



PHILIPPINE MARITIME SOVEREIGNTY AND THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

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President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. signs 2 key sea laws in a ceremony at Malacañan Palace on Nov. 8, 2024. Present to witness the signing were representatives from Congress, the Cabinet, and the Philippine Coast Guard. Credit: Noel B. Pabalate / PPA POOL

Why is it essential for the Philippines to strengthen its maritime strategy and engage in minilateral agreements to deter Chinese encroachment in the West Philippine Sea? The Chinese military expansion in the South China Sea (SCS) threatens the

Philippines' sovereignty, particularly over areas within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), known as the West Philippine Sea (WPS). The Philippines has long struggled to counter these advances, but the emergence of new minilateral alliances may signal a turning point. To protect its interests, the Philippines must prioritize security within these minilateral agreements and strengthen its maritime presence through routine patrols by the Philippine Coast Guard, Fishing Militia, and Navy. The recent adoption of the Philippine Maritime Zones Act and the Philippine Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act has even prompted China to adopt similar measures in disputed areas, a sign that China takes these actions seriously and is a promising step forward for the Philippines. With these strategies, the Philippines has a real chance to deter further Chinese encroachment. Without such efforts, however, the Philippines risks losing control as China continues to disregard international law, the rules-based order, and the 2016 SCS arbitration ruling.

Chinese Military Expansion

Since China announced its Nine-Dash Line, the Chinese have pushed back on the Philippines in the West Philippine Sea and are threatening the lives of the navy soldiers stationed on the BRP Sierra Madre, including the lives of people assisting with the resupply [missions](#). The intentional sinking of BRP Sierra Madre has become an enormous asset in the Philippines' fight to keep its territory. Still, it is only a matter of time before China finds a way to penetrate the Philippines' efforts. Therefore, the Philippines needs to secure minilateral agreements and focus on security within the WPS. China's military [power](#) has increased in the South China Sea as of March 2024, with seven large-scale land reclamation features, including an information collection sensor at the Bombay Reef in the Paracels. Furthermore, three runways, one of which is 3000 meters, dramatically increase the presence and capability of the Chinese Air Force. China's fleet of 716 warships vastly outnumbers the Philippines' 119, excluding coast guard and fishing militia vessels, making it an overwhelming challenge for the Philippines to confront alone. However, time is scarce, and China's militarization of the South China Sea is not stopping while the Philippines is increasing its naval and coast

guard capabilities. Therefore, if the Philippines wants to secure its maritime sovereignty, help is needed.

Chinese Excessive Use of Force

While China is expanding its military and increasing its nuclear arsenal and the size of its navy, it is also becoming increasingly aggressive with new ways to use force without labeling them as armed attacks. From lasers to water cannons to cutting off body parts, nothing seems to be off-limits as long as they can refer to it as Capt. Xiaobo Liu said in the Manila Dialogue “law enforcement operations”. Moreover, China appeared to be more desperate after the United States, Japan, and the Philippines had created their [minilateral](#) agreement, the presence of QUAD, and the AUKUS. This could be a sign that minilateral agreements are having a significant effect on China’s expansion. Therefore, it seems that for China to continue its expansion, states must be weak and alone. Scarborough Shoal was lost after the United States told the Philippines to stand down in their standoff with China in [2012](#). Currently, the Scarborough Shoal is being protected by China through various techniques, including coast guard ships and patrols, [floating barriers](#), and its fishing militia. While at the Second Thomas Shoal in the south, China is ramming Philippine ships, blasting them with water cannons, boarding and seizing their equipment, and [harming](#) the personnel.

Mini-lateral Agreements

In April 2024, the U.S.-Japan-Philippines triad was announced to bring together allies and partners to stabilize the region amid China’s aggression. Just a few weeks later the SQUAD including the former states and Australia emerged. This is a terrific opportunity to deter China in the WPS and regain its sovereignty with the help of the United States and Japan. The Philippines should make sure this new minilateral agreement focuses on the security of the WPS, which could also inspire other claimants of the South China Sea to follow in the Philippines’ footsteps, while further increasing bilateral agreements within the ASEAN sphere. With the presence of Japan, Australia, and the United States, China can no longer act recklessly and will be subject to more scrutiny

from the minilateral agreement states if they overstep. Also, China would have to be careful not to invoke the Mutual Defense Treaty between the Philippines and the United States.

Domestic Legislation

Ferdinand Marcos JR signed the Philippine Maritime Zones Act and the Philippine Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act on November 8th, 2024. The signing of these laws prompted an immediate response from China, which condemned the legislation and established similar maritime zones around shoals within the WPS. These laws, however, create an opportunity for the Philippines to further legitimize its claims, while also confirming the rules-based order and UNCLOS. While the PRC cannot seem to contextualize what the Nine-Dash-Line is or what the Nine-Dash-Line encompasses, the new legislation in the Philippines sets clear and justifiable claims to the WPS.

Conclusion

To conclude, to be able to deter the Chinese military expansion in the WPS, the Philippines needs to leverage its minilateral agreements to secure the WPS. These efforts, along with its new legislations, will bolster its sovereignty claims and improve its chances of regaining control over currently Chinese-occupied areas. These efforts send a clear message to China that the Philippines is firm on having a rules-based order and stands alongside powerful allies and partners committed to stabilizing the region. With strategic cooperation, the Philippines can more effectively defend its maritime rights and promote a lawful, rules-based approach in the South China Sea.

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