Additionally, in his first term, Trump favored Philippine interests as a whole and also recognized the geographic and strategic value that the Philippines holds in relation to China. For instance, Trump backed the Philippines through the Drug War and its extrajudicial nature, looking to reinforce their alliance when Duterte attempted to move away (Pennington, 2017). Therefore, the precedent shows that Trump acts mainly to advance his power and network of alliances to promote world

449 security regardless of values, such that he adheres to realist ideals when taking
450 action on matters regarding this ally.

451 Conclusion

452 The LEC isn't just a method for the Philippines to accelerate their economic
453 growth, but instead is part of the U.S. strategy to reaffirm their strength in the
454 South China Sea, especially in the face of growing Chinese aggression in the region.
455 Through a realist point of view, the LEC is an action that attempts to balance the
456 power dynamic of the region by bringing the U.S. up to par to China in terms of
457 investment and hegemony, aiming to reinforce an alliance with the Philippines after
458 Duterte turned to China from 2016 to 2022.

459 With the key factors and problems discussed above regarding the LEC, there
460 exist a few outcomes with the US's role in the second Trump administration: the
461 U.S. completely pulls out of the deal, reduces its funding, or delivers as promised.
462 The burden of ensuring that the deal runs smoothly is currently resting on the
463 Marcos administration, but President Marcos has stated publicly that he has
464 confidence in the plan continuing. This confidence from the Philippines' side,
465 combined with Trump's pattern of anti-China action by any means possible, implies
466 that the LEC has enough strategic value and therefore be maintained.
467 The LEC is a part of a broader strategy within an overarching political rivalry in the
468 South China Sea between the U.S. and China. With recent events such as Chinese
469 harassment of Philippine vessels, it is clear that the Philippines, one of the U.S.'s
470 longtime allies but also a geographical neighbor of China, may be caught in the
471 crossfire. Thus, the U.S.'s utilization of the Philippines as a deterrent to China
472 represents an offensive move against China in their game of chess.

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Dear Reviewer 1,

Thanks for the kind words regarding my submitted manuscript! Below is a line-by-line reply to your comments and feedback and how I incorporated them into the manuscript when revising.

Firstly, to address your point on relying on original work from Kenneth Waltz and Hans Morgenthau: I did find the foundational sources behind both Waltz and Morgenthau's theories of realism, which were *Theory of International Politics* and *Politics Among Nations* respectively. I integrated the knowledge that I gained from their analyses into my literature review, which definitely made this section much more extensive compared to that of the old version based on the Stanford Encyclopedia of Political Philosophy. I also incorporated discussions of constructivism and liberalism in the literature review and also throughout the paper as comparisons to neorealism.

I decided to proceed using neorealism as the overarching framework for my paper since with the example of the international tribunal that the Chinese refused to follow, it was much easier to show that the South China Sea is anarchical in the status quo and therefore it was more accurate to use neorealism.

Additionally, as part of your comments in the fourth paragraph, I moved the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative up to the literature review, which included my discussion of debt trap diplomacy.

Next, to make my paper more specific, I added the requested examples of counterbalancing within the LEC; they are now found starting on line 156 and not 115. I also cut extraneous portions of the analysis out, particularly in the discussion of Rodrigo Duterte's presidency around line 230, and made this section more focused on different theories' interpretations of different aspects of Philippine relations such as comparing constructivist and liberal explanations of Philippine bandwagoning and shifting of allegiances to that of realist ideals. Around line 185, I explained what an SOE was.

Regarding the Political Motivations section, I enhanced my focus on the schools of thought and comparing their interpretations. The feedback specifically suggested discussing what makes the LEC and its overarching situation uniquely neorealist, so I expanded on the anarchy found within the region to make it more specific around line 285 — in the updated version, it is line 325.

Arguments regarding U.S.-Philippines balancing against China were also requested to have more detail and nuance, which I did by bringing in the alternative

frameworks that I used of constructivism and liberalism to compare with neorealism. I also explained the initiatives of the LEC better and showed that neorealism was the most accurate framework regarding such initiatives around line 368.

I aligned the Trump section with the tone of the rest of the paper by adjusting my rhetoric to mention schools of thought more often and apply such schools of thought to predict Trump's next moves. I specifically described possible indicators of realist ideals being followed by Trump regarding the LEC – which seems to be the most likely outcome – such as Trump continuing the LEC but stressing the importance of military and logistic growth over cooperation. Therefore, I showed that the LEC presents itself to Trump as an opportunity to characterize his foreign policy regarding the Philippines as realist.

Thank you very much for your assistance during this process!



Dear Reviewer 2,

Thank you for your feedback on my submitted manuscript! Here is a line-by-line reply to your comments below.

