



***FINDING NEW FRIENDS AND  
BEGRUDGING OLD ONES: THE  
GROWING DIVERGENCE BETWEEN  
MALAYSIA AND THE PHILIPPINES’  
SOUTH CHINA SEA POSITIONS***

BY OLIVIA TAN

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*Photo: President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., talking to Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. Source: Reuters*

At the recent 37<sup>th</sup> Asia-Pacific Forum, differences between Southeast Asian nations on the South China Sea issue played out across panels, speeches, and off the cuff comments, even as delegates discussed regional cooperation opportunities and ASEAN centrality in an environment of worsening great power

tensions. Malaysia’s National Security Council Director-General Raja Dato Nushirwan Zainal Abidin said the South China Sea constitutes “4%” of the bilateral relationship between Malaysia and China at best. This statement comes as Malaysia has de-emphasized the South China Sea issue and reiterated its willingness to negotiate with China. In April last year, Anwar [said](#) he was willing to engage with China over its concerns that Petronas, a Malaysian energy state owned enterprise (SOE), was developing a carbon capture project in the Kasawari gas field, an area which both countries lay claim to. Anwar was criticized by domestic opposition for allegedly validating China’s claim to the area, to which Anwar defended that he was simply open to negotiations. Regardless of whether the barb was true or not, Anwar continues to stress the need to negotiate with China and for Beijing to abide by the rules of the ASEAN Code of Conduct.

The problem is other claimant countries, certainly the Philippines, may not see negotiations as the best way forward in countering China’s activities in the South China Sea. Under Bongbong Marcos’ leadership, Manila has u-turned from its previously closer ties with China under the Duterte’s administration. An escalation in confrontations between Manila and Beijing in recent months has been reflected in increasingly worrying rhetoric from both sides. Marcos [warned](#) that any Philippines citizen who died due to a “willful act” would be treated as very close to an act of war, referring implicitly to recent Chinese maneuvers around the Second Thomas Shoal. Philippines defense secretary Gilbert Teodoro [added](#) that the South China Sea issue was “existential” for the country, a far cry from Malaysia’s attitude towards the dispute.

The stark divergence in Kuala Lumpur and Manila’s approaches, and by extension between Manila’s more forthcoming position and ASEAN’s non-interference stance is generating critical implications for intra-ASEAN ties and relevance of the organization. Manila is no doubt diversifying its sources of security and seeking the support of regional and global powers that might support its claims when ASEAN has shown itself to be hesitant to. The Philippines is increasing defense training with the US and purchasing more

weapons from them, as the US has reestablished itself as a key security partner for Manila following a brief withdrawal issue during the Trump administration. At the same time, Manila is [wooing](#) the EU as European Commission president Von der Leyen pledged to strengthen maritime security cooperations with the Philippines. This statement was punctuated by discussion of defense deals with the Netherlands and Norway.

In the region, Teodoro has also been hard at work, [meeting](#) with the South Korean and Singaporean defense ministers at the sidelines of the 21st Shangri-La Dialogue to strengthen security ties. Manila has shown that if ASEAN, and especially an ASEAN led by Malaysia in 2025, will not back its position, the country will sidestep it and look elsewhere for concrete support. These crevices are also not temporary and specific to just current leaders in power. As nationalism in the region grows over the South China Sea claims and global powers like the US and China prepare to court allies in their budding confrontation, differences between ASEAN member states on how to manage the dispute will only widen. These differences may eventually resign ASEAN to inaction and impotence as the region scrambles to find new security arrangements.

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