



**RESURGENT FILIPINO NATIONALISM
AMID CHINESE AGGRESSION IN THE
WEST PHILIPPINE SEA**

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Photo: A Chinese Coast Guard ship using water cannon against a Filipino resupply vessel heading towards the disputed Second Thomas Shoal. Source: Philippine Coast Guard/Handout via Reuters

Existential threats and external enemies hold great potential in bringing together polarized factions even within divisive societies. The Russian invasion of Ukraine that began in 2022, for example, further [consolidated](#) Ukrainian national identity and rallied more Ukrainians around the national cause of total independence from Russian hegemony. Comparably, a stronger sense of [national unity](#) emerged among Israelis in the aftermath of the October 7th attack by Hamas. In the Philippines, however, attitudes towards Chinese territorial incursions vacillated over time. While Filipinos held middle-of-the-road sentiments

toward China in the past, most are now standing up to Chinese aggression within Philippine territory.

The oscillation of Filipinos' sentiments mirrors the Philippine government's hemming and hawing over its official stance towards China. After the Philippines clinched a favorable [arbitral award](#) in 2016, a landmark victory that rejected China's nine-dash-line claim, whatever gains the Aquino administration had achieved were undone during Rodrigo Duterte's regime. Duterte's [pivot to China](#) and closer ties to Beijing downplayed tensions in the West Philippine Sea and worsened the country's national security woes. Reversing his predecessor's foreign policy, Marcos Jr. has since been projecting a more calculated opposition against China. To sustain this effort, however, the unwavering support of the Filipino public is needed to shroud his policies with legitimacy and at least keep disruptive dissent at bay.

At the start of Marcos Jr.'s presidential term in mid-2022, a nationwide [survey](#) found that almost 9 in 10 Filipinos agreed that Marcos Jr. should strongly assert the Philippines' territorial rights in conjunction with the 2016 arbitral award. In his inaugural [State of the Nation address](#), Marcos Jr. vowed that he would not abandon even a square inch of Philippine territory to any foreign power. At the [Shangri-La Dialogue](#) in Singapore this year, Marcos Jr. enthusiastically proclaimed that "the life-giving waters of the West Philippine Sea flow in the blood of every Filipino. We cannot allow anyone to detach it from the totality of the maritime domain that renders our nation whole." The consistency in Marcos Jr.'s pronouncements not only calls out China's illegal actions at sea but more pointedly ignites a nationalistic fervor among Filipinos.

Filipino nationalism, while directed at safeguarding the Philippines' sovereignty and territorial integrity, is well-grounded in international law and geared towards promoting and strengthening a rules-based international order. At the inaugural iteration of the Manila Dialogue on the South China Sea in early November, the zealous yet tempered Filipino nationalism took center stage. Former Philippine Supreme Court Justice Antonio Carpio, one of the dialogue's panelists, emphasized in his [remarks](#) that

when China seized Scarborough Shoal in 2012, the Philippines did not respond by sending its marines to reclaim the shoal, but by sending its lawyers to the Hague to challenge China's nine-dash-line claim. Justice Carpio underlined the fact that by refraining from using force to resolve the maritime dispute, the Philippines adhered to and upheld the rule of law.

Along the same lines, the [panel](#) on the Philippines' maritime transparency initiative as a countermeasure against foreign malign influence operations unpacked how such efforts have been effective in exposing Chinese aggression in the West Philippine Sea. Commodore Jay Tarriela who is at the helm of the transparency initiative highlighted that the same has been instrumental in uncovering the ugly truth about China's behavior at sea, which in turn reorients the Filipino public's opinion about China. The initiative's success, according to Tarriela, can be measured by the fact that it has fostered a "united stand" among Filipinos regarding the West Philippine Sea issue, so much so that a recent Pulse Asia [survey](#) found that 73 percent of Filipinos will not support pro-China candidates in the 2025 midterm elections. Countering false information about the West Philippine Sea issue reframes the narrative in favor of the Philippines and its legal and rightful pursuit of its national interest.

The resurgence of Filipino nationalism surrounding the West Philippine Sea issue is more palpable today than it used to be. Nothing better illustrates this phenomenon than the formation of the civilian-led initiative *Atin Ito* (translates to English as "this is ours") Coalition. Composed of a multi-sectoral corps of civilian volunteers, the coalition has so far conducted two [supply missions](#) that delivered food and fuel to Filipino troops and fishermen in the Spratlys. The coalition's tangible display of nationalism aims to ["civilianize"](#) the highly militarized disputed waters while inspiring a renewed sense of citizenship among Filipinos.

Riding the tailwinds of resurgent nationalism, the Marcos Jr. administration has been deliberately taking huge leaps in strengthening the Philippines' capabilities in defending its territory. Marcos Jr. recalibrated the country's [National Security Policy](#) (2023-2028) spotlighting the West Philippine Sea

issue as a primary national interest. The modernization program of the armed forces is in full steam while the overall defense sector along with its coast guard will have [increased](#) budgetary allocations in 2025 to bolster the country's defense capabilities. On the legislative front, the recent [enactment](#) of two key pieces of legislation, namely the Philippine Maritime Zones Act and the Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act, reflect the Philippines' resoluteness in coming to terms with China's intimidation. These laws incorporated vital components of the 2016 arbitral award into the domestic legal framework and complement the country's efforts to secure its sovereignty and sovereign rights in contested territories.

Imperial powers have succeeded in the past by dividing people and conquering their lands. As it was in the past, the same holds true today. Fragmented nations cannot stand a chance against the hegemonic ambitions of great world powers. Yet, animated by nationalist zeal and united by a shared sense of identity and a common goal, countries like the Philippines are more capable of defending themselves than they thought they could.

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