Strengthening the Theoretical Framework

Regarding your first bullet point about incorporating alternative frameworks, I went through the paper and compared both liberal and constructivist views to my interpretations of U.S.-Philippines relations and the LEC. These paragraphs should be relatively easy to spot, but a few examples are at line 139 and 367. I also decided to move forward with neorealism rather than classical realism since there is evidence pointing to the anarchical structure of the Indo-Pacific, and classical realism is a tad bit more generic in this regard.

For the next bullet point, I expanded the paragraph on David C. Kang's critique of realism in Asian relations, particularly discussing its pitfalls and incorporating an example of realism not being applicable to Asia that Kang gave. I also added discussions of the alternative frameworks of constructivism and liberalism right after this paragraph.

Refining the Case Study Sections

I deleted a large portion of the Recent Developments section, since I agree that a lot of it was extraneous detail. For instance, I removed most of the section regarding Rodrigo Duterte's administration, although I kept references of his fervor for China. I also made sure to incorporate multiple framework arguments throughout the analysis, such that the paper is now much more grounded in international relations theory.

Evidence Selection and Theoretical Assessment

Thank you for catching the inaccurate phrasing of "offers reassurance to the Philippines," which is definitely more constructivist and symbolic. I rephrased it to reflect security enhancements around line 294.

Next, I imply throughout my framework arguments that the Philippines is an active agent due to its recent decisions to use balancing behavior against China. The U.S.

and China are the larger powers, but the Philippines still has a role as an ally of the U.S. and also China's neighbor.

In the updated manuscript, I am more self-critical and address alternative frameworks rather than assuming neorealism's objective accuracy, instead showing my reasoning as to why I employ neorealism. Around line 368 in my discussion of the zero-sum game, I compare and contrast the interpretations of constructivism and liberalism surrounding the LEC's economic security impacts.

Trump Section

I tightened the Trump section a lot, removing vague and speculative rhetoric such as "seems like." I also added some predictions of what would unfold regarding the LEC and the Philippines under the three key frameworks that I used in this paper, showing that neorealism, constructivism, and liberalism each would have different events occur in the near future. I also showed that neorealist indicators have already taken place, implying that Trump is acting in a manner consistent with a neorealist framework.

Language and Formatting

I read through the paper multiple times and ensured that my paper keeps an academic tone, removing "kept around" and replacing it with "maintained" as an example.

Citations

I revised the Works Cited and it follows APA guidelines consistently. Additionally, I went through the paper and put in all of the necessary in-line citations.

Convergence Journal Review of

“A Political and Economic Analysis of the Luzon Economic Corridor”

I recommend **accept as is**. The author has acceptably considered my revision recommendations. The article is original, interesting, clear, coherent, uses research at an acceptable level for high school, and is written using polished, grammatically correct writing.

This being said, there are some recommendations to keep in mind for future research:

In Lines 115 – 127, a discussion on Kang’s contention that realism is not generalizable to non-European international relations brings up the concept of balancing versus bandwagoning. Waltz discusses both bandwagoning and balancing – neorealists of different persuasions predict balancing and bandwagoning behavior in international relations. So, Kang’s assertion here is probably being misunderstood by the write and the claim that Kang is claiming bandwagoning invalidates realism misses the point.

Lines 128 – 141 do a much, much better job at outlining some key tensions among paradigms in the field in a way that is appropriate for this paper. Usually if you want a primer on constructivism, a great major thinker would be Alexander Wendt.

I caution against using words like “prove” in any science – there is no such thing as 100% proof in an empirical discipline because we are bound by time and space and can’t observe counterfactuals. Evidence supports or doesn’t support theories – it never proves or disproves them. Similarly, I caution against using words like “logical” as you do in Line 143 in paradigmatic debates – lots of theories or paradigms can be logical while still being rejected by you. It’s not as big a deal as misusing words like “prove”, but it’s something to consider.

Students of international relations misunderstand all the time that these paradigms, or “isms” are sets of assumptions and views about underlying, unobservable causes and effect in international relations. Which assumptions and views a scholar or policymaker rely on to understand the world and to base their policies off constitute the paradigms or parts of paradigms that they share. So, when this piece says things like on Lines 148 and 149 where you write “Liberalism....relies upon the U.N.’s ability to prevent conflict...” it doesn’t demonstrate understanding of what liberalism is. An underlying theoretical assumption doesn’t rely on the UN to prevent conflict, it assumes that an international organization might have a role to play in conflict prevention. That’s not mincing words, it’s a slight but important distinction. Also, the basket labels that we put various assumptions and views into to make sense of them (like Marxism, realism, English School, feminism, etc) are not always agreed upon. It’s more important you know what the assumptions are than what the name of the paradigm is, that way you can engage with them more

accurately. All of this is to say that liberalism, like other paradigms, has plenty of flavors, and they don't always agree with one another. Some flavors of liberalism might assume that the UN prevents conflict – others might assume that it doesn't – even though both might assume that some international organizations do help prevent conflict.

