

The Forgotten Bombs: America's Secret Nuclear Deployment in the Philippines During the Cold War ¹

Abstract _____

Thapiporn Suporn²

Why did the stationing of weapons of mass destruction in the Philippines not jeopardize Washington-Manila relations? This paper critically examines the clandestine deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in the Philippines during the Cold War—a move that made the country a potential nuclear target and infringed upon its sovereignty. Drawing on declassified documents from the National Security Archive, it argues that the Philippines' strategic culture, which heavily relied on the United States as its sole security guarantor, played a central role. Despite regional initiatives such as the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone, the United States forward-deployed approximately 250 nuclear weapons in the Philippines, effectively turning the country into a potential flashpoint. This research explores how military cooperation and strategic reciprocity between the Marcos and Nixon governments led Philippine elites to prioritize the U.S. alliance over sovereignty and nuclear risks. Despite Marcos's declaration of martial law in 1972 and the widespread human rights abuses that followed, the Nixon administration continued to support his regime, largely overlooking these issues due to shared anti-communist objectives and the strategic importance of U.S. military bases in the Philippines. Even after learning about the nuclear arsenals stationed at these U.S. bases, the Marcos regime continued to view the United States as its traditional ally, later receiving full support from the Nixon administration following the revelation of the nuclear weapons. This paper concludes that the Philippines' strategic culture of relying on the United States as a security guarantor also contributed to the stability of bilateral ties, with the U.S. playing the role of protector and the Philippines adopting a strategic accommodation posture.

Keywords: Cold War, Marcos, Nuclear Weapon, Strategic Culture, U.S.-Philippine Relations

Received: 8 May 2025 Revised: 28 May 2025 Accepted: 11 June 2025



¹This research was funded by the 2024 Young Sinologists Project, jointly supported by the Foreign Affairs Office of the People's Government of Beijing Municipality and Beijing International Studies University (Grant No. OFOP0001928).

²Assistant Professor of International Relations and Head of International Affairs Division, Khon Kaen University International College, THAILAND, Email: Thapsu@kku.ac.th

Introduction

During the height of the Cold War, Southeast Asia was considered a region of immense strategic importance for the security and global influence of the United States. The domino theory, which posited that if one country in Southeast Asia fell to communism, neighboring countries would follow in a domino-like effect, played a significant role in shaping U.S. foreign policy in the region during the Cold War (Smith, 2007). This theory was a key driver behind the United States' efforts to contain the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, as it feared that the loss of one country to communist forces would lead to the collapse of the entire region under Soviet influence. The domino theory was a cornerstone of the U.S. strategy in Southeast Asia, guiding its interventions and alliances in an attempt to maintain the U.S.-led order in the region and prevent the perceived communist contagion from spreading. The U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia was deeply intertwined with the global competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, with each side vying for influence and allies in the region. Amidst this global chessboard, the Philippines held a unique position as a long-standing ally of the United States, a legacy rooted in its colonial past and solidified through various security agreements (Wu, 2024).

The strategic importance of the Philippines to the U.S. stemmed from its geographic location and its potential to serve as a vital hub for projecting American power into the region. The Philippines played a crucial role in facilitating the projection of U.S. military power in Southeast Asia, providing access to strategic locations that were essential for maintaining a strong presence in the region. The establishment of U.S. military bases in the Philippines, such as Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base (Divis, 1992), were critical components of the U.S. strategy to contain communist expansion and maintain its strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific region. Given this backdrop, rumors and speculations have persisted for decades regarding the alleged secret stationing of nuclear weapons by the United States in the Philippines during the Cold War. These speculations raise complex questions about the true nature of the U.S.-Philippines alliance, the extent of American military activities within the Philippines, and the potential implications for regional and global security. This article will shed light on new evidence from declassified documents and analyses that reveal the impact of the alleged secret stationing of nuclear weapons on U.S.-Philippine relations during the Marcos era. The U.S.-Philippine alliance under Marcos reached a peak of hypocrisy, given the U.S.'s global reputation as a champion of democracy

and human rights. While the U.S. leveraged the alliance for military and strategic advantages, Marcos exploited American support to consolidate his dictatorial reign. Tensions in the alliance worsened due to the international outrage over the blatant erosion of human rights and martial law. Nonetheless, foundational national interests for the American elite and Filipino elite prevailed. During the Marcos regime, the U.S.-Philippine relationship was often described as a “special relationship,” in which the United States prioritized its strategic interests—particularly access to military bases in the Philippines—while overlooking Marcos’s authoritarianism and downplaying the regime’s blatant human rights violations. The stationing of nuclear weapons in the Philippines further complicated the Washington–Manila military alliance and served as a litmus test for its durability during the two decades of the Marcos era (Capino & Manalansan, 2021), as well as having long-lasting impacts on Washington–Manila relations in the post-Marcos era.

