

## KARAGATAN OBSERVER | OCTOBER 2021

### **Summary**

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### **Date**

1 November 2021

### **Recommended citation**

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

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

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### **Increased Pressure on Taiwan**

Half a month before news of China's hypersonic missile test was reported, China repeatedly intruded upon Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) with a **record number** of aircrafts. As of October 22, the **total number** of incursions is at 692. Taiwan has **accused** China of "damaging peace". The US State Department released a statement expressing its **shared** concern. **China**, after sending almost 150 aircraft over four days, then held the US as responsible for "raising tensions" The Global Times, a Chinese state-newspaper, **warned** that war could be triggered due to tensions over Taiwan. It went further to **dissuade** Taiwan from resisting reunification and **boasted** that no country will stand against China. A **senior analyst** at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute admitted the possibility of a major-power conflict occurring over Taiwan.

Taiwan has raised the alarm repeatedly during and after the incursions. **Foreign Minister Joseph Wu** warned that the island was preparing for war and urged allies such as Australia to increase intelligence sharing and security cooperation. **President Tsai Ing-wen** stressed that Taiwan's fall to China would "overturn a security architecture that has allowed for peace and extraordinary economic development in the region for seven decades."

Allies such as Japan have become **more vocal** in support of Taiwan. US President Joe Biden spoke with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the matter, reporting that President Xi agreed to abide by the "**Taiwan agreement**". President Biden then said during a **town hall** later in the month that the US would defend Taiwan. However, the White House made it clear that this was **not a change** in longstanding policy. Still, the US and its allies remained **concerned**.

The back-and-forth rhetoric increased in the days after the continuous incursions. Former Australian Prime Minister [Tony Abbott](#) visited Taiwan and slammed Chinese aggression. Australia's strengthening relationship with Taiwan has sparked a [Chinese backlash](#). President Xi [declared](#) that it is China's "historic mission" to reunite with Taiwan and lambasted the US and others for interfering in an "internal matter". President Tsai [responded](#) that Taiwan would not "bow to China".

Yet, despite the increased pressure, Taiwan's National Security Bureau Director-General Chen Ming-tong believes that the [probability of war](#) with China within the next year is "very low".

### Missiles from the North

North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un spoke of the need for an "[invincible military](#)" for [defensive purposes](#) to combat US hostility. A week afterwards, the country also [tested](#) a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), close to its naval shipyard in Sinpo, on the country's east coast. Its state media reported the next day that North Korea has made [advancements](#) in SLBMs that could widen North Korea's strike capability well beyond Northeast Asia.

### Interests in the Indo-Pacific

Debate over the regional implications of last month's launch of AUKUS (the trilateral partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) [continues](#). Malaysia, which criticized the new pact, hoped for an [ASEAN consensus](#) in responding to that pact that will equip Australia with nuclear powered submarines. Meanwhile, [Singapore](#) has changed its outlook on AUKUS, and expressed gratitude to Australia for its reassurance of AUKUS' goal of a "stable and secure" region. [France](#) has also softened its response, arguing that AUKUS was an opportunity for greater cooperation between the European Union and the US in the region.

Indeed, multiple states have begun to reinforce their commitments to the region, in pursuit of their individual or collective interests.

Early in the month, Malaysia [summoned](#) China's ambassador to answer for China's incursions in Malaysia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Malaysia noted that it expected an increased Chinese presence in its water due to a [Petronas oil project](#). The British [ignored](#) Chinese warnings upon entering the South China Sea. The UK Carrier Strike Group [remained deployed](#) to demonstrate support for international norms. However, while some states have taken a firmer stand against China, these responses are [not consistent](#) as is the case with both Malaysia and Indonesia.

In mid-October, Russia [reportedly denied](#) a US Navy destroyer from entering its territorial waters in the Sea of Japan. A few days later, ten naval vessels from [China and Russia](#) sailed near the Japanese mainland, after conducting joint naval drills. The drills were held in conjunction with a joint patrol which Russia's Defense Ministry [stated](#) was meant to show China and Russia's shared goals in the region.

Among the QUAD states, Japan has hardened its stance against China. For the first time since the Second World War, fixed-wing aircraft flew from a [Japanese warship](#) and for the first time in thirty years, its Ground Self-Defense Force conducted a [nationwide military exercise](#). Japan's new Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has [reaffirmed](#) commitment to the US alliance and announced the [reviewing](#) of Japan's National Security Strategy. Meanwhile, there is varied discussion on raising [Japan's defense budget](#). India highlighted that its [Act East Policy](#) intertwines closely with

ASEAN. In Australia, there is strong [political consensus](#) that China is a “significant threat” to the country’s national security. All the QUAD states participated in [Phase II](#) of the MALABAR 2021 exercise.

### Developments in the Philippines’ national security scene

The unofficial campaign period for the Philippines’ upcoming May 2022 elections began this month. Some are still calling on the current Duterte administration to [fulfill promises](#) made during the last presidential election in 2016. However, focus rests on the current slate of candidates, some of whom have made their positions clear. Manila Mayor [Isko Moreno](#) stated that he is open to brokering a deal between firms in the Philippines and in China for oil projects in the West Philippine Sea (WPS). He argued that half the oil gains would be used to fund the needs of the Philippine Navy while the other half would be sold locally. Vice President [Leni Robredo](#) took a firmer stance. While she is willing to work with China on areas with no dispute, she declared that no discussion on the WPS would take place unless China honored the 2016 Arbitration Award.

Meanwhile, the Philippines continues to strengthen its defense capabilities.

