

Ebb and Flow: A Strategic Analysis of China's Assertions and the Philippines' Response

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Abstract

The article aims to examine the developments of the geopolitical tensions between the Philippines and the People's Republic of China (PRC), focusing on the South China Sea (SCS). The issue of sovereignty in the South China Sea is a major flashpoint for all stakeholders, implying its contemporary strategic relevance. The Philippines declared its position when it filed an arbitration case with the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) against China in 2013, alleging the Chinese assertion of sovereignty over the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of the Philippines. The unanimous award in 2016 was in favour of the Philippines, but it did not change the Chinese approach in the region. The evident increase in daunting standoffs since then, over the Second Thomas Shoal, Mischief Reef, Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal highlights the Philippines' determination to protect its sovereignty. The paper aims to explore China's assertive actions in the region through the lens of Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism. The differences over off-lying islands, overlapping EEZs, proliferation of maritime boundary disputes and conflicting claims of sovereignty on islands and reefs are the key areas of contestation. The recent water cannon incidents between their respective vessels suggest the need for external balancing in the region. China continues to build its military might, enhancing power projection in the South China Sea and reflecting its persistent disregard for the SCS Arbitration ruling.

Keywords: China, Philippines, South China Sea, Scarborough Shoal, EEZ

Introduction

China significantly dwarfs the Philippines in almost every aspect including geographical size, population, economic power, military power and global influence. The PRC has obvious dominance, underscoring the profound disparity that shapes its roles on the world stage. The core of this research revolves around the interactions of these two nations in the South China Sea, which further shapes the future of the region and highlights the Philippines' evolution of response to China. China's actions are a clear embodiment of Mearsheimer's Theory of Offensive Realism, which posits that states inherently strive for domination and hegemony. Core assumptions about the behaviour of states include self-help, power maximisation and outgroup fear. States are disposed to competition and conflict because they are self-interested, power maximising and fearful of other states. In line with this theory, China's actions can be seen to be leveraging its offensive capabilities to expand its influence and establish regional hegemony.

In *China's Unpeaceful Rise*, Mearsheimer explores how China's ambitions for regional hegemony are reflected in its assertive actions in the South China Sea, particularly as it seeks to solidify its influence within ASEAN. Mearsheimer argues that the mightiest states strive to establish hegemony within their region while ensuring that no rival great power dominates another region. Moreover, it argues that states are obliged to behave this way because doing so favours survival in the international system. He further posits, "an ideal world for any great power would be to be the only great regional hegemon in the world", as regional hegemony is as close to global dominance as a great power can come.¹

In his work, "A Sea of Troubles? Sources of Dispute in the New Ocean Regime"², Barry Buzan discusses China and Vietnam in the context of the Spratly Islands. He highlights that there are also other claimants to the Spratly Islands, and he argued that any further movement on the dispute in the South China Sea depended on China's actions.³ China's 2015 Defence White Paper titled '*China's Military Strategy*' mentioned 'overseas protection' and "you fight your way and I fight my way", highlighting that China is bothered by the complex environment of the South China Sea because of external presence.⁴ Although the 2019 Defence White Paper highlights the 'national defence policy system', with a relative decrease in the percentage of the defence budget, the muscle-flexing tone in this document warns against Taiwan's independence

and the US' involvement in regions which China claims as part of its sovereign territory.⁵ The White Papers have consistently maintained vagueness on China's defence expenditure, the uncertainty of which results in inaccuracies, on the rapidly increasing capability of the PRC. Furthermore, the launch of China's next-generation aircraft carrier, *Fujian*, emphasises the Prisoner's Dilemma in the South China Sea, underscoring the difficulty of achieving cooperation at the expense of collective stability in the region.

The trajectory of the Philippine response to China, reflects a complex interplay of domestic, regional and international factors. The evolution of its responses can be identified by various drivers, and shows an increasingly stronger response by the Philippines. The initial diplomatic exchanges over the territorial disputes were still optimistic, focusing on multilateral negotiations for regional stability and actively seeking economic cooperation. The effort by the Philippines to take a stand while sensationalising the SCS Arbitration did not make China retreat. President Rodrigo Duterte, during his tenure, pursued closer economic ties, emphasising infrastructural investments. However, this economic pragmatism was received with domestic criticism over undermining national sovereignty. On the contrary, President Marcos Jr. is assertive and values Manila's security ties with Washington more than the flow of development funds from Beijing. Although the US is cautious about opening a new front due to its global commitments, the Philippines is a strategically significant partner in the Indo-Pacific if the US seeks to counter China.⁶ Additionally, Manila hosts the only US Veterans Administration regional office outside the US. Over the recent years, the Philippines has adopted a stronger stance, as seen from its increasing military presence in the disputed region, criticising China's actions internationally, and deepening security ties with the US and other allies.