In Lines 422 – 426, something to consider is that realist thinking does allow for foreign aid – however that aid is made with the material interests of the donor state in mind, not out of altruism. There are individual-oriented rational choice theories out there as well that focus more on how foreign aid benefits the governing coalition of the donor state in different ways depending on things like the government type and methods for leadership selection. An interesting take on this route is Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alistair Smith's "The Dictator's Handbook".

Nice work!

A Political and Economic Analysis of the Luzon Economic Corridor

By Yu-Ming Liu

Acknowledgements

Thank you so much to Dr. Audrey Wozniak, who mentored me throughout the research process and taught me quite a lot about the framework of the academic paper. By providing structured and flexible feedback, Dr. Wozniak challenged me to be intellectually curious and delve into the topic in a detailed manner. Dr. Wozniak also helped me refine my research to have a more articulate and rooted angle that was well-supported by evidence. She treated me as the lead, giving me overall independence to take the paper in the direction that I wanted but also ensuring that it remained academically viable. Being very patient and caring along this journey, Dr. Wozniak provided support and gave out suggestions during our numerous meetings. I am confident that with her help, I produced a strong research paper that follows academic norms and guidelines.

Abstract

This paper examines a trilateral initiative between the United States, Japan and the Philippines called the Luzon Economic Corridor that aims to invest around \$100 billion USD into the Philippine economy and ultimately improve it in a number of sectors such as agriculture and energy. This paper examines why the U.S. specifically is powering this policy through the lens of wider Indo-Pacific tensions, specifically that of China-Philippines disputes. Looking at the LEC using neorealism and continuously comparing it to the alternative frameworks of liberalism and constructivism in multiple aspects, this paper contends that the U.S.'s motivation behind the LEC is to counter Chinese influence, using power-balancing as its mechanism. Gathering evidence from academic publications, government documents, and news outlets, this paper explores how the LEC is inherently a realist strategy. Although the program was created under the administration of former U.S. president Joe Biden and current president Donald Trump may appear

to threaten the policy, this paper argues that Trump will still fund the LEC due to its strategic value and shares indicators proving that the LEC is inherently realist.

Introduction

Within the Indo-Pacific region that houses critical trade routes and developing nations, the Philippines is very important for geopolitical strategy as a strong ally of the U.S. while being very close to China. In 2024, the U.S., through a partnership with the Philippines and Japan, announced a plan to invest billions into Philippine infrastructure and modernization through an initiative called the Luzon Economic Corridor (LEC) (Brands, 2024). China, as a main U.S. rival on the international stage, has similarly attempted to establish the nation's dominance in the region through heavy investments into the Philippines. More recently, under the current Trump administration, it would seem that the LEC has been greatly disrupted due to his policy of isolationism. This paper contends that the LEC will continue as planned under its realist framework. This paper offers a realist model for investigating U.S. foreign policy motivations in the Philippines to counterbalance China's rising power, particularly in the context of tensions and incidents in the South China Sea.

Violence in the South China Sea has increased in frequency in the 2020s, with alleged incidents of the Chinese Coast Guard boarding Philippine vessels and attacking sailors with knives and axes near the disputed territory of Second Thomas Shoal (Al Jazeera, 2024). Other similar events of Chinese vessels assaulting those of other nations include a reported occurrence of Chinese soldiers terrorizing Vietnamese fishermen and destroying their property (Dinh, 2024). In order to protect its interests in the region — namely protecting commercial routes from Asia and balancing against China — it would be beneficial for the U.S. to take action in the region. The LEC, which has the potential to curb Chinese influence, represents the U.S.'s efforts in this arena.

The use of the balance of power strategy has been prevalent in the Indo-Pacific in the past few decades, especially regarding China. With China having built up its military strength and becoming one of the leading militaries in the world — designated as a top five military power by the Global Firepower Index in 2025 (Global Firepower, 2025) — its smaller neighbors have reacted with alarm and attempted to balance this power through both military investment and alliances with stronger powers. The U.S. is one key power that such nations have flocked to,

and due to the fact that China has a reputation of ambitious expansion, these nations also have tended to not ally with China in the past to avoid the potential of security and land concessions.

This paper examines the LEC as a case study for the overarching strategy of the U.S. within the South China Sea, specifically given its goals to deter China. Using neorealist perspectives, this paper argues that the US's intervention in the Philippines through the LEC is strategically framed to benefit U.S. interests abroad by counteracting China's power, a balancing action that would re-strengthen a key US-Philippine relationship and secure this vital nation from Chinese hegemony. The paper will first examine the Philippines within the context of its foreign policy in relation to the U.S. and China, considering key events that have defined its geopolitical trajectory. The paper then moves into the LEC's creation, its prospective impacts on the Philippines, and its implications for the U.S. and China were it to continue. The new Trump administration may seem like a threat to the LEC at a surface-level given his attempted reductions of U.S. foreign aid and federal spending suggesting that the LEC may be his crosshairs. However, the following section of this paper argues that Trump will continue the LEC even though it may appear to go against his ideals of isolationism since the LEC's underlying logic is realist and therefore offers Trump an opportunity to advance the U.S. 's power. Overall, this paper conveys that the LEC is a strong offensive strategy for the West to deflect Chinese attempts at global influence. Examining academic and policy sources, this paper will explore how realist thought can be applied to this inherently anarchic system to analyze the motivations behind the LEC. Specifically, this paper relies on academic journals, monographs, news articles, official reports, press releases, and government statistics. Examining past information on the relations between the Philippines and the US, I sought to connect the LEC to the pattern of U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific and identified some incentives for the U.S. in this case.