This paper will unfold across five sections. The first section introduces strategic culture as the theoretical framework, outlining its core principles and demonstrating its application to understanding Manila-Washington relations during the Cold War. The second section details the research methodology, focusing on the key primary documents used to investigate the secrecy surrounding nuclear deployment in the Philippines. The historical context of U.S.-Philippine relations and the geopolitical environment in Southeast Asia will be outlined in the next section. Section four examines the ramifications of the alleged stationing of nuclear weapons on the U.S.-Philippine relationship, drawing upon declassified documents from the U.S. National Security Archive. This section will further detail how, despite the region’s attempts to remain neutral amidst the rivalry between the free world and communism—as evidenced in its efforts to establish Southeast Asia as a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone—it ultimately became entangled in great power competition. The fifth section delves into the Philippines’ strategic culture vis-à-vis the United States, explaining why America’s secret nuclear arsenal deployed in the Philippines did not jeopardize Washington-Manila relations. The conclusion will synthesize the relationship between strategic culture and the deployment of nuclear weapons at U.S. military bases in the Philippines, emphasizing the significant implications for national sovereignty and the long-term trajectory of U.S.-Philippine relations in the 21st century

Strategic Culture – A Conceptual Framework

This paper employs the concept of strategic culture—which explores how a nation’s cultural, historical, and institutional contexts shape its strategic behavior and foreign policy—to examine how the Philippines’ national identity, historical experiences, and cultural values influence its perception of the United States as an indispensable ally. This approach assumes that foreign policy is not merely a response to material conditions or strategic necessities, but is also shaped by deeply embedded cultural and historical narratives.

Strategic culture is a concept employed to explain how cultural factors influence a nation’s approach to security and military strategy. As defined by Kerry Longhurst, strategic culture refers to “a distinctive body of beliefs, attitudes, and practices regarding the use of force, held by a collective and arising gradually over time through a unique, protracted historical process” (Longhurst, 2005, p. 7). This definition emphasizes the importance of historical context in shaping strategic choices and highlights the role of norm entrepreneurs—individuals or groups advocating for new norms within strategic culture. Edward Lock further refines the concept, suggesting that strategic culture consists of common ideas regarding strategy that exist across populations, rather than being confined to specific national boundaries. Lock also provides useful definitions of both strategic culture and strategy, defining the former as “patterns of common ideas regarding strategy distributed across populations,” and the latter as “matters pertaining to organized violence” (Lock, 2017, p.2).

This perspective enables an exploration of how strategic cultures can be influenced by transnational ideas and practices. The theory of strategic culture has evolved through several generations of scholarship. Early works, such as those by Jack Snyder and Colin Gray, proposed that strategic culture has a semi-permanent influence on national security policies shaped by elite socialization processes (Snyder, 1977; Gray, 1981). These scholars argued that cultural influences could predict state behavior based on historical experiences. More recent scholarship has focused on the fluidity of strategic culture, suggesting that while cultural norms may have deep historical roots, they are also subject to change through processes such as norm diffusion and social interaction among states (Snyder, 1977; Gray, 1981). This perspective aligns with constructivist perspectives that highlight the malleability of norms in response to pivotal events. Lock also identifies an issue in strategic culture scholarship, where researchers often conflate cultural ideas with the associated behaviors and artifacts. Furthermore, according

to Lock, strategic culture scholars have tended to employ overly restrictive assumptions in defining the concept, particularly regarding the locations where strategic culture can be said to exist (Lock, 2017).

As previously discussed, the nexus between strategic culture and constructivism suggests that norm entrepreneurs play a crucial role in shaping strategic cultures by advocating for new norms based on historical experiences and contemporary challenges. Their efforts can lead to significant shifts in how states perceive their security needs and respond to international threats. This dynamic interplay between norm entrepreneurs and established norms illustrates the evolving nature of strategic cultures over time. The intersection of strategic culture and constructivism provides valuable insights into understanding international relations, as it emphasizes the dynamic nature of cultural norms and their impact on state behavior (Lauterbach, 2011). Specifically, the strategic culture of the Philippines, as outlined by Arugay, emphasizes the country's island geography, the military's role in internal security, anti-communism, and a strong reliance on alliances—particularly with the United States (Arugay, 2022, p. 74). Similarly, De Castro argues that Philippine strategic culture has traditionally focused on internal security through asymmetrical warfare and alliance dependence as a means to offset strategic vulnerabilities (De Castro, 2014). This strategic outlook is shaped by a small elite group that has dominated the political landscape since independence, influencing key aspects such as the role of the armed forces, defense spending, and the enduring reliance on the U.S. alliance. Understanding strategic culture theory helps explain how historical experiences inform current security policies—such as the tolerance for the U.S. stationing nuclear weapons in the Philippines during the Cold War—and why such actions, despite infringing on Philippine sovereignty and making the country a potential nuclear target, were accepted without seriously damaging Washington–Manila relations.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, documentary research approach to investigate the influence of strategic culture and reciprocal strategic interests on U.S.-Philippine relations during the Cold War, focusing on the U.S. deployment of nuclear weapons in the Philippines and the Marcos regime. It examines how these factors shaped the perceptions, decisions, and interactions of both countries. The study primarily relies on analyzing declassified documents

from the National Security Archive at The George Washington University, specifically those declassified on January 19, 2006, pertaining to discussions and decisions surrounding the secrecy of nuclear stockpiles in the Philippines. These primary source documents include:

1. Talking Points for Discussion with Senators Fulbright and Symington re Subcommittee Hearings on U.S. Commitments Abroad
2. Meeting of Kissinger Committee on Symington Subcommittee
3. Presidential Decision on Categories of Information for Symington Subcommittee to be protected by executive privilege

These documents provide valuable insights into the perspectives and priorities of U.S. policymakers, particularly regarding the strategic importance of the Philippines during the Cold War and the lengths to which they were willing to go to maintain secrecy. Analysis of these documents will focus on identifying key themes related to U.S. strategic interests, perceptions of the Philippines, and the justifications for maintaining nuclear weapons in the country. Furthermore, these documents will be analyzed to understand the extent to which U.S. policymakers considered the implications of their actions for Philippine sovereignty and domestic politics.