The diplomatic relations between the Republic of the Philippines and the People's Republic of China were established in June 1975.⁷ However, territorial disputes in the West Philippine Sea escalated since the Scarborough Shoal naval standoff of April 2012. The relations further took a hit with issues such as Chinese illegal occupation, unlawful establishment of infrastructures and incidents of incursion and encroachment within the Exclusive Economic Zone of the Philippines. A major point in the worsening of relations was the Philippines' government filing of an arbitration case against China under UNCLOS in January 2013,

challenging the legality of China's '9 dash line' claim over contested waters and its further conclusion against the latter having no historic right and legal basis for the same.

The economic relations between the two nations are, however, robust. In 2021, China had jumped to become the second-largest export market for the Philippines and had already been the largest trading partner for six years. It is also the third-largest market for Philippine agricultural exports.⁸ The economic dependence of the Philippines on the PRC does not work in its favour. Out of the three types of security systems by Alexander Wendt, China's behaviour aligns with the competitive kind, where states identify negatively with each other's security, often identified with mutual suspicion and prevalent strategic rivalry, rather than cooperation or indifference.⁹ While China and the Philippines share areas of convergence, particularly in economic cooperation and regional stability efforts, significant divergences persist, especially regarding territorial disputes in the South China Sea and security concerns. These issues create a complex and often volatile relationship, where economic and strategic interests frequently clash with sovereignty and defence priorities.

“Standoffs” and the Current Situation

China signed the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982 and ratified it in 1996, two years after the Convention entered into force, with a reservation clause on sovereignty issues. It was through this reservation clause, the PRC denied the legitimacy of the Hague Arbitral Tribunal when the Philippines presented the case against China, regarding the South China Sea dispute in 2013. and to reject its verdict in 2016.¹⁰

The Permanent Court of Arbitration had based the award on the 'no representation approach'. The award regarded PRC's absence as the nation having no proof and thus awarded the judgment in favour of the Philippines. The PRC declared the award of the Permanent Court of Arbitration as null and void based on such an approach. The PRC is attempting to impose on the Philippines its version of the territorial sea in the SCS. This unilateral move is further complicated because the "islands" that the PRC controls are not recognised as natural islands and thus do not give it the rights to territorial waters or EEZ in the region.¹¹

The initial Mischief Reef incident in 1995,¹² where the Philippines was alarmed by the occupation of the island (which is a low-elevation atoll) by the PRC. The reef is less than 200 km away from the Philippines' Palawan Islands and therefore falls under the territorial seas of the Philippines.¹³ This was the first time that China had occupied a reef that was claimed by an ASEAN country. In an attempt to resolve their differences, a *Joint Statement on PRC-RP Consultations on the South China Sea and on Other Areas of Cooperation* was subsequently signed on 10 August 1995. Despite this, in January 1999, the Chinese again undertook construction of structures on another part of the Mischief Reef.¹⁴ The Second Thomas Shoal, which is also a Low Tide Elevation (LTE), has the BRP Sierra Madre grounded on it since 1999. Important locations with proximities to claimants are: the Second Thomas Shoal which is 194 kilometres from Palawan Island of Philippines; the Scarborough Shoal, a triangle-shaped atoll, mostly submerged, is 220km away from Luzon Island of the Philippines; Whitsun Reef is a boomerang shaped reef, 320km from Palawan Islands and 1000km Hainan Islands/also claimed by Vietnam.¹⁵ Notably, the Scarborough Shoal witnessing recent incidents, has been stated by the UNCLOS as an LTE¹⁶, maybe a rock too so it does not even have an EEZ.

The PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson presented China's persistent stance on the sovereignty of *Ren'ai Jiao* or Second Thomas Shoal. Even though it falls in the territorial waters of the Philippines according to the UNCLOS, the PRC is adamant on its claims and considers the docking of BRP Sierra Madre as illegal. The sovereignty over these islands could be useful while claiming rights for exploration and extraction of resources around the designated territories.¹⁷ Under the Section 2 of UNCLOS, the limits of territorial waters for the states are clearly stated. Therefore, considering the proximity of these disputed islands to the Philippines, the PRC's claims have no legal basis, as was proved in the arbitration case.¹⁸ Furthermore, Article 121 (3) of the UNCLOS states, "rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own shall have no exclusive economic zone or continental shelf", which was the case for most artificial islands built by the PRC as naval bases.¹⁹ The historical claims based on China's imaginary '9 dash line' are the only string it tries to pull, combined with its naval capabilities, to hold on to the resource-rich South China Sea region. The occasional water cannon incidents,²⁰ which have been increasing over the years, by the Chinese coastguard seem to be a way to gauge the reactions and support of the stakeholders

in the region. This also highlights the region's volatility and a pattern of the PRC's narrative building.

Despite the increasing friction, Chinese investments in the Philippines have not diminished. The Filipino islands continue to attract significant Chinese investments, particularly in the renewable energy sector. Additionally, a total of 164 Chinese companies/projects are registered with the Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA), generating over Philippine Peso 25.822 billion worth of investments (as of May 2023) and creating 16,221 direct jobs (as of March 2023).²¹

External Balancing

The Philippines has a long-standing Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) with the United States, which was signed in 1951 and serves as a cornerstone of its external balancing strategy. The Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA)²² signed in 1998 facilitates the presence of US military forces in the Philippines for joint exercises and training. This agreement is crucial for enhancing the Philippines' military capabilities, readiness, interoperability of both Philippine and the US forces, and serves as a deterrent against Chinese expansion in disputed areas. While the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) signed in 2014 allows for the rotational presence of US troops in Philippine military bases and the prepositioning of defence equipment for eventualities, including humanitarian assistance. Until March 2023, the US has allocated over \$82 million for projects at the five existing EDCA locations.²³ The US' iron-clad commitment to the Philippines, and its narrative building of China as a bully through social media, will garner support from US' allies to sideline China economically.

It is in the interest of the Philippines to increase its interactions with the larger South and East Asian region. The 2022 BrahMos missile deal with India and its eventual delivery in 2024 mark a good start for the defence interactions between the two nations, reflecting Manila's growing interest in strategic diversification and regional security collaboration.²⁴ As EAM Jaishankar's visit to the Philippines in early 2024 can be seen as India's support towards the Philippines' sovereignty. This deal would not only boost India's credibility in ASEAN but also help the Philippines look for trade alternatives to eventually move away from China, and maybe towards QUAD partners.

Recent MOUs and naval exercises between the Philippines and Vietnam also serve as trust-building measures, especially as Vietnam was among the first to openly challenge China's actions in the region. These developments reflect an increasing emphasis on sovereignty against the Chinese narrative to draw attention from like-minded allies, rather than assert its claims. In 2024, the 'Balikatan exercises' — the annual joint military exercise between the Philippines and the US — were conducted for the first time beyond the Philippine territorial waters and into the South China Sea. This established a stronger posture amid rising tensions with the PRC. The Philippine Navy, the US Navy, and the French Navy also conducted a Multilateral Maritime Exercise in the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone.²⁵ Although a routine exercise, the geographic proximity to disputed waters could lead to further escalation, considering China is already on the *qui vive* of the EDCA being expanded to four more locations.

Mearsheimer had argued, 'if China continues its impressive economic growth over the next few decades, the US and China are likely to engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential for war. Most of China's neighbours including India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Russia and Vietnam- will join the US to contain China's power'.²⁶

While ASEAN's collective security framework is limited, the Philippines leverages its membership to rally regional support for a rules-based order in the South China Sea. ASEAN's involvement in the negotiations for the South China Sea Code of Conduct is a key element of the Philippines' attempts at external balancing, aiming to constrain China's aggressive actions through multilateral diplomacy. China has been using economic tools like trade agreements, investments under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and development assistance as a means with ASEAN nations in exchange for some favourable stance on regional statements. Eventually, countries like Laos and Cambodia displayed qualms about delivering their side after the Philippines' stance on Chinese intrusions.²⁷ This pattern of economic incentivisation to cultivate political goodwill helps China advance its regional hegemony by gradually building alliances or neutralising regional opposition.

