

KARAGATAN OBSERVER | JUNE 2021

Summary

June has seen a continuation of both positive and negative trends. In a month that celebrates the 123rd anniversary of Philippine independence, commemorates the 46th diplomatic anniversary with China, and mourns the death of former President Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III, Filipinos continued to debate how the country should best defend and assert its sovereignty. In line with this, the Philippines joined the Indo-Pacific states as response to China’s incursions and the ongoing rivalry between China and the United States (U.S.) in the region.

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Date

1 July 2021

Recommended citation

APA: Gamboa, F.P. and Uy, M.C. (2021). “Karagatan Observer: June 2021.” *Amador Research Services*.

CMOS: Gamboa, Florence Principe and Matthew C. Uy. “Karagatan Observer: June 2021.” *Amador Research Services* (2021).

President Noynoy Aquino

Former [President Noynoy Aquino](#) died early morning of June 24. President Aquino spearheaded the implementation of the current military modernization and the filing of the arbitration case against China in the South China Sea, leading to a victory in 2016. A day before the president’s death, Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. declared in an official statement that the [arbitration award was final](#). He reiterated that the Philippines would reject any attempt to undermine it. Secretary Locsin also mentioned [President Duterte’s statement at the United Nations General Assembly](#) last year, wherein the president stated that the award was now a part of international law.

National Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana credited President Aquino for the military’s modernization through [Republic Act No.10349](#). The modernization continued under the Duterte administration. News of contracts and asset purchases are one of the trends that continued throughout the month of June. Early in the month, [a second batch of Blackhawk helicopters](#) arrived from Poland with a third batch scheduled before the end of the year. A day after the president’s death, the Pentagon announced its approval of [a potential sale](#) of F-16 fighter jets alongside two missile packages totaling \$2.5 billion dollars.

Asserting Independence

Prior to the president's death, the Philippines celebrated its 123rd Independence Day with an increased presence in the West Philippine Sea. The Philippine Navy welcomed its new Flag Officer in Command, [Rear Admiral Adelius Bordado](#), who said that he would continue his predecessor's projects and assured that the Navy had enough assets to defend the Philippines. The Navy deployed the [BRP Antonio Luna](#) on its maiden mission to Palawan, under the command of the Naval Forces West, responsible for protecting Palawan waters and the Kalayaan Island Group. On Independence Day, [a power plant](#) was activated on Pag-asa Island, reported to provide "round-the-clock" power to 68 facilities throughout the island.

However, the back-and-forth between the Duterte administration and its critics continued throughout the month.

President Duterte has vocally called out the U.S. on the issue of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA). He accused the U.S. of inaction regarding the [2012 Scarborough Shoal incident](#). As the President demanded an explanation from the U.S., former Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert Del Rosario pointed out that it was the [Chinese who broke the agreement](#) which was mediated by the U.S. Despite the president's lingering issues, Secretary Locsin revealed mid-June that the suspension of the VFA's abrogation was [extended for another six months](#). This comes after Philippine Ambassador Jose Manuel Romualdez said that [negotiations](#) are happening between the Philippines and U.S. for an improved VFA.

Meanwhile, administration critics such as former Supreme Court Justice Antonio Carpio has claimed that President Duterte is [violating the constitution](#) with his current security and foreign policy strategies. Justice Carpio has specifically criticized the President for how he is handling of the West Philippine Sea. This added to a statement he made [earlier](#) in the month wherein he said it was incumbent on the Filipino people to protest the President's "defeatist remarks". In that same statement, Justice Carpio called on the Philippines to join with the U.S. and its allies in freedom of navigation operations and conduct joint patrol agreements with neighboring states. His remarks aligned with fellow critic, former [Senator Antonio Trillanes IV](#). Senator Trillanes called on the Philippines to work alongside its neighbors for the sake of regional peace, adding that he believed the President was "compromised by China".

Others have called on the government to do more regarding the 2016 arbitration award. [Former Supreme Court Justice Francis Jardeleza](#) and two others drafted a bill entitled "Philippine Maritime Features of the West Philippine Sea Act", wherein individual features would be named and granted respective sovereignty rights, arguing that it would help the government enforce the country's claims. The Duterte administration took interest in this, ordering a [review of the proposal](#). However, Senate President Vicente Sotto III filed a bill aimed at [mapping the Philippines' maritime zones](#), wherein he similarly argued that declaring and defining the country's maritime zones would enforce maritime rights.

Responding to China's Incursions

Despite the backlash to its incursion in the Julian Felipe Reef last March, China continues to test the region. A report by [Simularity](#) on June 20 revealed that more than 100 additional ships were scattered throughout the Philippines' exclusive economic zones (EEZs). [Significant hotspots](#) include the Union Bank (where Julian Felipe Reef is a part of), Tizard Bank, and the vicinity of Pag-asa.

Malaysia also experienced an [incursion at the start of the month](#) when its air force intercepted 16 Chinese military aircrafts, 60 nautical miles off Malaysian Borneo. China claimed that the incursion was [routine training](#) to which Malaysia asserts was a breach of sovereignty. Half a month later, [Taiwan airspace](#) was also breached by 28 Chinese warplanes. This incursion came after China expressed [outrage at Japan](#) for referring to Taiwan as a country, a shift in the way Japan views China. A week after the incursion, Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu said that [Taiwan needed to prepare](#) for a military conflict.