In addition to primary source analysis, this research incorporates secondary scholarly works on U.S.-Philippine relations, Cold War history, strategic culture theory, and Philippine political history. These secondary sources will provide context for understanding the broader historical, political, and strategic dynamics at play. They will also offer alternative interpretations and perspectives on the events under investigation. The research will synthesize findings from primary and secondary sources to develop a nuanced understanding of how strategic culture and reciprocal strategic interests influenced U.S.-Philippine relations during the Cold War. By examining the intersection of these factors, the study aims to address the central question: Why did the stationing of nuclear weapons in the Philippines not jeopardize Washington-Manila relations?

Manila-Washington Relations During the Cold War

During the Cold War, Southeast Asia became a key battleground in the U.S.-led coalition against the spread of communism. The United States, deeply invested in the policy of containment, viewed the Philippines as a crucial ally in this strategic effort. Leveraging the

Philippines' strategic geographic location and existing military infrastructure, the U.S. was able to utilize the country as a vital platform for projecting power and influence throughout the region. This close strategic alignment between Washington and Manila fostered extensive military cooperation, with the United States providing the Philippines with significant military and economic assistance to bolster its capabilities and support joint operations. The U.S.-Philippines partnership was a cornerstone of American efforts to maintain the American-led security order in Southeast Asia and prevent the perceived communist contagion from spreading across the region.

The historical relationship between the United States and the Philippines is complex and multi-faceted, shaped by colonialism, shared security concerns, and evolving political dynamics (Greco, 2022). The Philippines, a former colony of the United States, gained independence in 1946, but the legacy of colonialism continued to influence the relationship between the two countries (Misalucha-Willoughby & Medillo, 2020). The strategic alliance between the U.S. and the Philippines was solidified through a series of agreements, including the Military Bases Agreement of 1947, which granted the U.S. the right to maintain military bases on Philippine territory (Wu, 2024). These bases, particularly Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base, became critical assets for the U.S. in projecting its power across Southeast Asia, especially during the Vietnam War and the broader Cold War period (Despi, 2017). These agreements reflected the mutual interests of both countries: the U.S. sought to maintain its strategic presence in the region, while the Philippines aimed to secure protection against external threats (Wu, 2024). Following the conclusion of the Korean War in the early 1950s, the United States further escalated its military involvement in the Philippines and broader Southeast Asian region. Declassified intelligence documents reveal that the U.S. government actively supplied arms, including surplus military equipment, to local insurgent groups like the Hukbalahap. This clandestine support was aimed at bolstering the Philippine government's counter-insurgency efforts against perceived communist threats within the country (Friend & Kerkvliet, 1978). This covert arming of domestic factions was a strategic move by the U.S. to contain the spread of communist influence in the Philippines and solidify its geopolitical position in the Asia-Pacific during the early stages of the Cold War.

The U.S. -Philippine alliance, cemented by the Mutual Defense Treaty in 1951, formed a strategic partnership that has shaped the security landscape of the Asia-Pacific region for

decades. The Mutual Defense Treaty of 1951 served as the bedrock of the alliance, stipulating that both countries would come to each other's defense in the event of an armed attack on either party. This agreement reflected the mutual interests of both nations - the U.S. sought to maintain its strategic presence in the region, while the Philippines aimed to secure protection against external threats (De Castro, 2012). However, the presence of U.S. military bases and the close security cooperation also generated tensions and resentment within the Philippines.

The political and social landscape of the Philippines during the Cold War was profoundly shaped by the United States' strategic interests in the region, particularly in the context of global Soviet aggression. The U.S. launched a large-scale anti-Communist campaign, utilizing public service ads and propaganda that vividly depicted the dire consequences of communist rule, emphasizing the potential loss of autonomy, religion, and family structures under such a regime. This campaign aimed not only to sway public opinion but also to reinforce American interests by supporting local elites who aligned with U.S. policies. Financial backing from U.S. agencies, such as USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy, enabled projects intended to improve living standards for the impoverished, thereby undermining the appeal of communism (Bello et al., 1983). The Magsaysay administration exemplified this strategy, as efforts to enhance community infrastructure and welfare served to diminish the perceived necessity for communist ideologies among the populace. However, the continuous military and economic support from the U.S. also instilled a sense of dependency, leading to concerns about national sovereignty. Critics have described subsequent Philippine administrations as increasingly compromised, with leaders accused of reverting to a "puppet status" under U.S. influence (McKinley, 2024). The establishment of military bases in the Philippines not only provided the U.S. with a strategic point for rapid deployment but also reinforced the perception of the Philippines as a subordinate ally in the geopolitical chess game of the Cold War (Rabena, 2019). The duality of this relationship culminated in a precarious political environment, characterized by a struggle between maintaining sovereignty and aligning with a superpower.

The Philippines had a complex and at times contentious relationship with its indispensable ally. The stationing of U.S. troops and the granting of basing rights on Philippine soil evoked concerns over national sovereignty and autonomy, leading to periodic frictions in the alliance. Additionally, the costs and environmental impact of hosting these military facilities fueled domestic political opposition and resistance among the Filipino populace

(Yeo, 2011, 2012). These tensions would have been further exacerbated by the potential covert deployment of nuclear weapons in the Philippines during the Cold War, which could have heightened fears over the country's strategic subordination to U.S. interests and the risks of being entangled in great power conflicts.

