



MANILA'S TRANSPARENCY INITIATIVE: A STRATEGY FOR DETERRENCE?

BY PHILIP ALEGRE

Philip Alegre is currently a Non-Resident Vasey Fellow at the Pacific Forum. He was part of the 2022 cohort of the US-Philippines Next Generation Leaders in Security Initiative. In 2022, he completed the Security Sector Governance and Reform Program of the Folke Bernadotte Academy of Sweden and more recently graduated from the Yeosu Academy on the Law of the Sea in South Korea in 2024. His research interests include maritime security, Philippine-US alliance, and Philippine foreign policy. Connect with him on LinkedIn: @Philip Alegre



Photo: Chinese Coast Guard vessels fire water cannons towards a Philippine resupply vessel Unaizah May 4 on its way to a resupply mission at Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea, March 5, 2024. Credit: REUTERS, Adrian Portugal, File Photo

Since its adoption in 2023, the Philippines' Transparency Initiative has become a defining feature of Manila's response to China's expansive and coercive behavior in the West Philippine Sea. Through an information campaign that includes publication of videos and images, actively exposing false narratives, and debunking

disinformation, the initiative has sought to expose China's aggressive actions against Philippine vessels legally operating within the country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

The strategy has drawn international attention—and mixed reviews. Critics question its [effectiveness in deterring](#) China's maritime assertiveness, and some argue it has escalated tensions with Beijing unnecessarily. Others point to the relatively more subdued approaches of other ASEAN claimants like [Vietnam](#) and Malaysia, suggesting that Manila's assertive information strategy is doing more harm than good for the Philippines.

These criticisms raise important questions – is the Transparency Initiative failing, or are critics measuring its success using the wrong yardstick? Do the risks warrant shutting down this transparency approach?

The Question of Deterrence

Many observers gauge the effectiveness of the Transparency Initiative based solely on whether it has succeeded in deterring Chinese aggression. The underlying assumption is that by exposing China's actions to the world, international pressure will build and reputational costs will increase, compelling China to restrain its behavior. However, the effectiveness of this logic depends heavily on Beijing's strategic calculus of its national security interests.

Beijing views the waters within its so-called “nine-dash line” not just as a geopolitical interest but as something integral to its sovereignty and national identity. This makes its South China Sea posture uniquely resistant to outside pressure. China has proven willing to weather diplomatic costs — whether in response to the 2016 arbitral ruling or international statements of condemnations — to sustain its maritime operations. It is, therefore, no surprise that despite the Philippines' public disclosures, China's operations from water cannon attacks, intentional collisions, to persistent maritime militia shadowing and blockades have continued with little visible restraint. Yet the calls to shut down the Transparency Initiative all

together on these grounds alone may be analytically shortsighted.

The June 17 Incident

A significant moment came on June 17, 2024, when China Coast Guard (CCG) [intercepted](#) and physically blocked a routine Philippine Rotation and Resupply (RoRe) mission to the BRP Sierra Madre at Ayungin Shoal (Second Thomas Shoal). The confrontation, [captured on video](#) and widely circulated by the Philippine government, revealed a highly aggressive posture by the CCG – ramming the Philippine supply vessel, brandishing bladed weapons, seizing firearms, and destroying equipment, including maneuvers that led to one Filipino soldier losing his thumb.

The diplomatic aftermath was telling. Amid mounting international backlash — including [condemnations and expressions of serious concern](#) from the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan, France, and the European Union — Manila and Beijing quietly [reached a “Provisional Arrangement”](#) to prevent similar future incidents. While the details remain undisclosed, subsequent RoRe missions proceeded without untoward incidences.

This episode illustrates two critical dynamics. First, it demonstrated that China, for all its aggressive posturing, does not seek uncontrolled escalation. Beijing has displayed a high tolerance for tensions but wouldn’t want the situation to spiral out of its control. China still sees value in managing tensions and maintaining regional stability. Second, it demonstrated that the Transparency Initiative, while unable to deter provocations, can help generate political pressure for Beijing to recalibrate and consider alternative approaches on certain situations.

A Form of Strategic Communication

Rather than viewing the Transparency Initiative as a strategy for deterrence, it may be more accurate to understand it as a form of strategic communication to achieve multiple objectives that underpin the Philippines’ position in the West Philippine Sea.

First, it galvanized international support. It provided a basis for stronger alignment for allies, partners, and like-minded nations which have responded with statements of support, expanded joint patrols, greater intelligence-sharing, and greater interest to develop cooperation initiatives on defense and security.

Second, the initiative has served an important domestic purpose. It increased the Filipino’s awareness on the issue which [rallied national support](#) around the Philippines’ maritime claims and defense posture. It facilitated greater allocation of resources and resolve from Philippine officials to defend the country’s territory.

Third, the Transparency Initiative has placed the moral burden on China. Even if Beijing does not alter its behavior significantly, each aggressive act caught on camera chips away at China’s narrative of “peaceful rise,” “responsible power,” and “win-win cooperation.” This reputational damage, while slow to accumulate, has real consequences in shaping the strategic environment.

Fourth, it has helped shift the frame through which the West Philippine Sea is viewed—not merely as an isolated dispute between China and Southeast Asian claimants but [as a broader challenge to international norms and the rules-based order](#) — one that all countries has a stake in.

Risks of Transparency

That said, the Transparency Initiative is not without risks or costs. There is always a danger that overexposure without tangible responses may breed domestic cynicism or international fatigue. Moreover, the reliance on transparency can complicate backchanneling initiatives. While Manila has been careful not to rule out quiet engagement with Beijing, highly publicized incidents can narrow the political space for compromise and make crisis management more difficult.

Most importantly, for transparency to be sustainable, it must remain strategic. It must be viewed as a component within a broader national security strategy. Correspondingly, it is also more

effective when used with the right calibration, and concomitantly with other tools and instruments of national power, be it military, legal, diplomacy, political, or economic power.

Ultimately, the Philippines' Transparency Initiative represents a pragmatic response by a middle power confronting a more dominant neighbor. It is a strategy born of necessity, not naïveté—leveraging information to offset disadvantages in military capability, diplomatic clout, and economic power.

It has not stopped China's illegal, coercive, aggressive, and deceptive maritime operations, nor was it ever likely to. But it has achieved more subtle victories. What is necessary now is to learn from previous experiences and apply the lessons to come up with an improved and evolved transparency approach in the West Philippine Sea, one that carefully balances asserting Philippine sovereignty and sovereign rights, while maintaining peace and stability in the region.

Disclaimer: *The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of any institution or organization to which the author is affiliated.*