

KARAGATAN OBSERVER | FOURTH QUARTER 2023

Summary

2023 has seen the Philippines definitively step up its game in terms of defending its sovereignty. This is most notably seen in the fruits born from the renewed focus on the alliance with the United States (US), amid a “balancing” in foreign relations. However, this tangible show of security focus came as China likewise increased its activities.

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The Duty of Care

An [article](#) in early October described the Philippines as advancing “in the right direction” in terms of maritime priorities. It concluded by saying that the Philippines must approach issues in a multi-faceted manner, guided by sound policy, interagency coordination, and support from like-minded states. The Philippines appears to be keeping to this path if China’s increased resistance can be seen as evidence of it.

Over the last months of 2023, China has been party to several dangerous encounters. On October 22, there were [two separate incidents](#) near Ayungin Shoal wherein [Chinese ships collided](#) with Philippine vessels. The US responded by reiterating its [obligations](#) under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty. Later on November 10, a Chinese Coast Guard ship fired a [water cannon](#) at a Philippine supply vessel, prompting the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) to file a diplomatic protest, the 125th under the Marcos administration. By the beginning of December, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) reported [135 Chinese](#)

vessels near Julian Felipe Reef. A week later, on December 9, [multiple Chinese vessels](#) fired water cannons at resupply vessels bound for Scarborough Shoal. The European Union (EU) [remarked](#) that this was “provocative and dangerous behavior” by the Chinese. Despite increasing diplomatic backlash, China continued its campaign and several vessels were spotted [swarming Ayungin Shoal](#), only a few days after the incident.

The Philippines has not backed down. It has [augmented relations with Japan](#), in what National Security Agency Secretary Eduardo Año described as the “significant steps” in a “golden age” of bilateral relations. Japan has pledged to begin [negotiations](#) on a defense pact, and has upheld its promises for [supplying the Philippines](#) with assets, such as the recent long range radar. In mid-November, the Philippines was an [observer](#) for the first time in a Japanese-led naval exercise. Philippine relations with other states are bearing fruit as well. With Canada, Philippines now has access to [satellites](#) to track “dark vessels” (ships with intentionally inoperative location transmitters) and the [coastlines](#) are now a part of Canada’s Dark Vessel Detection System. South Korea, alongside Japan, joined the Philippines and the US in November’s [7th KAMANDAG Marine Exercise](#), wherein the British Armed Forces were present as observers for the first time. But defense is not simply in assets and exercises, but also in communications. In mid-December, the DFA and the United Kingdom’s Government Communications Services International conducted a [workshop](#) to improve the government’s communication of the Philippines positions in the West Philippine Sea.

The Philippines and the United States have seen a fruitful renewal of relations. A [prime example](#) of China has pushed states to the US. The two had the largest gathering at the [7th Sama Sama Exercise](#) with participants from Australia, Canada, France, Japan, Malaysia, and the United Kingdom. The US has agreed to [63 infrastructure projects](#) within all EDCA sites and to conduct [more joint exercises](#). US President Joe Biden has repeatedly reaffirmed his country’s commitment to the Philippines. In a joint [press conference](#) with Australia’s Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, President Biden described US commitments to the Philippines as “[ironclad](#)” in late October, and this was [reaffirmed](#) by his Vice President Kamala Harris. The US legislature, in a unique show of bipartisanship, has expressed “[unequivocal support](#)” for the Philippines.

Figuring Out China

China’s recent behavior, especially in December, has prompted fierce backlash among Philippine policymakers, particularly in the senate. DFA spokesperson [Ma. Teresita Daza](#) mentioned that the Chinese Ambassador Huang Xilian was summoned for the fourth time to answer for the incident. She also noted the “extreme” option of branding Amb. Huang *persona non grata*, as [proposed](#) by Senate President Juan Miguel Zubiri, is to be seriously considered. Former Supreme Court Justice Antonio Carpio [commented](#) that such an extreme measure should only be done after lower level members are expelled. Some members of the senate have [raised the option](#) for the Philippine Ambassador to China Jaime FlorCruz to be recalled.

While the Philippines continues to grapple with the additional options it can take to respond to China’s actions, it should be noted that China is not invulnerable to international pressure, and has, at times, bent the knee to save face. In October, China [warned the members](#) of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to remain or else lose high-quality yields. While it was [reported](#) that the Philippines left BRI later that month, citing doubt over China’s investments, the DFA [clarified](#) that this was not the case and that a Memorandum of Understanding was signed last January 2023. In early November, [China agreed to South Korea’s mandate](#) to have all fishing vessels keep their tracking devices on while in South Korean waters. Later that month, China agreed to [adopt a resolution](#) of the 31st Asia-Pacific Parliamentary Forum wherein UNCLOS is the basis of ensuring maritime peace.

Analysis: 2023 in Retrospect

The year 2023 was particularly turbulent as both the Philippines and China refused to back down from their respective positions. At no point throughout the year did the Philippines err in international behavior nor shirk away from its responsibilities and adherence to the rule of law. China acted inconsistently when it came to its rhetoric and its actions, while simultaneously increasing its aggression in contested waters. There is no figure among the Chinese of 2023 who embody this more than Amb. Huang Xilian.