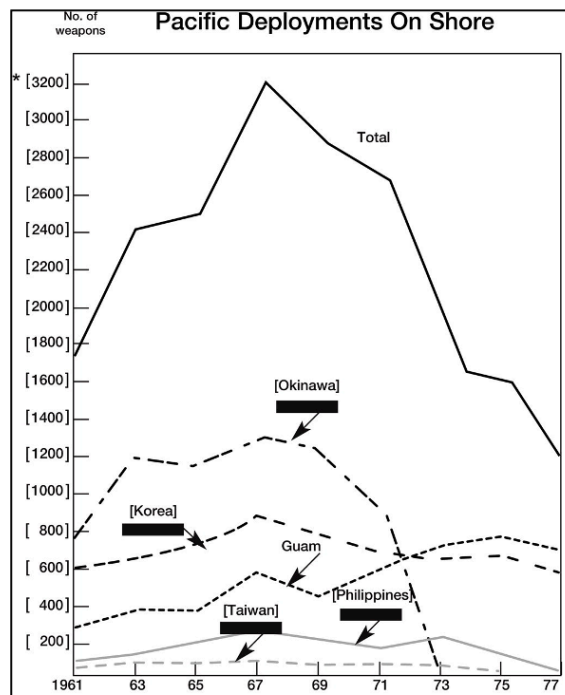
The Nuclear Stockpile Secrecy: Declassified Documents

Southeast Asia's geopolitical significance stems from its historical position as a focal point for competition among major powers, a dynamic that predates the current U.S.-China power competition. Now, many Southeast Asian countries have expressed their desire to diversify risks by engaging with multiple partners. In other words, they believe that a hedging strategy would be the safest bet for their economic and security interests, as argued by several scholars (Kuik, 2016; Kuik, 2021; Deng, 2024; Chung, 2004; Ciorciari, 2019; Goh, 2016). While the narrative that great power competition is a fact of life for Southeast Asian countries is not entirely novel, their attempt to preserve optionality and avoid making definitive alignment choices is noteworthy. A prime example of this can be found in the Declaration on the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), (Henderson, 1957; Hanggi, 1991) which encapsulates the regional ambition to promote peace and cooperation while steering clear of external interference. This aspiration was further reinforced by the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, which emphasizes mutual respect, non-interference, and peaceful dispute resolution (ASEAN Secretariat, 1976).

Another treaty that demonstrates the region's well-intentioned efforts is the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ), signed by ASEAN member states on December 15, 1995. Through this agreement, the region committed to preserving Southeast Asia as a zone free of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction. The treaty reaffirmed the significance of the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Treaty in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and promoting international peace and security. Additionally, it established Southeast Asia as one of the five nuclear-weapon-free zones globally, with the others located in Latin America and the Caribbean, the South Pacific, Africa, and Central Asia. However, these ambitions have been challenged by the complex realities of regional security, especially the dynamics of the great power competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, as well as the growing influence of China. Despite these attempts, the region failed to make Southeast Asia free from weapons of mass destruction, which were reportedly placed in the Philippines without the knowledge of the Filipino people or the leaders in Southeast Asia.

The covert deployment of nuclear weapons in the Philippines during the Cold War has been a subject of significant historical scrutiny. As the geopolitical landscape evolved, particularly with the rise of communism in Southeast Asia, the United States sought to bolster its military presence in the region. This involved clandestine operations and the strategic placement of nuclear arms, which were pivotal in asserting U.S. influence. While nuclear weapons were primarily stationed in more prominent locations such as Germany and Japan, evidence suggests that the Philippines also served as a covert site for these weapons during the Cold War (Norris et al., 1999). This was part of a broader strategy to counter the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. According to Norris et al., the United States began deploying a wide variety of nuclear weapons and delivery systems to the Pacific region starting in 1956. This included deployments to locations such as Guam, Okinawa, Hawaii, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines. The number of U.S. nuclear weapons in the Pacific region peaked in 1967 at approximately 3,200, with the majority stationed in Korea and Okinawa. However, these deployments began decreasing in the late 1960s, and by the end of the 1970s, only South Korea remained a forward base for U.S. nuclear weapons (See figure 1).

Figure 1 The trend of U.S. nuclear weapons deployment in the Pacific region from 1961 to 1977



Source: Norris et al., 1999, p. 30

Figure 1 shows that the number of nuclear weapons in the Philippines rose to around 250 in 1967, before declining in line with the overall trend in the Pacific region. The stockpile then increased again to close to the previous peak level by 1973, before all nuclear weapons were eventually removed from the Philippines by the end of 1977. Although the exact number of nuclear weapons stationed in the Philippines was debated and may have been smaller compared to other Pacific locations, a declassified “Top Secret” document from 1969 highlighted the potential impacts on U.S.-Philippines relations during the Nixon and Marcos administrations.