The Department of National Defense (DND) attempted to acquire [two strategic sealift vessels](#) to enhance landing missions and transport tasks and welcomed the arrival of [several assets](#) from the US and from Poland and its first ever [surface-to-air-missiles](#) from France. Support from and cooperation with other countries such as [Australia](#), [Canada](#), [Indonesia](#), and [Turkey](#) were also warmly received by the Philippines.

The US remains a reliant partner for the Philippines and for the region. From the first ever [joint coastal defense exercise](#) between the countries’ Marine Corps to [casualty care training](#) for the Philippine Coast Guard, the Philippines has endeavored to [maximize its cooperation](#) with the US. It is expected that the two can resume [full-scale](#) Balikatan Exercises in 2022.

The Philippines also continues to foster maritime cooperation with other regional actors. The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) conducted a [seminar with Australia](#) and a [dialogue with Japan](#).

All these are primarily aimed at deterring states from intruding upon the Philippines’ EEZ and sovereign territory. The DFA announced that it was filing yet another [diplomatic protest](#) against China for “over 200 radio challenges” by Chinese vessels. While it is noted that Chinese radio challenges [appeared to cease](#) after the DFA’s announcement, Chinese presence lingered. The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative announced the “[there and back again](#)” routine of Chinese ships within Philippine waters. Chinese ships, despite their decreased numbers, merely transfer from one area to another while remaining within the Philippine EEZ. The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources previously [expressed concern](#) over the large number of foreign vessels in the WPS, the majority of which were Chinese Maritime Militia. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) has announced that it is [ready to act](#) on a joint-WPS fisheries plan primarily to support Filipino fishers.

In non-security news, AUSTAL Philippines in [Balamban](#), Cebu – the “Shipbuilding Capital of the Philippines” – completed its largest multihull ship. An expansion of the facilities is expected to begin in January 2022 with the completion set for December 2023. Early in the month, a research team from the UP Marine Science Institute began the [refurbishing](#) of the Pag-asa Island Research Station – this [concluded](#) on October 25th.

## Analysis

The controversial inauguration of AUKUS, coupled with the continued debate of implications over the Afghanistan debacle last August, has shown that the Philippines needs to carefully consider concrete steps in maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. This is needed more as China continues to advance militarily.

The world was stunned when both China and North Korea made the airwaves about missiles. In August, China is [reported](#) to have test-launched a hypersonic missile, catching United States intelligence by [surprise](#). A hypersonic missile can move at greater speeds and could potentially bypass standard missile defense systems. It could also potentially carry a nuclear warhead. This has sparked concern of a [new arms race](#). US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs [Mark Milley](#) said that the test was “*almost like a Sputnik moment*”, alluding to the beginning of the space race with the Soviet Union. This, along with North Korea launching SLBMs, contributes to the anxiety and instability that undermines peace in the region.

The irony is that Chinese state-run Global Times [claimed](#) AUKUS to be more of a destabilizing factor rather than a uniting one. Creation of the pact has allowed the region to re-evaluate the status quo and individual alliances in a new light. States like Malaysia and Indonesia have pushed for ASEAN to have a [unified approach](#) to the issue and to address potential future actions that could polarize ASEAN member states. President Rodrigo Duterte [added](#) that pacts like AUKUS must complement ASEAN. Debate on the issue has ranged from [more intensive cooperation](#) between states such as those between QUAD states to more European involvement among regional actors such as [France’s intentions](#) for Japan and India, and the [European Union’s push](#) for closer relations with Taiwan.

Given these developments, the Philippines must also carefully consider and foster its alliances. Former Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario has [argued](#) that the Mutual Defense Treaty between the Philippines and the US can be a message to deter states like China from aggressive behavior and that the Philippines must build upon existing relations with other states to develop its defense posture. The latter was clearly demonstrated in allowing an [allied fleet](#) to conduct operations in the Philippine Sea and when the Philippine Navy recently concluded the [17th Western Pacific Naval Symposium](#).

The US remains the Philippines’ most reliant ally, as well as for most of the region. Indeed, while the overall reliability of the US remains a [subject of debate](#), even China recognizes the [need to balance relations](#) with it. Despite its foreign policy missteps, US recent actions and policy pronouncements in the region manifest its serious commitment to the Indo-Pacific. It was reported early in the month that the US had [special operation units](#) in Taiwan, at least since 2020, to improve island defense. The report also unveiled the US Central Intelligence Agency’s new “[China Mission Center](#)”.

In a similar vein, the Philippines needs to maintain a clear foreign policy that aligns itself with the [goal of preserving](#) the international rules-based order. It needs to stand with its friends, allies and like-minded states that will foster policies and statements that strengthen its claims and defend its sovereignty in disputed areas. Australian Defence Minister [Peter Dutton](#) has argued in an interview that all parties in the Indo-Pacific need to speak with a “unified message” against states like China. In that same interview, he stated that Australia clearly wants a “*sustained peace in the region*” as well as stability. ASEAN made a [similar statement](#), reaffirming the need for peaceful resolution to disputes under UNCLOS and to promote an environment wherein negotiations on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea can continue. President Duterte in a statement to ASEAN [reaffirmed](#) the principles of peace and stability.

As the electoral candidates start their informal campaign for the May 2022 elections, the Filipino voters must take stock of each candidate’s and each party’s positions on national security concerns, which should include the

Philippines' maritime affairs. As [argued](#) by De La Salle University Prof. Charmaine Willoughby, the Philippines needs to be mindful of the effect of domestic politics on foreign affairs. And as [previously argued](#), now more than ever, unity and clarity are necessary for a strong defense of national interests and sovereignty.