Taiwan and Japan are not alone. The Indo-Pacific region has become increasingly suspicious of Chinese intentions given its blatant and repeated incursions. In Australia, [Defense Minister Peter Dutton](#) supports the increase of American military personnel and assets in the country. Defense Minister Dutton shared Foreign Minister Wu's concern for a potential conflict with China. In Southeast Asia, China is viewed to be [undermining its own vaccine diplomacy](#) by failing to establish any meaningful relationships due to its overt activities in the South China Sea.

Rivalry in the South China Sea

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin acknowledged to a U.S. Senate committee that China's behavior in the region could ["spark a crisis"](#). The U.S. has also expressed [specific concern](#) for a possible invasion of Taiwan. The Biden administration has taken steps to increase its presence in the region and to assure its allies - from expanding the [blacklist of Chinese companies](#) tied to the military to conducting [full ship shock trials](#) on its aircraft carriers.

The U.S. has also successfully brought the focus of its European allies on China. [At the G7 meeting, China hit back against](#) the attending state leaders agreed to plan a unified approach to China, which. However, the focus is not ironclad. While there is agreement to set up an alternative to China's Belt and Road project, some were [uneasy](#) to publicly antagonize China. Nevertheless, [NATO expressed concern](#) over China's "coercive policies" in the region.

In Southeast Asia, the U.S. is also facing problems at maintaining its public image. This is partially caused by the [Biden administration](#): which has omitted the Philippines and Thailand from its Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, snubbed Southeast Asian diplomats and leaders, and has held back its security alliance with the Philippines leading up to the VFA negotiations impasse. Regional states are also reluctant in overtly aligning against China. For instance, despite territorial disputes, the Philippines commemorated its 46th anniversary of diplomatic relations with China where Foreign Affairs Secretary Locsin called China a ["key economic partner"](#) and stressed the need for a Code of Conduct. Early in the month, [ASEAN and China](#) agreed to exercise "self-restraint" and to focus on the negotiations for a Code of Conduct. Yet it is also notable that [both parties](#) did not set a definite timeline for the negotiations. Foreign Affairs Secretary Locsin argued for strong language on the subject, but some states with close ties to China opposed it. [Regional states](#) have shown that they are not eager to openly align with either faction in the rivalry.

Analysis

With 2021 at the halfway point, the Philippines is not alone in its desire to safeguard its sovereignty and source of livelihood like many other countries caught between the U.S.-China regional rivalry. Balancing complicated ties that involve security and economic considerations remain to be a challenge. While development and prosperity are important, the potential for military escalation in the region remains to be a common concern among littoral states. The G7 states' alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative is also an opportunity that should not be missed by the Philippines. Preserving long-lasting defense ties such as the [VFA](#) and continuously improving the country's defenses

and capabilities are also necessary in the balancing act. It is imperative for the Philippines to not only consolidate individual relationships, as it had with [Indonesia](#), but to learn from the steps taken by its neighbors.

China and Indonesia entered a [submarine salvage operation](#), a complicated activity for any navy to undertake. While the reasons may be genuinely altruistic, there remains the concern that China could use this as a method of on-site information gathering. Malaysia's recent rare incursion by China has prompted an [analysis](#) of its air force. Malaysia and the Philippines share similar problems of an underpowered or outdated defense system with the responsibility of a large expanse of territory. It can also take cues from Vietnam's [expanding](#) maritime militia, to complement its official military forces. Japan has become more vocal in its support for a rules-based order and in maintain regional peace. The Philippines could maximize opportunities opened by [Japan's proactive voice](#) in standing up to China in its pursuit of enforcing the arbitration award and upholding the rules-based order supported by other Indo-Pacific states.

The Philippines can also take lessons from the Western allies.

The Pentagon 2022 budget has [realigned](#) to focus on innovations such as the hypersonic weapons program. The focus on specific assets rather than a broad range of systems would be cost-efficient. A potential investment is in underwater platforms. As [submarines increase in importance](#) for both the U.S. and China, it would be [beneficial](#) for the Philippines to also invest in [anti-submarine capabilities](#).

More closely to the region, a [study](#) conducted by the RAND Corporation on behalf of Australia's military revealed several gaps in Australia's defense capabilities. The report argued for the need for "Total Defense", wherein defense of the state is undertaken by the whole of society alongside the military. It argued that with the onset of gray-zone tactics and other non-traditional methods of war, an appropriate response would entail cooperation between different departments of government and between military and civilian populations, as well as to psychologically prepare the people for potential conflict.

Australia and the Philippines has a great deal to improve upon before it can achieve "total defense". However, if the Philippines can learn from its neighbors, be less dependent on China and is able to prioritize its defense and military needs, total defense is not impossible. Adaptation and innovation are essential in meeting this challenge. One first step already in motion is the use of the so-called "[Angels of the Sea](#)", wherein a unit of specially trained female radio operators will deter foreign vessels from entering with the goal of reminding them of their wives and mothers. Another good step is the [Archipelagic Coastal Defense](#) concept of the Philippine Marines.