According to the National Security Archive at The George Washington University, three key documents related to the Philippines and nuclear stockpile secrecy were declassified on January 19, 2006. These include:

1. “Talking Points for Discussion with Senators Fulbright and Symington re Subcommittee Hearings on U.S. Commitments Abroad,” a Top Secret memo from Robert McClintock, Office of Under Secretary for Political Affairs, to the Secretary, dated 25 September 1969
2. “Meeting of Kissinger Committee on Symington Subcommittee,” a Top Secret memo from Robert McClintock to the Secretary and Acting Secretary, dated 30 September 1969
3. “Presidential Decision on Categories of Information for Symington Subcommittee to be protected by executive privilege,” a Top Secret memo from Robert McClintock to the Acting Secretary

The third document from the Department of State (see illustration 1) clearly highlights the concerns about the potential implications of revealing the presence of nuclear weapons in the Philippines to the public and the Philippine government. It noted that “divulging the fact that nuclear weapons have been stored in the Philippines for many years without prior consultation with the Philippine government would greatly jeopardize U.S.-Philippine relations, particularly on the eve of the scheduled presidential elections on October 11” (U.S. Department of State, 1969c, p. 1)

In 1969, Senator Stuart Symington chaired the newly established Subcommittee on Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad, which investigated secret U.S. agreements with foreign governments. The Subcommittee’s inquiries revealed that the Nixon

administration—and its predecessors—had circumvented constitutional obligations to consult Congress. Investigators, including Roland Paul and Walter Pincus, uncovered classified U.S. operations in Laos and the Philippines, including a “secret war” in Laos and the covert deployment of nuclear weapons in the Philippines—known only to President Marcos among local officials (Burr, 2006). Further, as revealed in the first document, top Nixon administration officials, including National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, and Director of Central Intelligence Richard Helms, decided that government witnesses would refuse to testify on the nuclear deployments by invoking executive privilege (Burr, 2006).

According to the memo: “It was recommended, as a fallback position from the recommendation that no comment whatever be given on nuclear weapons, that if there is indeed a risk of a leak, the Secretaries of State and Defense should contact the Senators on the Symington Subcommittee, inform them of the facts off the record without any transcript being taken, and urge the Senators not to reveal this highly sensitive information” (U.S. Department of State, 1969a). The three declassified documents suggest that the Nixon administration, concerned about the potential disruption to the upcoming Philippine presidential election if the revelation of the nuclear deployments in the Philippines were to leak, decided to keep this information secret by rejecting the Symington Subcommittee’s requests for information.

Illustration 1 A Top-Secret memo from Robert McClintock to the Acting Secretary, 1969

DECLASSIFIED
Authority: NND 565000
Date: 1-18-00

DEPARTMENT OF STATE
Washington, D.C. 20520

TOP SECRET/NODIS

TO: The Acting Secretary
THRU: S/S
FROM: J/EM - Robert McClintock

SUBJECT: Presidential Decision on Categories of Information for Symington Subcommittee to be protected by executive privilege

Mr. Richard Allen of the NSC staff telephoned me at 1:30 p.m. today to say that yesterday the President had signed a directive that the following categories of information would be covered by executive privilege and not divulged to the Symington Subcommittee on overseas commitments:

1. Contingency plans.
2. CIA activities in Laos.
3. Storage of nuclear weapons anywhere.

The Symington Subcommittee has specifically asked for detailed information on CIA counter-insurgency activity in Laos and on the storage of nuclear weapons in the Philippines. Hearings on the latter item are scheduled for October 2; on Laos for October 13. The Subcommittee's investigating team, Messrs. Pincus and Paul, have visited the Philippines and Laos and are thoroughly informed as to the facts of nuclear weapons stored in the former country, and of CIA programs in the latter.

Nuclear Weapons in Philippines

Divulgence of the fact that nuclear weapons are stored in the Philippines, and have been there for many years without prior consultation with the Philippine Government, would gravely jeopardize U.S.-Philippine relations, particularly on the eve of the presidential

TOP SECRET/NODIS

14756
NOV 1969
Cat. A - Contingency Plans
Included in O-1A200
Cat. B - CIA activities in Laos
with additional areas
controlled by S/S
Cat. C - Contingency and custody
information by S/S
Reviewed by: J. G. George
Date: 10-1-69

Source: U.S. Department of State, 1969c

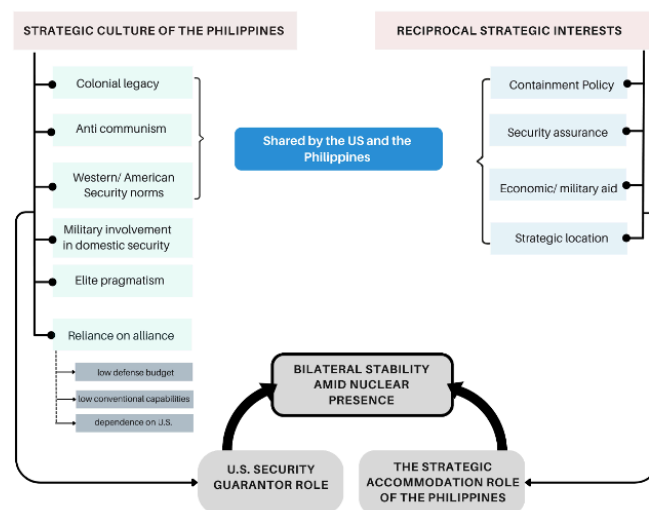
The decision to conceal the presence of nuclear weapons from the Filipino public was made in close collaboration with President Ferdinand Marcos, who had been secretly informed of the weapons' existence since 1966. The Nixon administration viewed Marcos as a crucial ally in the region and sought to maintain his political power, even at the expense of transparency and democratic principles (Bacho, 1987; Overholt, 1986). By withholding this sensitive information from the Philippine government and the public, the U.S. aimed to preserve its strategic military advantage and avoid any potential backlash that could have disrupted the upcoming presidential election and threatened Marcos's continued rule.

