



***BETWEEN SILENCE AND SPOTLIGHT:
STRATEGIC RETHINKING REGIONAL
TRANSPARENCY IN THE SOUTH
CHINA SEA***

BY SIU TZYY WEI

Siu Tzzy Wei is a Senior Research Associate at the Global Awareness and Impact Alliance (GAIA), a non-profit organization headquartered in Brunei Darussalam. Wei's research interests lie mainly in the geopolitical and maritime security concerns of Southeast Asia and the South China Sea, particularly in understanding how national factors influence the international system structure and vice versa. Her work has been featured on Fair Observer, CSIS Indonesia and Pacific Forum. As an alumna of YSEALI, ASEAN Korea Center, and a Pacific Forum Young Leader, Wei is presently a GKS Scholar pursuing her Master's in International Relations at Ewha Womans University, Seoul, South Korea.



Photo: Journalists report as a Chinese coastguard ship blocks the path of the Philippine coastguard's BRP Sindangan trying to enter the Second Thomas Shoal in the disputed South China Sea on March 5, 2024. Source: Associated Press

Under the leadership of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., maritime tensions between the Philippines and China now follow a dangerous

rhythm. With determination to change Duterte's much more passive approach towards navigating challenges in the South China Sea following the [2016 Arbitration Award](#), the Philippines Coast Guard (PCG) has adopted a "[transparency initiative](#)", publicizing China's unlawful incidents through patrol footage and official statements to expose coercive behavior and, in extension, shape international perception. Since then, direct confrontation, blocked resupply missions, and the deployment of water cannons have become the new norm for the PCG; one encounter even escalated to Filipino Navy sailor Jeffrey Facundo losing part of his [thumb](#) in a physical scuffle.

In PCG spokesperson Commodore Jay Tarriela's words, the transparency initiative holds [two key objectives](#) for the Philippines: first, in "educating" Filipinos about the territorial disputes, correcting past misinformation, and fostering national unity and second, in "securing international support" for the Philippines' position. Claiming early [success](#), the Philippines now [challenges](#) other ASEAN claimant states to move beyond what it sees as regional dormancy and stand behind the transparency initiative more actively. However, while greater transparency may serve as a tool for accountability, the assumption that it should take a uniform and securitized form risks overlooking the nuanced and calibrated diplomacy that many Southeast Asian countries rely on. As such, the critical nexus of this debate arises: does regional transparency serve more effectively as a shared principle or a shared tactic?

At the recent Dialogue on ASEAN Maritime Security in Manila, Tarriela pushed for ASEAN claimant states to demonstrate [more support](#) for the transparency initiative. While this appeal is framed as a convincing call for ASEAN to move past [growing polarization](#) towards regional solidarity, it is important to understand that the transparency initiative is not designed as an ASEAN-wide mechanism, nor was it intended to forge consensus across growing diversity in the region. Rather, the initiative [reemerged](#) from the Philippines' own efforts to adopt a "name and shame" strategy - most notably through former President Benigno Aquino III's [2013 arbitration case](#) under UNCLOS, which sought a ruling by the Permanent Court of

Arbitration on the validity of China's expansive maritime claims. By documenting and publicizing the Philippines' experiences in the West Philippine Sea, the transparency initiative aimed to reinforce the Philippines' legal position and shape international narratives vis-à-vis its claims within the South China Sea.

While the transparency initiative has some relevance in the Filipino context, critics argue that it has had limited impact in generating reputational costs for non-compliance and lacks the structural design to serve as a prescriptive model for other ASEAN states. In this light, the Philippines needs to understand that the strategic postures of other ASEAN claimant states - cautious, quiet, or even deliberately ambiguous- are also meticulously measured to their own domestic, diplomatic, and economic realities in tandem with their bilateral relations with China. As such, asking these states to align with the Philippines' reactive, high visibility approach risks, at the very least, undermining those calibrations. While the PCG's call was principled, it is arguably idealistic if it fails to accommodate the region's strategic diversity.

The core challenge with a one-size-fits-all transparency model lies in its limited incentive structure for other ASEAN claimant states. Therefore, for transparency to gain regional traction, it must be compatible with ASEAN's long-held norms of non-interference and consensus building, allowing states to contribute in ways that align with quiet diplomacy rather than risk disrupting regional cohesion for the sake of uniform action. For countries with significant economic interdependence with China, like Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei, joining a high visibility exposure campaign aimed solely to support the Philippines in their own objectives carries clear political risks and few gains.

It is important, though, not to overstate the impact of economic interdependence; dependence on Chinese trade, investment, or tourism does not necessarily equate to economic vulnerability. Vietnam, for example, continues to actively defend its maritime claims through [quiet assertion and oil exploration](#) in contested areas like the Spratly Islands, despite being one of the region's most economically integrated partners with China. Malaysia, under the leadership of Prime Minister

Anwar Ibrahim, follows a similar [path](#), while Brunei, notorious for being silent, preserves its claim with its own [two-pronged](#) balancing strategy. Such examples illustrate that while economic ties may shape bilateral responses, they do not necessarily predetermine submission to China. Economic interdependence with China should be understood not as a liability, but as part of a broader toolkit of regional diplomacy, pushing states to better calibrate their interests suited to their own definition of strategic space preservation in the current-day maritime reality.

As such, the Philippines' call for an ASEAN-wide transparency initiative based on their perceived successes requires careful consideration. While the initiative itself may encompass a spectrum of transparency tools that already exist, the public narrative has emphasized exposure and deterrence as primary goals, unintentionally risking the diplomatic calculus of more cautious states. Hence, the Philippines must ask itself one more question: what incentive exists for its fellow ASEAN member states to adopt the initiative?

For an ASEAN-wide transparency initiative to evolve effectively, it must remain flexible, non-prescriptive, and most importantly, sensitive to varying risk thresholds. A uniform methodology should not be the goal; perhaps a more durable path in gaining genuine traction is to avoid prescription and instead, create space for differentiated participation. Southeast Asian states, if and when willing, can contribute through various modalities—environmental monitoring, backchannel coordination, legal filings, or limited data sharing. Alternatively, minilateral cooperation can also be considered, coupled with options for observer status or technical partnership roles for less publicly engaged states. In doing so, a regional transparency initiative built on this flexible, multi-speed logic stands a better chance for all parties to achieve multiple goals at once: fostering collective awareness, fueling maritime resilience and respecting sovereignty without forcing strategic convergence amidst the already volatile waves of polarity, all broadening the initiative's appeal without demanding strategic alignment.