Literature Review

Realist perspectives such as that of Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz — pioneers of classical realism and neorealism respectively — are especially applicable to the current South China Sea situation, including the LEC. According to Morgenthau, actors make decisions based on some concept of power along with aspects of human nature such as greed and fear in order to further their own

interests, focusing on their own gains in order to rationally advance themselves and their own power (Morgenthau, 1948). Since, in a neorealist perspective, states aim to advance their own interests by any means possible due to a lack of regulation in an anarchical system, it follows that when some states get too powerful and threaten others' interests, actions to balance power may occur between weaker states in the region (Waltz, 1979). After an international tribunal ruled largely in favor of the Philippines in a 2016 arbitration regarding Chinese aggression against the Philippines in the South China Sea and its violations of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, China refused – and continues to refuse – to comply with the ruling (Campbell & Salidjanova, 2016). Therefore, Chinese aggression is not fully contained by peacekeepers. Since China does not engage with mediations by international bodies, the South China Sea situation can be viewed as inherently anarchical. This follows neorealist principles that support an anarchy-driven viewpoint of international relations, since violations of international law are not properly kept in check by enforcers. Thus, power balancing is a rational act by smaller nations through neorealism since China is viewed as a threat to their security.

Some argue that realism is less applicable to Asian relations and is more accurate for discussions of European relations since this school of thought inherently has European roots. Such critics assert that bandwagoning is more appealing than balancing in Asia, since Asia operates under a China-centric hierarchy. For instance, David C. Kang argues that under realism, the Taiwan-China conflict merits a larger reaction from Japan and South Korea in support of Taiwan to protect themselves from Chinese hegemony – a reaction that has not occurred for decades – and points to historical bandwagoning towards China pre-1900s (Kang, 2003). However, Kang misrepresents neorealism, as from a Waltz-like point of view, both bandwagoning and balancing could be viable options given different situations. Additionally, Kang's evidence is largely outdated, and new evidence actually specifically supports neorealism due to China's disregarding of the 2016 arbitration ruling and continued harassment of foreign vessels that point to anarchy's dominance in the status quo.

Alternative schools of thought such as liberalism and constructivism offer differing interpretations to the Asian region. Liberals typically believe in international cooperation and enforcement of international law and that state preferences' differences lead to certain consequences, both positive and negative (Moravcsik, 1997). They also argue that differences or similarities in values and

134 preferences among states will cause a variety of relationships to form, with
135 similarly-minded states being more likely to work together to simultaneously
136 benefit. One could argue that liberalism could rationalize the LEC as an example of
137 the Philippines seeking to forge strong connections with the U.S. since both nations
138 share democratic values. Constructivists support the notion that international
139 relations depend upon norms and social constructs, such that states take on
140 identities shaped by their history, culture, government, etc. that others can
141 recognize (Hopf, 1998). China's history as the most powerful nation in Asia could
142 therefore motivate it to reclaim its former glory.

143 While liberalism and constructivism may seem compelling, neorealism
144 prevails as the most applicable theory in the China-Philippines situation simply
145 because of China's position as the major power within the anarchical Indo-Pacific.
146 The security concerns presented by China are not restricted by any international
147 peacekeeping body, and the asymmetrical power dynamic of China compared to
148 the Philippines militarily and economically has led to power balancing with the
149 Philippines seeking reliance upon the U.S. for help. Liberalism, on the other hand,
150 relies upon the international peacekeepers' ability to prevent conflict within the
151 region, which has not happened so far. Its emphasis on cooperation would imply
152 that China and the Philippines should work together to solve this issue, which
153 seems unrealistic under the current Filipino administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr.
154 that has already made efforts to power balance towards the U.S. (Kurlantzick, 2024).
155 Constructivism correctly assumes China's motives for its expansion, since China
156 claims that large swaths of the South China Sea are its historical inheritance.
157 However, China's threat to the Philippines is not social and instead regards security
158 and coercion. This does not fit into the constructivist narrative that the standoff is
159 between two nations with a shared history and complex societal relations.