During the [first quarter](#) of 2023, President Marcos visited China, the first leader China welcomed for the year **and** the president's first state visit to a major power. During that visit, amid more than two dozen bilateral deals, it was agreed upon that both states would pursue an amicable solution to issues within the West Philippine Sea. But China did not reflect this behavior for the PCG to see. There were swarmings around Ayungin Shoal and the notable green laser light incident, which prompted Amb. Xilian to be summoned for the first time.

In the [second quarter](#), the Philippines finalized the expansion of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) and, notably, established buoys in the West Philippine Sea. China reacted with blustering threats and lies, respectively. Amb. Xilian (implicitly) threatened Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in Taiwan if the Philippines did not stop, supposedly, backing Taiwanese independence. The EDCA sites, **somehow**, were seen by the Chinese as support bases for the Philippines and the US to back Taiwan. This was repeatedly debunked and clarified by Philippine authorities. Later on, the Chinese claimed to have removed buoys set up in the Philippine EEZ—a claim the PCG denied.

The latter half of the year is when events reached their climax. During the [third quarter](#), the beginning of a handful of water cannon incidents occurred near Ayungin Shoal (in which Amb. Xilian was again summoned), Chinese survey ships were spotted in the Philippines' eastern waters, near Philippine Rise, and the Chinese established a floating barrier near Scarborough Shoal (removed by the PCG a day after). Atop all these was China's misinformation campaign centered on BRP *Sierra Madre* on Ayungin Shoal.

Chinese actions reached the apex in the long-feared collision incidents of October. While there were no casualties, it has unfortunately pressed upon the national consciousness the seriousness in which China takes its claims over Philippine territory. And the Philippines must respond with the same seriousness, but it must do so in a responsible and exemplary manner. DFA Secretary Enrique A. Manalo and the Chinese foreign ministry reiterated the [importance](#) of dialogue. This must be fostered even as the Philippines continues to pursue an independent foreign policy, [unhindered and unbothered](#) by Chinese rhetoric.

All things considered, the Philippines has done well in 2023. It has expanded and strengthened its relations, particularly with Japan and Australia, and most notably restored its alliance with the US. The renewed alliance has already seen fruits in the largest joint exercises ever conducted, the expansion of EDCA, and repeated affirmations from top US officials. The [future of the alliance](#) is bright. The US Secretary of State Antony Blinken gave [one final reaffirmation](#) of this before 2023 ended. This is seen not only in the defense angle but in economic matters. President Marcos made a point of [visiting business leaders](#) during his second US trip, and announcing that the Philippines would [co-host](#) with the US the 6th Indo-Pacific Business Forum.

But fostering and maintaining fruitful foreign relations is just one aspect of the defense that the Philippines must foster. On the domestic front, the Marcos Administration did well to release its National Security Policy, to recognize the importance of legislation (Maritime Zones and Archipelagic Sea Lanes), and to actively detach itself from being unilaterally economically dependent on China. The government has also focused on advancing the Philippines as [a middle power](#): notably considered alternatives to supply and fund

military modernization, negotiating with partners on [additional joint exercises and patrols](#), and nurture [alternative economic ties](#).

The Philippines has learned many lessons and continues to grow in their application: (1) it has pushed back against false rhetoric and narratives, (2) it has learned the value of providing constant presence in the West Philippine Sea, (3) it has strengthened partnerships and alliances with improved diplomacy, and (4) it has seen how information can infiltrate the public and the culture. However, what the Philippines must foster, above all else, is national consciousness.

A “whole-of-society” approach means nothing if only certain aspects of society are involved. Already, we have seen that there is a civilian interest in protecting Philippine sovereignty from the Chinese. In December, a planned [Christmas convoy](#) made up of volunteers was intended to resupply coastline communities and “frontliners”, but was ultimately called off due to Chinese shadowing. This sort of peaceful and communal behavior must be encouraged and protected. “*Laban ng lahat*” is what the convoy wanted to convey. This not only bolsters the Filipino resolve to defend itself but serves as an application and example of our policy towards peaceful and diplomatic resolution to conflicts.

2023 has definitively shown that China cannot be taken at its word, that it will do whatever it can within its power to advance its agenda, and that it has no desire to meaningfully adhere to the standards and rules of the international community. Going forward into 2024 and beyond, the Philippines must present itself as the complete opposite. To that end, the Philippines must channel the lessons learned into definitive application, specifically in improving the national response to Chinese activities. Application will need strong initiatives and protocols established by the government, and this cannot be achieved without strong political will from all relevant stakeholders and from the public.

Should the Philippines succeed, it will have definitively established itself as a reliable and trustworthy partner; a state that is persistent, consistent, and adamant in protecting what lies under its sovereignty; and secure in 2024 and beyond the image of an exemplar e of justice and the rule of law.