



***THE EVOLUTION OF THE
PHILIPPINES' COAST GUARD
DIPLOMACY***

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Amid [recurring confrontations](#) from the [China Coast Guard \(CCG\)](#) and maritime militia in contested waters, the Philippines [has shifted](#) its tactics by deploying Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) vessels instead of Philippine Navy forces and assets. This approach [aims](#) to avoid the escalation of tensions and signal that the country is not seeking to heighten hostilities. However, PCG has long struggled with [limitations](#) in capabilities and equipment, affecting the ability to protect its maritime sovereignty. The most practical way for the PCG to be modernized is through external assistance provided by foreign countries. In that context, the country has sought to promote coast guard cooperation and cultivate a sophisticated three-tiered network of coast guard cooperation.

The Philippines' coast guard network has two primary objectives. First, it aims to [reduce overdependence](#) on the US by diversifying ties with other countries. This is something that was learned when the US [abandoned](#) the Philippines in the Scarborough Shoal disputes in 2012. Second, it seeks to deter maritime coercion by strengthening operational interoperability and enhancing its coast guard capabilities. The Philippines is also sending a clear diplomatic message that it is not isolated in its resistance to unlawful maritime behavior by pursuing political alignment with like-minded partners who support the rules-based order.

At the core of this network are like-minded states and territories along the first island chain. The US has assisted the PCG for several years through security guarantees, [vessel provision](#), joint [exercises](#), and information-sharing mechanisms. The US [has expanded](#) the scope of defense commitments to include armed attacks on PCG in the South China Sea under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty. Washington recently also [pledged](#) 450 million pesos to support the modernization of the PCG. Japan plays a similarly vital role as a political partner and the largest vessel provider to the PCG. Twelve of the PCG's 25 largest vessels were [supplied](#) by Japan, and Tokyo [has agreed](#) to provide five additional multi-role response vessels for PCG under loan assistance from the Japan International Cooperation Agency. These partnerships are also bolstered by growing [trilateral coordination](#) among the PCG, US Coast Guard (USCG), and Japan Coast Guard (JCG).

The Philippines has also turned to the Republic of Korea (ROK) as an emerging maritime partner. This partnership is considered a component of Washington's strategic objective of building an interconnected network of maritime allies from the East China Sea, down the Taiwan Strait, to the South China Sea, to enhance collective maritime security and uphold a rules-based order. In December 2024, the Philippines and the ROK [signed](#) an MOU on coast guard cooperation during former President Yoon Seok Yeol's visit. ROK shipbuilders, especially HD Hyundai Heavy Industries, which previously [secured](#) a contract to deliver 10 warships to the Philippine Navy, [are expected to](#) contribute to the modernization of the PCG fleet. South Korea will likely continue to provide financial assistance to the Philippines to maintain its shipbuilding industry. However, future collaboration could face hurdles, as the newly elected administration of Lee Jae Myung appears [less devoted](#) to the Indo-Pacific strategy pursued by its predecessor. Taiwan is a quiet but exceptional case to pay attention to in the future. Despite the Philippines' adherence to the "one China" policy, growing unofficial cooperation between the PCG and Taiwan's Coast Guard Administration (CGA) has become [visible](#) in recent years. Recent sources [reported](#) that joint coastal patrols have occurred in the Bashi Channel between the CGA and PCG. While carefully calibrated to avoid

provoking Beijing, such efforts nonetheless reflect Manila's pragmatic approach to maritime cooperation. Experts [say](#) this is a strong signal the Philippines sends to Beijing that miscalculations at sea could escalate into incidents and disrupt the supply chain.

In the second layer, the Philippines strengthens coast guard cooperation with neighboring South China Sea claimant states to foster a united front and regional capacity-building efforts. For example, the Philippines has [tightened](#) maritime cooperation with the Vietnam Coast Guard. The two sides [signed](#) an MOU on coast guard cooperation and established a hotline communication mechanism. The Philippines is [negotiating](#) to achieve an MOU between PCG and the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency. The Philippines [continues](#) to engage Brunei to explore areas for future cooperation between the two countries' coast guards. However, the prospects might be more limited, as Brunei's pro-China stance has made it a less active participant in regional maritime cooperation.

Code of Conduct (COC) negotiations face many difficulties, leading to the Philippines prioritizing bilateral interaction among Southeast Asian claimants to limit undesirable encounters with them in the South China Sea. The Philippines also integrated this bilateral network into a multilateral cooperation network, such as the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum and initiatives such as the [SEA-PEACE](#) to establish standard rules of engagement and build mutual trust among regional coast guard agencies.

In the third layer, the Philippines has expanded its network to include extra-regional supporters such as Australia, India, Canada, and France. These are countries that all want to engage more in Southeast Asia and can support the improvement of the PCG's maritime capacity. Australia has [committed](#) PHP110 million worth of maritime surveillance technology and drones, underscoring its growing role in the Philippine maritime domain awareness. India [signed](#) an MOU with the PCG to facilitate joint exercises and best practice sharing in 2023. Most recently, the decision by the Philippines and India to upgrade their bilateral ties to Strategic Partnership [has further strengthened](#) cooperation between the two countries's

coast guard forces. Unofficial sources also suggest that the Philippines has shown [interest](#) in the Indian-designed Next Generation Offshore Patrol Vessel for PCG. Through these partnerships, the Philippines may [integrate](#) into broader frameworks such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad"), which has expressed interest in coast guard cooperation through the "Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Mission." Canada also boosts its footprint in Philippine maritime security by offering technology such as the [Dark Vessel Detection Program](#). France has [agreed](#) to supply 40 additional vessels to the PCG, representing one of its most extensive security engagements with the Philippines.

The Philippines' coast guard cooperation strategy aligns with the Marcos administration's evolving foreign and security policy. In the State of the National Address 2025, there may be a softness in Marcos' words when it comes to the South China Sea issues, which [is said](#) to be in preparation for 2026 when the Philippines holds the ASEAN chairmanship. As the Philippines prepares to chair ASEAN in 2026, these cooperative efforts will strengthen its security posture and support regional confidence-building efforts to contribute to a more resilient and effective maritime security architecture.

While taking a more pragmatic and less confrontational stance, the coast guard cooperation strategy aims to build long-term capacity and foster resilience, allowing the Philippines to strengthen maritime governance, enhance its deterrence posture, and promote a vision of shared responsibility among regional and extra-regional actors.

Nevertheless, the increasing presence of multiple forces from the Navy to the Coast Guard of extra-regional countries could further complicate the situation in the South China Sea. Manila must retain leadership over operations conducted within its own maritime jurisdiction.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.