160 Additionally, the LEC is a clear-cut example of neorealism's applicability to
161 the region at hand, since its counterbalancing initiatives already exemplify an
162 American administration that battled with China over the alliance of the
163 Philippines. For instance, transportation and infrastructure projects such as the
164 Malolos-Clark Railway connect major economic centers and protect trade from
165 Chinese influence, securing the Philippines as an ally instead of China (Malolos-
166 Clark Railway Project, 2024). Therefore, realism can be used as a framework within
167 the seemingly anarchical China-Philippines standoff, and it can be understood as
168 the motivation behind the U.S. legislation discussed in this paper.

China-Philippines relations have severely degraded in the past few decades due to China's expansive and ambitious claims to the South China Sea through the nine-dash line plan — a controversial maritime boundary that has led to many land disputes with their neighbors along with violence (Caruana, 2023). For example, in 2023, Philippine resupply missions to regions within their own exclusive economic zone were intercepted by the Chinese Coast Guard, and Chinese ramming of vessels has become increasingly common. In 2024, what has been called the most violent conflict between vessels from the two nations occurred, with the Chinese coast guard ramming Philippine supply ships near Second Thomas Shoal. A tentative agreement between the two was reached to stop further violence for a period of time, although it would appear that the Chinese have continued their attacks throughout 2025. These conflicts are not just between China and the Philippines, with similar instances of harassment being reported by Vietnam (Timeline: China's Maritime Disputes, n.d.). In general, the South China Sea remains a state of alarm and tension with Chinese claims over the geography included within the nine-dash line causing a myriad of territorial disputes with smaller nations, prompting U.S. involvement to prevent China's spread (Ratcliffe, 2024).

China's highly controversial Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) also exemplifies Chinese expansion, only around the globe through an ambitious network of massive infrastructure and transportation projects through Asia, Africa, and Europe that are normally funded by Chinese state-owned enterprises — government-owned businesses that work in specific economic sectors such as infrastructure (Hillman, 2018). As political scientist and researcher Sypha Chanthavong has observed, the BRI has been criticized for using “debt trap diplomacy” to “obtain economic or political concessions” from its debtor countries, using massive loans to build projects and collecting collateral after an inevitable default (Chanthavong, 2024). The BRI fits into a neorealist, anarchical view of Chinese relations, since with no international mediator preventing its investments and contentious actions, China can expand its power through any means it can afford. Smaller states will also be likely to accept said loans due to their potential relative gain in power.

Constructivists would argue that the BRI fits the Chinese narrative of restoring its historical grandeur in the modern era and liberals would assume mutual economic benefits for all parties involved. However, China has coercively managed to take ownership over infrastructure projects in the receiving nations in some cases. For instance, China's BRI initiative in Sri Lanka led to China Merchants Port Holdings, a Chinese SOE, effectively holding 85 percent of shares in Hambantota Port after

funding its construction (Chanthavong, 2024). Therefore, Chinese loans may have an ulterior motive of creating dependence, and China can dominate nations' economies around the world as a result. Neorealism therefore best explains China's aggression since no international body can prevent its expansion, so they have free rein to expand their power.

According to Congressional Research Service naval affairs analyst Ronald O'Rourke, for the U.S. to counter China's behavior in the South China Sea, it must prevent further harassment of Philippine sites and encourage China to accept the 2016 arbitration ruling denying their claims over this territory (O'Rourke, 2020). One key element of a U.S. strategy that O'Rourke does not discuss much is investment, which could be used to dissuade nations such as the Philippines from bandwagoning to China's side in an attempt to guarantee their own safety. The LEC is a perfect example of investment as a strategy to counter China.

Analysis

Recent developments

The Philippines' economic status renders it open to outside influence and investment such as through initiatives like the LEC. Currently, it is deemed a developing country by the World Bank with the services sector comprising 62 percent of the GDP. Economic growth has been steady with the GDP consistently increasing by between 5 and 7 percent a year since the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank, n.d.). Historically, the Philippines has been a strong ally to the more democratic West, which started with the U.S. granting its former colony independence in 1946 and establishing a Mutual Defense Treaty in 1951. The MDT played an extremely important role in establishing a U.S. military presence in the Philippines, such as the Subic Bay Naval Base. In the past three decades, Filipino workers also have migrated to the U.S. and other more developed nations en masse, with remittances from overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) reaching around \$37.2 billion in 2023. Most OFWs are motivated to work abroad in order to sustain their family back home financially, and are seen as heroes by their culture. By spurring consumer spending, remittances made up around 8.5 percent of the Philippine GDP in 2023 (Fintech News Philippines, 2025).

While the Philippines has historically deferred to Western interests, one recent administration has altered the course of the Philippines' political allegiances: that of President Rodrigo Duterte (2016-2022), who ruled with an iron fist and criticized the U.S. and E.U while supporting China (Lema & Petty, 2018). For instance, in 2019, the Duterte administration defended China against international accusations of persecution of Uyghurs via a petition to the UN Human Rights Council that was also signed by 36 other countries (France-Presse, 2019).

