



TRUTH IN TROUBLED WATERS: THE PHILIPPINES' TRANSPARENCY INITIATIVE AND ASEAN'S DILEMMA

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Photo: US aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt (CVN-71) and several escort ships sailed in the South China Sea in a display of America's naval might during the Chinese sea drills. Credit: SunStar File Photo

During the inaugural meeting of the [Dialogue on ASEAN Maritime Security](#), the Philippines presented its [transparency initiative](#) to other states in the region as a model for dealing with China's aggressive and coercive behavior in the South China Sea. However, it was met with apprehension from representatives - even among claimants Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia.

This tepid reception reflects deeper regional complexities. When it comes to the contested area, claimant states have to deal with various complexities, including US-China competition, bilateral relations among major powers, regional security and the 'ASEAN Way', and their national

security agenda. Vietnam has a [policy](#) of "cooperation and struggle" wherein cooperation means acknowledging Vietnam's autonomy. Vietnam has chosen to [downplay incidents](#) with China concerning territorial disputes. Malaysia has done the same in [understating](#) Chinese aggression, particularly when it comes to gas fields in its claimed territories. Recent developments have [not spurred any change](#) in Malaysia's policy. Malaysia [reaffirmed](#) its unchanging position, considering economic relations and the Chinese diaspora in the country. Brunei has been [labeled](#) a "silent claimant" and has decided on [active cooperation](#), such as in oil and gas, rather than following its neighbors in balancing defense and cooperation.

The Transparency Initiative

The [transparency initiative](#) is the Philippine government's strategy to control the narrative and expose China's coercive and unlawful actions in the South China Sea. While the coinage of the term has been popular under the current administration of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, the grand strategy of 'naming and shaming' has actually been popularized under Former Benigno Aquino, through the filing (2013) and successful win (2016) of the arbitration award, which nullified China's nine-dash line claim and unveiled its illegal actions in the South China Sea. Under the Marcos administration, the transparency initiative's goal has been to intentionally record and publish its clashes with China whenever and wherever they occur in Philippine-claimed territory.

The Philippines has endured the brunt of Chinese aggression at sea for years. There is a [long history](#) of confrontation between the two states, with a continuous uptick of incidents in [2024](#) and in 2025, as China operationalizes its gray zone tactics against the Philippines. A Filipino scientific survey bound to Sandy Cay, a coral reef in the Spratly Islands also claimed by Vietnam, was [suspended](#) in January after the fisheries vessels were harassed by Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) ships. Later in mid-April, the CCG released [footage](#) of a landing conducted on the reef with a Chinese flag raised, alluding to its occupation. But this was [debunked](#) by the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) when they conducted a landing of their own.

In March, there was a [water cannon attack](#) by the CCG against a resupply ship bound for Second Thomas Shoal. This happened [twice](#) in the same month. The Philippines publicly [called out](#) China for its “refusal to abide by international law.” In May, the CCG aggressively interfered with two civilian Philippine vessels conducting a routine marine scientific research mission in the vicinity of Sandy Cay. This has been condemned [publicly](#) by the government, followed by the reiteration of its claims and rights under international law. More recently, two CCG vessels were seen [shadowing](#) a Philippine civilian ship and PCG vessels en route to Pag-asa Island.

An analysis on the [pay-offs and trade-offs](#) of the transparency initiative notes its success in garnering international solidarity and support from major regional powers. It has also been a means to garner strong domestic public approval for the government’s efforts to defend the country’s national interest. However, if the long-term goal of the initiative is to make China halt and step back from its illegal actions at sea, recent data and interactions between the Philippines and China mentioned above show that relying on transparency alone remains to be insufficient. Dialogue remains strained and the two countries are pushed to harder stances.

Telling the Truth, Standing Alone

The international community cannot blame the Philippines for being the “loud” one in ASEAN. As a small state, it has been trying to use all the possible tools in its arsenal in the face of China’s economic and military prowess. Early this year, during the [10th Bilateral Consultation Mechanism](#) in the South China Sea, the Philippines reiterated its willingness to engage in dialogue and diplomatic and pragmatic cooperation. At the same time, it is utilizing ASEAN as a regional platform by [pushing for the conclusion](#) of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

Unfortunately, even after decades of disputes, ASEAN claimant states are still fragmented when it comes to dealing with China and the South China Sea. The transparency initiative has incrementally strengthened the Philippines’ position and upheld regional security in Southeast Asia, but it lacks the

support from the regional group that would have given the transparency initiative more teeth. ASEAN as a group has endeavored to [maintain neutrality](#) and keep to the [ASEAN Way](#) of non-interference and respect for individual sovereignty. While this way has its own merits, it is important to note that progress is slow and has [not improved](#) regional unity or regional security.

To protect its interests and secure the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, China cannot be expected to yield to anything perceived as Western-led. It will, however, respond to and negotiate with its neighbors, especially those with whom it wants to preserve good relations. ASEAN must present itself as a regional grouping worthy of China’s respect: indivisible when it comes to international laws that protect peace and order. An incursion on the sovereignty of a member-state should be seen as a sign of disrespect and offensive to the sovereignty of the entire ASEAN region. It is therefore the [responsibility](#) of all members to come to the support of any of the claimant states when their territories are violated by Chinese vessels. Silence can be perceived as weakness and fragmentation.

The transparency initiative must not be seen as a means to shame and close doors to cooperation with China. It is about the truth of what is happening in the South China Sea and calling a spade a spade. If there are no illegal and aggressive actions to report, then China would have nothing to be ashamed about. Philippine House of Representatives Speaker Ferdinand Martin Romualdez, at the 4th ASEAN Leaders Interface with Representatives of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, [stated](#) that ASEAN “must move as one”.

The transparency initiative of the Philippines will be more effective if it is backed by the international community, especially ASEAN. With a strategy based on exposing the truth and protecting a rules-based order, the Philippines should be able to bank on the support of its neighboring states, particularly those that experience the same violations in sovereignty and incursions in their exclusive economic zones. After all, it is for the region’s and the smaller states’ benefit to keep great powers in check.

The challenge for the Philippines is how it would convince its neighbors to stand by its side, the side of the truth and international law. This would be a Sisyphean task without other Southeast Asian countries diversifying their economies to lessen dependence on China, preventing economic ties from compromising not only national but also regional security. As a whole, ASEAN is challenged to act with coherence and credibility. Will the bloc stay divided, or will it finally be able to negotiate as one with China?