Recent incidents

There have been numerous incidents of Chinese Coast Guard vessels blocking refuelling missions towards BRP Sierra Madre, often even using high-pressure water cannons over the Philippines' vessels or coming dangerously close, to the one incident of a physical brawl between their respective personnel.²⁸ On 15 May 2024, a flotilla of about 100 mostly small fishing boats led by Filipino activists set sail for Scarborough Shoal. This group, which included a roman catholic priest, belonged to a non-government coalition *Atin Ito*, meaning “This is ours” in Tagalog. They planned to distribute food packets and fuel to Filipino fishers, and to deploy small territorial buoys with civilian boats sailing from the Philippines towards Thomas Shoal.²⁹ Events such as these indicate domestic pressure by the Filipinos on the government and their dissatisfaction with the failure on the diplomatic front, this could even cause political instability in the country and thus needs active measures to address the issues, including against the Chinese Coast Guards.

The 9th Meeting of the Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on South China Sea in Manila was held on 2 July 2024, where both China and Philippines recognised the need to restore trust, de-escalate tensions and discuss “mutually acceptable resolution”. The Filipino Department of Foreign Affairs undersecretary highlighted that, the talks ended while noting that “very significant differences remain”.³⁰ In early 2024, Philippines and Vietnam, the most vocal countries against growing Chinese dominance signed an MOU for more maritime cooperation.³¹ Later on, 9 August 2024, Philippines and Vietnam's coast guard exercise paved way for the first ever historic joint drill after they showed willingness to resolve overlapping claims over continental shelf.³² Later in August 2024, a Chinese aircraft executed a dangerous manoeuvre, which could be considered aggressive, over the disputed Scarborough Shoal, only adds to the growing list of incidents.³³

Conclusion

This paper focused on China's continued and intensified militarisation of the South China Sea, including the construction of artificial islands and the increasing presence of its military and maritime militia, has turned the region into a volatile hotspot. On an individual level, China can work towards presenting itself as a cooperative player. To summarise the evolution

of the Philippines' response to China, we can see the shift from a cautious diplomatic effort to a more comprehensive and intensified set of responses, including legal actions, public pressure and strategic importance of alliances. This reflects stronger retaliation by the Philippines, driven by heightened security concerns. The economic dependence of the Philippines on the PRC limits its ability to assert its interests in the face of Chinese assertiveness. To mitigate these vulnerabilities, it is crucial for the Filipino government to diversify its economic partnerships. The growing recognition of the strategic and economic importance of the South China Sea, particularly for fishing and energy resources, has made it imperative for the Philippines to protect its claims to enhance its strategic autonomy. While tensions prevail and skirmishes in the region seem unavoidable, the growing trade relationship suggests Manila's attempt to compartmentalise economic and political relations with Beijing, pursuing strategic autonomy while making space for economic cooperation where feasible.

Both parties want to protect their territorial sovereignty while maximising the utilisation of marine resources that come with the territory. The economic power and influence that China holds in the current world order translates to assertiveness, particularly in the South China Sea. While this may not necessarily imply an ulterior motive, it however reinforces the need for regional actors to develop strategies to effectively manage China's expanding presence to protect their interests. Perhaps close US allies and partners who have a common interest in the South China Sea, should at least try to coordinate or to synergise efforts for regional stability, as right now it seems to only bring the issue to a stalemate.

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About the Author

Ritika Sharon completed her undergraduate degree in Political Science and History from St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi, and holds a Master's in Defence and Strategic Studies from Panjab University, Chandigarh, along with a Diploma in Chinese Language. Her research focuses on the Indo-Pacific, with a particular interest in China's strategic behaviour in the South China Sea and its implications for regional security. Recently, she has been examining India's evolving geopolitical standing in the Indo-Pacific—its recent diplomatic engagements, strategic partnerships, and emerging role as a voice for the Global South. Ritika is keen to explore the overlapping interests of major Asian economies, maritime disputes, and the far-reaching consequences of strategic rivalries in the Indo-Pacific.

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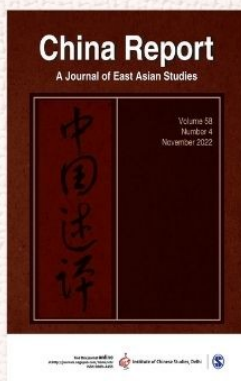


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