Additionally, Duterte increased Chinese investment to the Philippines through the BRI with China pledging to invest \$24 billion into the Philippines (Lema & Petty, 2018). This amount was partially delivered but ultimately canceled by Duterte's successor Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Duterte also sought to cancel the Visiting Forces Agreement, one of the pillars of the U.S.-Philippines relations that encourages their military alliance. Former U.S. Secretary Lloyd Austin ultimately convinced him to keep this bilateral military agreement in place in June 2021. After Duterte left office, Marcos Jr. gravitated back towards the American agenda in accordance with his father and former president Ferdinand Marcos' pro-Western policy, cutting ties with China by canceling BRI investments (Kurlantzick, 2024). The U.S. has also shored up its defenses in relation to the Philippines: in 2023, Marcos moved to extend the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) established in 2014 that allowed the U.S. military to post personnel in Philippine bases on different islands of the archipelago, creating four new EDCA sites (Fact Sheet: U.S.-Philippines Bilateral Defense Guidelines, 2023). Former U.S. president Joe Biden also warned China that "any attack on Philippine aircraft, vessels, or armed forces in the South China Sea [would] invoke [the] Mutual Defence Treaty" in 2024 in response to Chinese harassment of fishing boats in the region (Heydarian, 2024). Constructivists would interpret these shifts in domestic policy as a national identity crisis due to Duterte's anti-Western rhetoric being a complete opposite of the pro-U.S. Marcos'. Liberals would imply that Marcos' return to U.S. support was likely due to their shared values of democracy. However, neither of these theories fully explain the material problems at hand: with Chinese investment being inefficient and harassment on the South China Sea continuing despite Duterte's bandwagoning to the strong and hegemonic China, Marcos' pivot to balancing seems more of a realist action to improve national security.

The Luzon Economic Corridor was developed in April of 2024 as a trilateral initiative between the U.S., Japan, and Philippines to funnel \$100 billion from the U.S. and Japan into various sections and industries of the Philippines, hoping to

build greater interconnectivity (Philippines Luzon Economic Corridor, 2024). Specifically, the plan develops green energy supply chains, invests in the semiconductor industry, and improves infrastructure and transportation. Major projects aim to connect parts of the Philippines crucial to economic development. Coming from the efforts of former U.S. president Joe Biden's administration, it reflects Biden's policy of using alliances with Indo-Pacific nations to counter possible Chinese influence. Realist interpretations of the LEC outperform that of liberals and constructivists, seeing as the LEC specifically invests into sectors that China has leverage in, strengthens the regional bloc against China, and therefore reduces Chinese control over the Philippines' resources. Liberals would stress the win-win coming from such economic cooperation and constructivists would argue that the LEC signals democracy's reinvigoration in the region, but neither of these arguments address the fact that particularly contentious sectors regarding China were selected for investment as well as realist balancing principles can.

Political Motivations

One key motivation of the U.S. for the LEC is its current geopolitical competition with China in the Indo-Pacific. China's financing of large-scale projects and investments, particularly in developing nations, has allowed the CCP to extend its influence around the Global South, including across much of Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. BRI infrastructure loans have encouraged Cambodia to reevaluate their diplomatic efforts with the U.S. as they moved closer to China, setting an ominous precedent that other Indo-Pacific nations may turn away from the U.S. and the West as a whole (Hillman, 2018). Therefore, the BRI's wide and growing influence around the globe poses a threat to U.S. authority abroad. To rival the Chinese in investing into developing nations, G7 nations, consisting of the U.S., UK, Italy, Germany, Canada, France, and Japan, formed the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) in 2022 at a summit in Germany. This organization pledged to invest \$600 billion into construction and infrastructure in middle to low-income countries over five years, a parallel initiative to the Chinese BRI (Tan, 2022). The LEC, as a project under the PGII, secures and improves ties between the Philippines and G7 nations by overturning the political implications from Duterte's BRI integration while simultaneously securing a foothold for U.S. influence and reducing Philippine reliance on China in infrastructure and energy.

It is of utmost importance for the U.S. to gain the Philippines back as an ally after Duterte's fervor for China. Having an increasingly powerful friend in the Indo-Pacific is beneficial for the U.S. in its political rivalry against China. Applying Morgenthau's principles of realism, nations constantly compete for increased influence and power (Morgenthau, 1948). Therefore, in the U.S.-China standoff, whenever one side benefits, the other will likely be worse off. In the case of the Philippines, if the U.S. re-established strong political ties, China would lose its footing in influencing this pivotal nation.