Analysis: Strategic Culture and Nuclear Weapons in the Philippines

Without a doubt, the nuclear stockpiles secrecy in the Philippines could ultimately lead to a period of increased strain and mistrust between the United States and the Philippines. Many Filipinos may view the covert deployment of nuclear weapons as a violation of the Philippines' territorial integrity and its ability to act as an independent nation in the international arena. Some experts and pundits have even accused the U.S. of "nuclear hypocrisy," given that Washington supports non-proliferation while maintaining the world's largest stockpile and stationing weapons in allied countries without their full knowledge and consent. The presence of these weapons could have made the Philippines a target in the event of a conflict between the U.S. and the Soviet Union or China. Furthermore, it could have complicated the Philippines' relations with its neighbors, some of whom were wary of the U.S. military presence in the region.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that U.S.-Philippine relations have long been shaped not only by shared strategic cultures between Washington and Manila, but also by reciprocal strategic interests that have defined their alliance since the end of World War II (See figure 2). The United States has consistently acted as a security guarantor for the Philippines, while the Philippines has accommodated American interests in various military and security endeavors—especially in the context of anti-communist cooperation. Hence, the revelation of nuclear stockpiles at American bases did not appear to jeopardize the ties between the two countries as previously anticipated.

Figure 2 Strategic Culture and Nuclear Weapons Secrecy



Source: Author

Placed an emphasis on internal security and regime legitimacy, the strategic culture of the Philippines is strongly affected by its colonial history, geography, and liberal-democratic system. This distinct viewpoint has long been shaped by the strategic choices of a select group of elites—roughly 400 families who have controlled local politics, the economy, and society since the Philippines gained its independence in 1946 (Castro, 2014). The strategic preferences of the Philippines’ political elite have been reflected in the Armed Forces of the Philippines’ long-standing counterinsurgency operations, limited conventional military capabilities, low defense expenditures, and reliance on the United States for military assistance and security assurances. For these elites, strong ties with the United States have been seen as a guarantee of political and economic stability.

Furthermore, as discussed in the theoretical framework section, strategic culture’s influence on foreign policy is deeply rooted in the diffusion of norms and social interactions among political elites. President Marcos, a staunchly pro-American leader, had internalized the American-style liberal democratic system in which he was educated and trained, as well as American security norms and personal relationships with U.S. policymakers. This elite pragmatism aligns with the Philippines under Marcos and shapes the country’s perception of threats and security needs. Given its limited defense capabilities, it is unsurprising that Manila would heavily rely on Washington as an external security guarantor. Simultaneously, the Philippine government during the Cold War understood the American grand strategy of Containment Policy and the country’s strategic location as a staging ground for U.S. power projection in Southeast Asia against communism. Consequently, the Philippines played a role of strategic accommodation to the United States.

A prime example of this pragmatic and mutually beneficial alliance was during the Marcos administration’s declaration of martial law. With the backing of the Nixon administration, which prioritized realpolitik over democratic ideals, Marcos consolidated power, dismantling institutional checks and balances (Doronila, 1985) and ushering in a period of authoritarian rule (Navera, 2018). This era was marked by human rights abuses, suppression of dissent, and the erosion of democratic norms, further entrenching a system of patronage and cronyism that would plague the country for decades to come. As a matter of fact, the Nixon administration’s muted response to Marcos’s martial law declaration underscores the U.S. focus on preserving its strategic interests in the region, even at the expense of Philippine sovereignty and democratic values. As evidenced by the declassified documents, the U.S.

government prioritized maintaining Marcos's political power, viewing him as a crucial ally in the fight against communism. This support, however, came at a cost, as it further alienated the Filipino public and fueled anti-American sentiment. This decision to prioritize geopolitical strategy over democratic principles would have long-lasting repercussions for U.S.-Philippine relations, contributing to a legacy of mistrust that continues to shape the dynamics between the two countries.

In summary, the covert deployment of these weapons, hidden from the Philippine government and public, had significant implications for the U.S.-Philippine relationship. While the revelation of the nuclear stockpiles could have strained ties between the two countries, the strategic cultures and reciprocal strategic interests of both Manila and Washington have helped maintain their alliance. Despite the potential for increased tension and mistrust due to this covert action, the shared security cooperation and interdependence forged over decades have sustained the partnership between the United States and the Philippines. If anything, the secret nuclear stockpile in U.S. bases in the Philippines has long been relegated to the shadows of Cold War history, but its legacy continues to linger in the 21st century.

Conclusion

During the Cold War, Southeast Asia had been a battleground of great power competition, and the Philippines, due to its strategic location and close ties with the U.S., was inevitably drawn into this rivalry. The secret stationing of nuclear weapons in the Philippines during this period represents a significant yet often overlooked aspect of U.S. foreign policy and its impact on bilateral relations. The United States, driven by its global strategic objectives, sought to contain the spread of communism and maintain its dominance in the Asia-Pacific region. It is worth noting that while Southeast Asian countries made efforts, such as ZOPFAN and SEANWFZ, to prevent major powers from jeopardizing regional stability, particularly from nuclear threats, these attempts ultimately proved to be ineffective, as evidenced by the United States' covert nuclear deployment in the Philippines.

