



PUBLIC MANDATE VS PRAGMATISM IN MANILA'S SOUTH CHINA SEA STRATEGY

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The Philippines is currently caught in a persistent tug-of-war between two kinds of competing pressures. While internal pressures are pushing Manila toward a firmer stance in response to China's coercive actions at sea, contemporary geopolitical realities require the Philippines to pursue a pragmatic approach in dealing with its superpower neighbor to preserve strategic stability and safeguard its economic interests.

Domestically, Manila's strategic calculus in the South China Sea is anchored in security concerns. The Philippines can no longer afford to take a passive stance in the light of China's [mounting assertiveness](#) within its exclusive economic zone. Manila is now compelled to pivot toward a more assertive posture as way to project [deterrence](#) and prevent coercive practices from becoming normalized.

Beyond these security imperatives, public sentiment is another factor that defines Manila's policy decisions in the South China Sea. In contrast to former president Rodrigo Duterte's [appeasement](#) stance, the Marcos Jr. administration, upon inauguration in 2022, deliberately shifted back toward a [firmer balancing posture](#) and [reaffirmed](#) the 2016 South China Sea Arbitral Award as a legal anchor it cannot afford to abandon. The South China Sea is as much a domestic battlefield as a foreign one.

As the public grows intolerant of Beijing's actions at sea, small signs of concession or silence can easily be framed as weakness or a betrayal of national interests.

A recent survey by Pulse Asia found that [68%](#) of Filipinos support continuing to publicly expose China's coercive activities in the West Philippine Sea, even as the country holds the ASEAN chair. The Marcos administration's firmer approach in the South China Sea thereby acts as a strategic lever for political legitimacy, allowing Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to project an image of resolute leadership

while reinforcing his political legacy in contrast to his predecessor's more accommodating posture.

While internal dynamics tend to favor a more robust response, there are still persuasive reasons to engage China pragmatically. On the one hand, the Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea between China and ASEAN, despite its slow progress and profound differences, remains one of the few long-term [conflict management mechanisms](#) in the South China Sea.

The Philippines' current playbook of shoring up alliances, stepping up defense cooperation, and employing "assertive transparency" is a double-edged sword. While it builds deterrence, it could [narrow](#) diplomatic space needed to achieve a breakthrough in COC negotiations with Beijing.

On the other hand, economics quietly but powerfully shapes Manila's room for maneuver. China remains one of the Philippines' largest trading partners and its [largest source of imports](#). This gives Beijing [potential leverage](#) to use its economic statecraft to pressure Manila in the South China Sea issues.

A deeper vulnerability lies in the Philippines' [heavy reliance](#) on imported energy. As geopolitical shocks from the Iran war in the Middle East increase the risk of energy supply disruptions, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has signaled that a potential "reset" in relations with China may be inevitable and [opening the door](#) to joint gas development in areas of the South China Sea, while [attempting](#) to keep economic cooperation separate from sovereignty disputes. The Chinese side also signaled its [openness](#) to restart such talks, but lawmakers, experts, and fishermen's groups [have expressed](#) concerns about this agreement. Meanwhile, pragmatists, such as security analyst Chester Cabalza, advocate [for](#) pursuing the "vast oil reserves" with a pragmatic approach towards China, and some senators [back](#) the idea.

The talks about resuming energy cooperation, which [reemerged](#) in 2023, are clearly not a reactive shift but part of an evolving policy trajectory. This approach, however, [encounters](#) considerable constitutional and political obstacles.

The situation is particularly complicated, considering the 2016 Arbitral Award, which weakened the legal foundation of China's maritime claims in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, nearly a decade later, Beijing continues to ignore the Award and [urges](#) Manila to acknowledge the "reality" of overlapping claims, despite China having no legal basis under UNCLOS to generate maritime entitlements that could overlap with the Philippines' EEZ. As a

result, a mismanaged re-engagement might be interpreted as a quiet acceptance of Beijing's illegal claims, which could jeopardize the 2016 legal victory. In this delicate landscape, any joint oil and gas exploration must be carefully managed to reconcile national sovereignty with potential economic benefits.

While neighbors like [Vietnam](#) and [Indonesia](#) offer potential templates for managing China, the Philippines' deeper security alliance with Washington and more frequent and direct maritime confrontations with China make these models difficult to replicate.

The Philippines is now at a real crossroads. Beijing is unlikely to accept terms that are consistent with Manila's interests, and domestic politics, constitutional requirements, the 2016 Arbitration Award, and its alliance with the United States continue to [constrain](#) Manila's room for making a deal.

Consequently, Manila should adopt a flexible, multi-layered approach centered on strengthening its strategic autonomy to minimize its vulnerabilities.

This flexibility means Manila can stay at the negotiating table with China, but only if any agreements are consistent with the Philippine Constitution and the 2016 Award. Simultaneously, the Philippines should must take the initiative to [diversify](#) its energy talks with like-minded nations to secure its supply.

More importantly, the Philippines needs to accelerate the development of strategic autonomy through a multi-layered strategy including maintaining its legal principles, managing alliances effectively, strengthening defense capabilities, sustaining domestic political support, and diversifying economic and energy supply chains.

Of all the paths available, this is the only sustainable one if Manila wants to avoid being forced to trade its sovereignty for economic interests.

In the short term, the Philippines should lean into partnerships with countries like [Japan](#) to tackle the immediate domestic energy supply shortages. This is crucial because even if a deal with China were signed, the years required for exploration and commercial extraction mean it couldn't solve current crisis.

In the long term, working with other like-minded partners is the way forward. However, this demands a sufficiently strong defense capability to protect energy projects from the risk of Chinese coercive activities at sea. Regional history [shows](#) that South China Sea coastal states can indeed keep their oil and gas rigs running despite Beijing's pressure. Vietnam's success in expanding energy ties with Japan [proves that](#) partnering with nations that share strategic interests can effectively shield against unilateral regional aggression, offering a valuable blueprint for the Philippines.

A cornerstone of the Philippines' strategy should and must always be its unwavering adherence to international law, particularly the 2016 Arbitral Award.

Approaching its 10th anniversary, the 2016 Award remains a strategic asset for the Philippines. The Award not only invalidates China's excessive claims and strengthens the sovereignty, sovereign rights, jurisdiction, and legitimate interests of coastal states such as the Philippines and Vietnam, but also raises the diplomatic and political costs of any unilateral moves by Beijing. Remaining committed to this ruling without making strategic compromises would not solve the Philippines' short-term energy needs, but remains the most viable path for preserving legal integrity, maintaining strategic credibility with like-minded partners, and preserving long-term cooperation with the United States, Japan, Australia, as well as international energy investors. It would also

avoiding the creation of unfavorable precedents for other claimant states.

Manila's South China Sea policy should be far from a dualistic choice between confrontation and compromise, but rather as the result of a process of constant recalibration between the heat of domestic demands and the international environment.

The Pilot commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Please write to rob@pacforum.org for more information on how to contribute.