But apart from their long-term ties, why is the Philippines so enticing for the U.S.? One reason lies in the shipping lanes. The South China Sea constitutes the biggest trade route to and from East Asia, and it is estimated that around one-third of total maritime shipping heads through it (EIA, 2024). The Philippines claim sovereignty over the Luzon Strait, which is a route used by 44 percent of the global fleet when navigating the South China Sea. However, China claims almost the entirety of these waters under its nine-dash line plan, leading to disputes over the line's boundaries and Chinese hegemony (Caruana, 2023). Chinese claims also overlap with Philippine territories at Scarborough Shoal. Chinese aggression in its desired territory is worrisome for Western interests, as Chinese influence over the region would allow the CCP to control distribution of goods globally, not to mention threaten allies in the region. For example, around 10 billion barrels of petroleum passed through the South China Sea in 2023, which represents around 30 percent of total oil trade (EIA, 2024). As they already have shown aggression towards foreign vessels on the waters, it is very likely that China will continue to escalate such tensions if allowed to expand unchecked. Trade in the South China Sea therefore holds great significance: nations that manage to act as middlemen in the region or hold large swaths of these waters have more say over large amounts of resources, allowing them to inherently advance their own interests by holding leverage over other nations. Waltz argued that nations in anarchical situations would rationally make decisions to improve their own power and enhance national security (Waltz, 1979). This situation is uniquely neorealist in that no international body has come to physically prevent China's aggression, so the anarchy in the South China Sea pushes regional nations to rationally balance. Applying this theory to the aforementioned situation, the LEC, by enhancing the economic relations between the U.S. and Philippines, is rational since it balances in a manner that is encouraged by the anarchy it faces.

340 This aspect of balancing power in international relations is key when
341 discussing U.S.-China relations. According to neorealist ideals, alliances and
342 political ties are extremely important in protecting nations from external threats,
343 namely those of other aggressive nations. Specifically, neorealist thought assumes
344 that power is essential to a nation's survival, and with the world being in a state of
345 inherent anarchy, alliances are necessary to balance against some superior threats.
346 Applying this framework to the current Philippine dilemma, the U.S. and
347 Philippines, through the LEC, invigorate their alliance and stance against Chinese
348 aggression. Chinese behavior can also be seen as rational through neorealism. As
349 one of the major powers in Asia, its expansion of power through any means
350 necessary, controversial or not, exemplifies a reaction to enhance its survival in an
351 anarchical world.

352 For instance, China has called for the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese
353 nation" as one of its largest goals, implying a likely military invasion of Taiwan
354 (Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024).
355 In such an event, the Taiwan Strait could become compromised. According to U.S.
356 Department of Defense reporter Jim Garamone, "a major conflict in the [Taiwan
357 Strait] would result in thousands of casualties and jeopardize more than \$2 trillion
358 dollars in global economic activity, igniting a global economic depression"
359 (Garamone 2023). The LEC indirectly secures an alternative trade route – the
360 Luzon Strait – and, in an insurance-like manner, protects U.S. shipping within the
361 region.

362 The LEC also aims to reduce Chinese intervention in the Philippines, showing that
363 the U.S. is willing to invest at the same level that China did during the Duterte
364 administration. Specifically, the energy and electricity projects within the LEC
365 provide strong competition to Chinese energy investments. The State Grid
366 Corporation of China, a Chinese SOE, owns around 40% of the National Grid
367 Corporation of the Philippines, which is the nation's main state-owned power grid
368 (Maderazo, 2025). The energy sector, key to developing a first-world country by
369 providing a higher quality of life to inhabitants, is currently influenced by China,
370 meaning that China can gain leverage over the Philippine economy. The LEC
371 announcement promises clean energy deployment, which would reduce the
372 Filipino dependence on fossil fuels and Chinese companies. USAID had planned to
373 invest \$750 million into the Philippines from 2020 through 2025 for energy security
374 means, implying that the U.S. is more than capable of upping their investments
375 (Quitzon & Poling, 2024). The LEC plants an American stake in Philippine

development by allowing the latter access to better and cleaner technologies to fuel their energy demands. Realism would stress the existence of a zero-sum game between the U.S. and China where gains for one nation in their relations with the Philippines result in losses for the other, such as weakened influence on the economy. Alternatively, liberals would find that the economic relationship between the Philippines and China could bring the two together, likely with China being the dominant party, and constructivists would find that the Philippines metaphorically recognizes and accepts China's influences. Neorealism still prevails as the best perspective regarding energy in this scenario, though, since it frames energy dependence on China as a security concern where the U.S.'s actions are necessary as counterbalance. Whether or not these efforts will effectively thwart Chinese influence remains to be seen.

