

## KARAGATAN OBSERVER | SECOND QUARTER 2023

### **Summary**

The Philippines continued to foster strong relations with the United States (US) through the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) and the conducting of extensive bilateral exercises, much to China's chagrin. Internally, the Philippines wrestled with internal disputes over maritime policy.

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### **Ironclad Philippines**

President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. had three notable diplomatic moments: he had a "successful" meeting with [Czech Republic Prime Minister Petr Fiala](#) in mid-April, commemorating 50 years of bilateral relations in October; he visited the US in early May and [reaffirmed the alliance](#) (a trip that was extended towards the United Kingdom for the [coronation of King Charles III](#)), and he attended the [42nd ASEAN Summit](#), wherein all ASEAN states recommitted to the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

Relations with the US flourished over the summer. During the Philippine-US [2+2 Ministerial Dialogue](#) in early April, plans were [finalized](#) for joint patrols, a "new focus" on long-term economic partnership, and the establishment of a [real-time information-sharing network](#) by the end of the year. Concurrently, the [largest Balikatan exercises](#) were held for three weeks in April and were "very successful". A ship was [reportedly sunk](#) as part of a new training designed for the drills.

Most notably, the Philippines had to [deal](#) with Chinese [reactions](#) to possible new sites for bases under the expansion of EDCA. President Marcos [assured](#) that these bases were meant for training and not for "offensive action." China took offense all the same. [Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines Huang Xilian](#) implicitly threatened Philippine overseas workers in Taiwan if the Philippines did not stop siding with Taiwanese independence. The National Security Council clarified in a [statement](#) that China was already made aware that the Philippines both strictly adheres to the One China Policy and that the proposed EDCA bases will not be used against China.

The Filipino backlash forced [the Chinese Embassy](#) to say that their ambassador's statements were taken "out of context". In late April, President Marcos announced that [more lines of communication](#) would be established with China to further prevent interactions that could be "misinterpreted."

After it was reported that China had [over one-hundred \(100\) ships](#) in the West Philippine Sea, the Philippines in mid-May placed [five buoys](#) within its exclusive economic zone. China [reacted](#) to this by sending ships and claimed to have removed them. The Philippine Coast Guard had to [clarify](#) that this was not the case for any of the currently ten deployed buoys in the West Philippine Sea.

### Fortifying Philippines

Security of the West Philippine Sea remains prevalent in the Marcos administration's rhetoric and relations. At the start of April, President Marcos said that the government was "very serious" about military modernization for security purposes. The Marcos administration has reached out to partners and allies to assist in this endeavor. The new EDCA sites were partially a means of [military infrastructure modernization](#). [Philippine Ambassador to the US Manual Romualdez](#) boasted that "our armed forces is going to be at par with other countries in our area" in about five years due to relations with the US and the new EDCA sites. Other states have also assisted: Czech Prime Minister Fiala pledged [support](#) for military modernization; as well as [Japan](#) and [Sweden](#); [Australia](#) pledged assistance to the Philippine Coast Guard and presence in the West Philippine Sea; and the [European Union](#) established a new dialogue on maritime security with Manila.

Military modernization has the support of the Senate. Senate President Juan Miguel Zubiri said that he will push for the modernization to be [included](#) in the National Expenditure Program (NEP) of 2024. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) has since [updated](#) its "wish list" of assets. According to Senate President Zubiri, as of late May, support in the Senate [remains](#) strong.

The economic security of the Philippines was also present. In early April, in compliance with a Supreme Court order, the government [suspended](#) the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) Fisheries Administrative Order No. 266 of 2020 (FAO 266), which mandated vessel monitoring systems. Reaction was [mixed](#) with local fisher groups celebrating and environmental groups condemning. Over time, [opposition](#) against the government's suspension grew. Pro-suspension groups [warned](#) that FAO 266's implementation would force commercial fishers to simply not fish, which would then affect the price of existing catch. However, anti-suspension groups [argued](#) that failure for the Philippines to abide by international standards of vessel monitoring will see an official demerit from organizations such as the European Union (EU). BFAR [reaffirmed](#) its support for the FAO 266 and its effectiveness in combating illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUUF). President Marcos [called](#) for "comprehensive studies" to address IUUF and emphasized the need to comply with international commitments, such as those made with the EU.

In late May, the House of Representatives' [bill on maritime zones](#) passed final reading.

## Analysis: Summer School Lessons

There is no question that the Philippines faces a range of challenges because of China. Yet this should not hinder any lessons from being learned from our northern neighbor. The chief of these lessons is China's unwavering proactivity. This is demonstrated in a number of ways.

First lesson is the reaction to the EDCA sites. Immediately, China **smeared** the US, rhetorically asking if its expanded role would incur "grave irreparable consequences". China doubles down on this rhetoric whenever its claims are **challenged** by either the US or the Philippines. The Philippines must do the same for *every* incident that China does upon its territory. This is in addition to official diplomatic complaints and transparency actions by publishing incursions. Official statements that condemn China must commensurately be done for as long as Beijing insists on its incursions in Philippine sovereign territory. The Philippines has a limited arsenal to defend its claims, and as a baseline, it must not proceed in an **irresponsible and reckless manner** that the Chinese do with its vessels.

Second, constant presence. While it is indeed reckless to endanger assets and personnel, it is imperative that the Philippines maintains a visible presence in its seas. It does this well with existing patrols and the aforementioned buoys. That is what makes it imperative that the Philippines address any existing logistics issues. Just as Taiwan signed a **deal** with the US for maintenance parts. Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen said it well when she **described** Taiwan as a "responsible risk manager". The Philippines needs the capacity and resources to maintain a constant presence, which can be aided by its partners and allies.

Third, if the Marcos administration is to strictly adhere to a "balance" of relations, improving the conduct of foreign policy is contingent on the refinement of the skills of Filipino diplomats in traditional and public diplomacy. The Philippines must do its best not to appear blatantly anti-China, even if that is principally true on the ground and even if China will label any defensive action against it as such. We must continue to adhere to the rules-based international order as **supported** by our allies. We must also attempt to economically diversify to reduce risks and limit overdependence on China, as the EU has **recognized** as a danger. This will also help the Philippines avoid becoming like **Cambodia** – the fellow ASEAN state backed by Chinese investments, thus providing some context to recent decisions such as being the **opposition** to an ASEAN-wide joint military exercise.

In sum, the Philippines should (1) emulate the rhetoric against any actions that violate its sovereignty, (2) address any shortcomings in providing constant presence in the West Philippine Sea, and (3) strengthen partnerships and alliances with improved diplomacy.