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Summary

The recent incident at Ayungin Shoal and the following reactions have shown the overwhelming dissatisfaction of world powers against China's continued aggression in the Indo-Pacific.

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Ayungin Shoal Incident

Ayungin Shoal, known internationally as Second Thomas Shoal, was the site where vessels from the Chinese Coast Guard [fired water cannons](#) at Philippine supply boats on Tuesday, November 16.

The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) released a [statement](#) wherein Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin conveyed "*in the strongest terms*" the outrage and protest of the Philippines. Support came from different parts of the world. The [United States \(US\) State Department](#) likewise released a statement and [accused China](#) of escalating the situation. [Australia and Japan](#) also expressed concern and strong opposition to the incident. The [European Union](#) expressed similar sentiments and called on adherence to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the passage of an ASEAN-led Code of Conduct.

China stood resolute on [its own claim](#) that it was the Philippines instead that was trespassing. National Security Adviser Hermogenes Esperon Jr. noted that Chinese ships in the area were "*unusual*" with 19 maritime militia vessels present for a week prior to the incident. Mr. Esperon also mentioned that there were at least 45 similar vessels near Pag-asa Island in the same week.

A week after the incident, National Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said that [resupply missions would resume](#) and that there was no need for an escort from the Philippine Navy or the Philippine Coast Guard

(PCG), despite [Chinese vessels remaining](#) in the area. [President Rodrigo Duterte](#), at the ASEAN-China Special Summit on November 22, condemned China's actions. He added that the only way out of this situation was through the rule of law.

Philippine Sovereignty as Non-Negotiable

Many presidential aspirants have voiced their support for the defense of Philippine sovereignty. [Senator Panfilo Lacson](#), [Senator Manny Pacquiao](#), [Mayor Isko Moreno](#), and [Vice President Leni Robredo](#) have all released statements on the importance of Philippine sovereignty, refusing to apologize for asserting our sovereign rights in the West Philippine Sea, general condemnation of Chinese activities, and for consistency in policy. This was likewise reiterated in a [pushback against China](#) in the days following the Ayungin Shoal Incident.

Most notably, Senator Lacson made a [public visit to Pag-asa Island](#) where he led a [flag raising ceremony](#) and spoke with military personnel and fisherfolk. Senator Lacson also said this visit pushed through [despite Chinese warnings](#) to stay away. Following the Ayungin Shoal Incident and his experience visiting Pag-asa, he filed a Senate [resolution condemning Chinese activities](#) within Philippine territory.

Philippine sovereignty has become a [non-negotiable issue](#). Senatorial aspirant Atty. Jose Manuel "Chel" Diokno has [called on the government](#) to have a consistent position regarding the West Philippine Sea. Senator Koko Pimentel announced that the Senate will begin discussions with international law experts on the [necessity of a Maritime Zones Act](#). A similar bill spearheaded by Representative Cyrille Abueg-Zalvidar [passed second reading](#) in the House of Representatives.

A New Cold War?

A few days before the Ayungin Shoal incident, on November 11 at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, Chinese President Xi Jinping alluded to a [new cold war](#). He said that the Asia-Pacific "*cannot and should not relapse into the confrontation and division of the Cold War era.*"

Throughout November, China has [condemned](#) the US-United Kingdom-Australia trilateral AUKUS as a "destabilizing force", especially regarding the [use of nuclear weapons](#), and [warned against US lawmakers](#) from visiting Taiwan as "eroding" the One China Policy. In a talk with US President Joe Biden, President Xi warned that the two needed to "improve communication" in light of the US "[encouraging Taiwanese independence](#)". President Xi also reassured ASEAN leaders that China [would not bully](#) smaller states.

As [the world has noted](#) in recent months, China's words do not correspond with its actions on the ground. US intelligence and analysts have noted that China is pushing its military on [multiple fronts](#) – from its [nuclear arsenal](#) to [advances in cyber-technology](#) (as noted in the US Defense Department's [2021 Report](#)). Aside from its actions at Ayungin Shoal, China [harassed an expedition](#) of Filipino scientists to Pag-asa. It has also stepped up [night bombing drills](#) in Hainan Island and [threatened Australia](#) after Australian Defense Minister Peter Dutton echoed [Japanese focus](#) on the [importance of Taiwan's defense](#). Satellite imagery has also detected China [building mock-ups](#) of US warships for war exercises. Above all else,

China's Communist Party passed a [resolution](#) that cements President Xi's rule, and his agenda, until at least 2027.