China also could strike a crucial blow in a successful Taiwanese invasion by gaining control of Taiwan's lucrative semiconductor industry. The U.S. imports 44 percent of their logic chips — crucial parts of all electronics — from Taiwan, meaning that the U.S. would face extreme shortages in digital devices and be left ruined in this sector (Jones et al., 2023). The Philippines are also a valuable Pacific ally for Taiwan in this respect. At a joint press conference with the Philippines on July 30, 2024, former Secretary of State Antony Blinken's remarks implied the importance of the Philippines to the U.S. due to its engagement in the semiconductor industry: "the Philippines is a priority partner on semiconductor manufacturing" with "twenty percent of global assembly, testing, and packaging [taking] place here in the Philippines" (Joint Statement on the Philippines-United States Fourth 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, 2024). The LEC projects the future revamping of supply chain flows for semiconductors. In such a case, with the Philippine semiconductor industry becoming a prominent and reliable source, the U.S. could cash in early, as the Philippines only exported \$2.96 billion worth of semiconductors in 2023 compared to the \$62.3 billion of China in 2023, but is expected to grow 10 to 15 percent per year until 2027 (YCP, 2024). The example of the semiconductor industry illustrates how the LEC is projected more broadly to enhance U.S.-Philippine military cooperation and methods of reducing dependence on China.

The Trump Update

The second U.S. administration under Donald Trump has led to uncertainty around U.S. foreign policy, implying some variability over the LEC's fate. As an international global leader, he is definitely a volatile character, and it is difficult to categorize his foreign policy. His actions, in some cases, cede U.S. power and influence by weakening relations with other nations, seemingly contradicting realist ideals that argue that states will expand their power through any means necessary. For instance, Trump has called NATO's mutual defense clause into question (The Guardian, 2025) and began the process of removing the U.S. from the World Health Organization (Yamey & Titanji, 2025). Additionally, during his inauguration week, Trump signed 37 executive orders, including "Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid." This executive order stated that all foreign aid and development would pause for 90 days, with each case of foreign aid being examined over this time period by its respective departments or agencies to gauge whether they should be continued, modified, or ended (White House, 2025).

Relative to Trump, a few indicators exist to test whether neorealism is the logic underneath the LEC instead of other frameworks: firstly, Trump would continue the LEC due to its counterbalancing initiatives that reduce Philippine reliance on China in key sectors such as energy, and likely consider continuing foreign aid in a quid pro quo manner. Another indicator would be if Trump prioritizes projects that have logistical and military benefits, since in a neorealist framework, infrastructure aims to enhance a nation's power and security. Since Trump prioritizes U.S. gains over economic cooperation and mutual benefit, if liberalism was perceived to be at the core of the LEC, Trump would reduce the LEC's funding or cancel the project entirely due to his dislike of foreign aid if there is no strategic benefit for the U.S. If constructivism was at the forefront, the promotion of the U.S. and Philippines' shared value of democracy would be overtly stressed. Trump, who maintains a transactional foreign policy, does not center his actions around the promotion of U.S. values such that he would likely reject constructivist logic and embrace his campaign slogan of "America First" to promote U.S. growth (Frum, 2020).

Indeed, there is some precedent to suggest that neorealism is the most accurate theory behind Trump's actions regarding the LEC. Specifically, Trump's Secretary of State Marco Rubio confirmed that the U.S. would proceed with the LEC (Talosig-Bartolome, 2025). Philippine National Security Council representative

Jonathan Malaya echoed this sentiment, stating that “all their projects here are aligned with Trump’s vision of making the U.S. more secure” (Heydarian, 2025)

Additionally, in his first term, Trump favored Philippine interests as a whole and also recognized the geographic and strategic value that the Philippines holds in relation to China. For instance, Trump backed the Philippines through the Drug War and its extrajudicial nature, looking to reinforce their alliance when Duterte attempted to move away (Pennington, 2017). Therefore, the precedent shows that Trump acts mainly to advance his power and network of alliances to promote world security regardless of values, such that he adheres to realist ideals when taking action on matters regarding this ally.

Conclusion

The LEC isn’t just a method for the Philippines to accelerate their economic growth, but instead is part of the U.S. strategy to reaffirm their strength in the South China Sea, especially in the face of growing Chinese aggression in the region. Through a realist point of view, the LEC is an action that attempts to balance the power dynamic of the region by bringing the U.S. up to par to China in terms of investment and hegemony, aiming to reinforce an alliance with the Philippines after Duterte turned to China from 2016 to 2022.

With the key factors and problems discussed above regarding the LEC, there exist a few outcomes with the US’s role in the second Trump administration: the U.S. completely pulls out of the deal, reduces its funding, or delivers as promised. The burden of ensuring that the deal runs smoothly is currently resting on the Marcos administration, but President Marcos has stated publicly that he has confidence in the plan continuing. This confidence from the Philippines’ side, combined with Trump’s pattern of anti-China action by any means possible, implies that the LEC has enough strategic value and therefore be maintained.

The LEC is a part of a broader strategy within an overarching political rivalry in the South China Sea between the U.S. and China. With recent events such as Chinese harassment of Philippine vessels, it is clear that the Philippines, one of the U.S.’s longtime allies but also a geographical neighbor of China, may be caught in the crossfire. Thus, the U.S.’s utilization of the Philippines as a deterrent to China represents an offensive move against China in their game of chess.

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