Although the U.S. decision to secretly deploy nuclear weapons in the Philippines had far-reaching implications for the country's security and political climate, it did not substantially undermine bilateral relations. In fact, U.S.-Philippines ties have historically been shaped by a strategic culture within the Philippines – one characterized by a dependence on the U.S. for

security guarantees and influenced by a small group of elites (Castro, 2014) – which allowed the U.S. to prioritize its own strategic interests, even when they conflicted with democratic principles and Philippine sovereignty. This is particularly evident in the close rapport between the Marcos and Nixon administrations. Despite Marcos’s imposition of martial law in 1972 and the widespread human rights violations that ensued, the Nixon administration continued its support, largely turning a blind eye. This permissiveness was rooted in a shared anti-communist stance and the strategic importance of maintaining a U.S. military presence in the Philippines.

The end of the Cold War era substantially reshaped the relationship between the United States and the Philippines. With the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the strategic imperative for sustaining a robust alliance diminished, ultimately leading the Philippine Senate to decline renewing the Military Bases Agreement in 1991 (Harding, 2024). This decision marked a significant turning point, as the departure of U.S. forces from the Philippines signaled a shift in the long-standing alliance between the two nations. While the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty remained in place, the lack of a clear threat that warranted its continuation raised questions about the future direction of U.S.-Philippine relations in the post-Cold War era.

Without a doubt, the Philippines is of strategic importance to the U.S. amid the renewed great power competition with China (De Castro, 2016). While the U.S. no longer maintains military bases in the Philippines, the two countries’ alliance remains strong through military exercises, security cooperation, and mutual defense treaties. A prime example is the Visiting Forces Agreement, which was ratified in 1999 and is a bilateral agreement governing the conduct of U.S. troops in the Philippines (De Castro, 2020). This shift in U.S. military strategy, known as “places not bases” (Dosch, 2009), allows American allies to facilitate the presence of U.S. troops, which helps strengthen U.S. presence without the need for permanent basing as during the Cold War.

In the 21st century, China’s assertive behavior and land reclamation, combined with the unorthodox and unpredictable nature of the current U.S. president—marked by a nationalist and neo-mercantilist approach—have cast uncertainty over Washington and Manila’s strategic interests. Although strategic culture is shaped by enduring historical norms, it is not immutable. Norm diffusion and social interaction can lead to significant shifts in a state’s strategic orientation. The strategic cultures of both countries may inevitably evolve, given the unorthodox and unpredictable nature of the current U.S. president and the growing influence of China in

the region. The long shadow of the Cold War—particularly the legacy of secret nuclear stockpiles in the Philippines—continues to re-emerge, deepening mistrust between the two countries. Notably, the Philippines is the only Southeast Asian country to have constructed a nuclear power plant. Built in the 1970s in Bataan Province, approximately 40 miles from Manila, the plant never produced a single watt of electricity due to safety concerns. Due to safety concerns, the Bataan Nuclear Power Plant never produced a single watt of electricity. However, if Manila proceeds with its Nuclear Energy Roadmap and achieves its goal of having commercially operational nuclear power plants by 2032, nuclear-related issues and security concerns will inevitably resurface. These “forgotten bombs” remain a lingering specter of the Cold War—one that continues to haunt and potentially complicate U.S.–Philippine relations.

References

- Arugay, A. A. (2022). *Defying the water's edge: The Philippines and its strategic policy toward the United States-China competition*. National Institute for Defense Studies. https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/event/proceedings/symposium/pdf/2022/e_05.pdf
- ASEAN Secretariat. (1976). Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, Indonesia. ASEAN News. <http://www.asean.org/news/item/treaty-of-amity-and-cooperation-in-southeast-asia-indonesia-24-february-1976-3>.
- Bacho, P. (1987). U.S. policy options toward the Philippines. *Asian Survey*, 27(4), 427-441.
- Bello, W., Harris, J., & Zarsky, L. (1983). Nuclear Power in the Philippines: The Plague that Poisons Morong! *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 15(3), 51.
- Burr, W. (2006, August 18). How many and where were the nukes? What the U.S. government no longer wants you to know about nuclear weapons during the Cold War. National Security Archive. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB197/index.htm>
- Capino, J. B., & Manalansan, M. F. IV. (2021). Introduction: New Filipino American scholarship on the Marcos era. *Alon: Journal for Filipinx American and Diasporic Studies*, 1(3), <https://doi.org/10.5070/AL11356864>
- Chung, C. P. (2004). Southeast Asia-China relations: Dialectics of “hedging” and “counter-hedging.” *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 35-53.
- Ciorciari, J. D. (2019). The variable effectiveness of hedging strategies. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 19(3), 523. <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcz007>
- De Castro, R. C. (2012). Future challenges in the US-Philippines alliance (No. 168). *Asia Pacific Bulletin*.
- De Castro, R. C. (2014). Philippine Strategic Culture: Continuity in the Face of Changing Regional Dynamics. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 35(2), 249–269. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2014.927673>
- De Castro, R. C. (2016). Twenty-First Century Philippines’ Policy Toward an Emergent China: From Equi-Balancing to Strategic Balancing. *Asian Politics & Policy*, 8(2), 305. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12249>