Concerns of an arms race amid a new cold war also extend to the recent activities of Russia and North Korea. Early in the month, Russia is reported to focus on [hypersonic missiles](#). North Korea is reported to be able to [produce more uranium](#) for its arsenal amid recent missile tests. UK Chief of Defense Staff General Nick Carter warned that due to the multi-polar nature of the world today, the [risk of an accidental war](#) between the West and its rivals such as Russia is greater than during the Cold War.

The actions of many states in the Indo-Pacific reflect the volatile multi-polar nature. US [President Biden](#) is said to have emphasized to Chinese President Xi the importance of the international system and a free and open Indo-Pacific region. German Navy Chief [Kay-Achim Schonbach](#) condemned China's claim over the South China Sea.

Japan's recent adjustments in its security policies are noteworthy. A [recent poll](#) reported that 58% of Taiwanese polled believed that Japan would come to its defense should China invade. The Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force joined with ships from the US, Australia, Canada, and Germany in its [ANNUALEX 2021](#) maritime exercise. [Japan and Vietnam](#) have solidified maritime capacity building as integral to bilateral cooperation. Japan has also announced that it was seeking to revise its [National Security Strategy in 2022](#) to accommodate developments regarding China and North Korea.

As previously mentioned, Australia has stated its [opposition](#) to Chinese bullying. [Southeast Asian states](#) have been increasing their maritime capabilities while simultaneously [balancing relations](#) with the US and China. China's elevation to "Comprehensive Strategic Partner" to ASEAN has brought expectations of [strategic alignment](#) between the two – one wherein ASEAN will not tolerate opposition to its vision.

Analysis

With sovereignty as a key issue, especially for the aspirants of the 2022 elections, amid the concerns and tensions of a "new cold war", the Philippines moves closer to a "whole-of-nation" approach to asserting its rights in the West Philippine Sea and in protecting itself.

The defense of Philippine sovereignty is waged on multiple fronts. On the ground, the PCG opened a [newly upgraded station](#) in Pag-asa Island. Culturally, the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB) [successfully ordered Netflix](#) to remove certain episodes of a political drama that showed the nine-dash line claim on a South China Sea map. Politically, aside from the previously mentioned measures on maritime zones, the legislature has taken steps to [revise](#) the PCG Law of 2009 to reform and reorganize the PCG.

Diplomatically, the DFA has issued [153 diplomatic protests](#) against Chinese activities in 2021 alone. Despite China's ignoring of diplomatic pressure, the Philippines is recommended to [continue the protests](#) to make clear the Philippines' rights and assertions. The DFA also [collaborated](#) with the German Embassy, inviting Prof. Dr. Rüdiger Wolfrum to discuss the 2016 Arbitration Award in an online lecture series.

Internationally, the Philippines continues to cooperate with neighbors in the maritime domain (i.e. [Indonesia](#), [New Zealand](#), [Vietnam](#)) and accept the aid of partners for military modernization and capacity-building (i.e. [South Korea](#), [Japan](#), [Vietnam](#), [Pakistan](#)). With China's growing assertiveness, Western allies are bound to be even more engaged in the region. President Xi's allusion to reverting back to Cold War era tensions must be considered as a warning against choosing sides. Ultimately, [adherence to the rule of law](#) remains to be the Philippines' best weapon.

It will be incumbent on the next administration to build upon these developments and positive trends. The priority should be to [retain the country's alliance](#) with the US and to consistently [reaffirm commitments](#) from both sides. These should be done under the umbrella of [a unifying vision](#) built from shared values. The same should be done with other allies and to deepen those relationships – such as with Australia as [previously argued](#) and with Japan. Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio said that relations between his country and the Philippines reached a “[golden age](#)” under the Duterte administration. Fostering this relationship and following Japan's example of [investing in its defense](#) must remain an integral part of Philippine foreign policy.