- De Castro, R. C. (2020). Abstract of crisis in Philippine-U.S. security relations: from an alliance to a security partnership? *The Pacific Review*, 35(3), 477–505. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2020.1845227>
- Deng, Y. (2024). Southeast Asia's grand strategy: Hedging. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*. <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2024/08/12/southeast-asias-grand-strategy-hedging/>
- Despi, D. F. C. (2017). Sea Power in the 21st Century: Challenges and Opportunities for the Philippine Navy. *Asian Politics & Policy*, 9(4), 583. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12344>
- Divis, C. B. (1992). Subic Bay Naval Complex - Are There Alternatives? (USAWC Class of 1992, No. 92-12100). U.S. Army War College. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA249409.pdf>
- Doronila, A. (1985). The Transformation of Patron-Client Relations and its Political Consequences in Postwar Philippines. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 16(1), 99. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022463400012789>
- Dosch, J. (2009). The US and Southeast Asia. In M. Beeson (Ed.), *Contemporary Southeast Asia* (pp. 45–67). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Friend, T., & Kerkvliet, B. J. T. (1978). The Huk Rebellion: A Study of Peasant Revolt in the Philippines. *The American Historical Review*, 83(1), 260. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1866087>
- Goh, E. (2016). Southeast Asian strategies toward the great powers: Still hedging after all these years? *The Asan Forum*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.26465/asan.v4i1.2207>
- Gray, C. S. (1981). National style in strategy: The American example. *International Security*, 6(2), 21–46.
- Greco, A. W. (2022). A Relationship of Pivots: Philippine-US Cooperation in a Changing World. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 15(3), 95. <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.15.3.2000>
- Hanggi, H. (1991). *ASEAN and the Zopfan Concept*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789814377843>
- Harding, S. D. (2024, May). There and back and there again: U.S. military bases in the Philippines. *Proceedings*, 150(5), Article 1,455.
- Henderson, W. (1957). The Roots of Neutralism in Southern Asia. *International Journal*, 13(1), 30–40. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40198371>
- Kuik, C. (2016). Malaysia between the United States and China: What do weaker states hedge against? *Asian Politics & Policy*, 8(1), 155–177. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12240>
- Kuik, C. (2021). Getting hedging right: a small-state perspective. *China International Strategy Review*, 3(2), 300. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-021-00089-5>

- Lauterbach, T. (2011). Constructivism, strategic culture, and the Iraq War. *ASPJ Africa & Francophonie*, 2(4), 61-92.
- Lock, E. (2017). Strategic Culture Theory: What, Why, and How. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Retrieved 2 May. 2025, from <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-320>.
- Longhurst, K. (2005). Strategic culture. In K. Longhurst & M. Zaborowski (Eds.), *Old Europe, new Europe and the transatlantic security agenda*. Routledge.
- McKinley, K. (2024). The Tydings-McDuffie Act: *Philippine independence and neo-empire in the Indo-Pacific* (Undergraduate honors thesis, William & Mary). William & Mary ScholarWorks. <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/2192>
- Misalucha-Willoughby, C., & Medillo, R. J. (2020). The Tragedy of Small Power Politics: The Philippines in the South China Sea. *Bandung*, 7(1), 3. <https://doi.org/10.1163/21983534-00701002>
- Navera, G. S. (2018). Metaphorizing Martial Law: Constitutional Authoritarianism in Marcos's Rhetoric (1972–1985). *Philippine Studies Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*, 66(4), 417. <https://doi.org/10.1353/phs.2018.0033>
- Norris, R. S., Arkin, W. M., & Burr, W. (1999). Where They Were. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 55(6), 26.
- Overholt, W. H. (1986). The Rise and Fall of Ferdinand Marcos. *Asian Survey*, 26(11), 1137. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2644313>
- Rabena, A. (2019). Factors Shaping Philippines-North Korea Relations. *Asia Pacific Bulletin*. <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/factors-shaping-philippines-north-korea-relations>
- Smith, K. (2007). How important was the so-called 'domino theory' in forming US policy towards Indochina during the Cold War? Were other factors more important? *E-International Relations*. <https://www.e-ir.info/2007/12/22/how-important-was-the-so-called-%E2%80%98domino-theory%E2%80%99-in-forming-us-policy-towards-indochina-during-the-cold-war-were-other-factors-more-important>
- Snyder, J. (1977). *The Soviet strategic culture: Implications for limited nuclear options*. RAND Corporation.

- U.S. Department of State. (1969a). *Talking points for discussion with Senators Fulbright and Symington re subcommittee hearings on US commitments abroad* [Top Secret memo, declassified]. Records of the Department of State (RG 59, Subject-Numeric Files 1967–1969, DEF 12, Box 398, Symington Subcommittee, Vol. I). National Archives, Washington, DC.
- U.S. Department of State. (1969b). *Meeting of Kissinger Committee on Symington Subcommittee* [Top Secret memo, declassified]. Records of the Department of State (RG 59, Subject-Numeric Files 1967–1969, DEF 12, Box 398, Symington Subcommittee, Vol. I). National Archives, Washington, DC.
- U.S. Department of State. (1969c). *Presidential decision on categories of information for Symington Subcommittee to be protected by executive privilege* [Top Secret memo, declassified]. Records of the Department of State (RG 59, Subject-Numeric Files 1967–1969, DEF 12, Box 398, Symington Subcommittee, Vol. I). National Archives, Washington, DC.
- Wu, S.-S. (2024). The Philippines' Security in the Face of China's Rising Threats. *The US Army War College Quarterly Parameters*, 54(4). <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.3318>
- Yeo, A. (2011). *Activists, alliances, and anti-U.S. base protests*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511842344>
- Yeo, A. (2012). Challenging US Military Presence in the Philippines. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 111(4), 857. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-1724237>