



KARAGATAN OBSERVER

Q1 2024

Summary

The beginning of 2024 has seen the Philippines experience several milestones. The greatest victory the Philippines has is the passing of the Maritime Zones Bill, which passed Congress in late March. A timely legislation that was mentioned last year as a priority. The deliberation and subsequent passage of the bill occurred during sustained swarming and incursions of the Chinese, unhindered from the previous year. As the Philippines strengthens its relations with the United States (US) and other like-minded countries, its relationship with China continues to sink.

Date

05 April 2024

Prepared by

Matthew C. Uy
Research Associate

Florence Principe-Gamboa
Senior Research Associate

Deryk Matthew N. Baladjay
Research Manager

Recommended citation

APA Uy, M.C., Principe-Gamboa, F., & Baladjay, D. (2024). "Karagatan Observer: Fourth Quarter 2023." Amador Research Services.

CMOS Matthew C. Uy, Florence Principe-Gamboa, & Deryk Baladjay, "Karagatan Observer: Fourth Quarter 2023." Amador Research Services (2024).

The beginning of 2024 has seen the Philippines experience several milestones. The greatest victory the Philippines has is the passing of the Maritime Zones Bill, which passed Congress in late March. A timely legislation that was mentioned last year as a priority. The deliberation and subsequent passage of the bill occurred during sustained swarming and incursions of the Chinese, unhindered from the previous year. As the Philippines strengthens its relations with the United States (US) and other like-minded countries, its relationship with China continues to sink.

The Challenge of Defense

The [Maritime Zones Bill](#) made headlines last February 23 when it [passed](#) the Senate on second reading. Attention gained momentum when it passed [final reading](#) on the 26th until it was finally [ratified](#) on March 19. It now awaits President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s signature.

The Maritime Zones Bill, once signed, will be the first concrete step for the Philippines to harmonize its domestic maritime policies with its commitments to international instruments, particularly with UNCLOS.

The bill's passage comes in the middle of a challenging time for Philippine defense. At the beginning of 2024, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) [vowed](#) to enhance its maritime security. But the Chinese begged to differ. During the [second](#) maritime cooperation activity (MCA) between the Philippines and the US, a Chinese frigate [arrived](#) at the exercise point first. The Philippines [pushed back](#) against [accusations](#) by China's foreign ministry describing the exercise as "irresponsible". This was the first incident of the year.

Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro Jr. said in mid-January that protecting Philippine territory and sovereignty is the [top military challenge](#) of the year. The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) was [more direct](#) in calling out Chinese activity in the West Philippine Sea (WPS) as "imperialist and ambitious". [Chinese rhetoric](#) has repeatedly called for dialogue

and “meeting halfway”, but the PCG [countered](#) that the Philippine government has done nothing but exert effort in dialogue and peaceful resolution. The PCG reported that the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) [attempted](#) to drive away fishers from the WPS in early January. By the end of January, the Philippine Navy (PN) [reported](#) monitoring over 200 Chinese ships in the WPS.

This swarming has [persisted](#) until March. China has not restricted itself to the WPS, as [research vessels](#) were spotted near Philippine Rise in the east in early March. Partially in response, the PCG [sent a patrol](#) on a two-week mission. President Marcos Jr. [spoke](#) of a “pattern of aggression” from China in the WPS. This followed two collision and water cannon incidents between the coast guards near Ayungin Shoal on [March 5](#) and on [March 23](#) (which resulted in [three](#) injuries). The latter incident evoked a [series of demarches](#) from the Department of Foreign Affairs: against the Charge d’affaires of the Chinese Embassy, the Chinese Vice Foreign Minister, and to the Chinese Foreign Ministry (issued by the Philippine Embassy in Beijing). President Marcos Jr., during his Australia visit, [announced](#) that diplomatic protests would be filed against China’s dangerous actions in recent months.

However, despite these incidents, government organizations such as the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) announced [continued support](#) for fisherfolk and the PCG continued its [resupply missions](#) to outposts in the WPS. The AFP reported [successful](#) resupply missions in early February. Likewise, the PCG successfully safeguarded fishers during a [nine-day operation](#) at Bajo de Masinloc in early February, and in a three-day [operation](#) in early March.

Chinese Falsehoods

On March 11, the PCG said that China [exposes itself](#) as “a bully and untrustworthy” when it engages in dialogue while provoking incidents in Philippine territory. Particularly evident during this first quarter of 2024 is China’s engagement in the digital and information domains.

In early February, the Department of Information and Communication Technology (DICT) [reported foiling cyberattacks](#) and tracing their origin within China. The attacks were [described](#) as “academically perfect”, and directed at several email domains such as that of the DICT, Coast Guard, and even President Marcos Jr.’s private website. Another cyberattack in mid-February [succeeded](#) in affecting the PCG’s X (Twitter) account for five hours. As part of the government’s push for cyberdefense, the AFP [participated](#) in a

British cyberwarfare exercise and received high marks. The AFP [confirmed](#) that cyberattacks against military ships in the WPS increased over the past four years, however there was no evidence that this was perpetrated by the Chinese government.

Meanwhile, the Chinese government and its affiliates engaged in outright lying. Almost a week after the foiled cyberattack, state-sponsored Global Times [falsely reported](#) that PCG patrol was driven away from Scarborough Shoal. The Global Times at the start of March [falsely claimed](#) that there was a provisional agreement between the two countries on fishing at either Bajo de Masinloc or Scarborough Shoal. The DFA [denounced](#) the statement made by Chinese consul general Zhang Zhen at an Iloilo event slandering the 2016 arbitration award. The PCG [countered](#) China's claims of driving away fishing vessels.

In mid-March, an [article](#) from The Manila Times featured an anonymous Chinese official who claimed that the Marcos administration ignored 11 concept papers on the disputed territory. The DFA [categorically denied](#) this in a statement, citing that the proposals were studied, proven contrary to the Filipino national interest, and counter proposals were submitted.

Analysis: The Unquenchable Fire

China has lit a fire under the Philippines that cannot be quenched. Tensions between the two states caused Ambassador Jose Manuel Romualdez to [remark](#) that the West Philippine Sea is the “real” flashpoint for a potential conflict. The veracity of this is debatable, but the point that China is a threat is true. China has done everything it can to slander, smear, and harass the Philippines, particularly [after the passage](#) of the Maritime Zones Bill. But China's activities do not solely affect the Philippines, but the entirety of [the international community](#), as most maritime trade passes through the South China Sea. China has forced the Philippines to upgrade its defense in all aspects that it is capable of, and it is to the Philippines's credit that diplomacy and dialogue remain the first course of action.

The development of the security sector in the Philippines is two-pronged: Seeing China as both an adversary and a regional neighbor. President Marcos Jr. lamented the [unfortunate circumstances](#) of China's activities even while the Philippines continued diplomatic engagement. Yet the president also said that the Philippines would [push back](#) if its sovereignty was questioned or ignored. Aligned with the latter statement, Secretary Teodoro [announced](#) in late January that the military would provide “unimpeded” access

to maritime resources through the [Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept](#) (CADC). A top strategist at the AFP said that the Philippines desires to [elevate](#) its armed forces to become world-class.

President Marcos Jr. is the latest leader to engage in diplomacy while simultaneously improving aspects of the nation's defense in multiple areas. A February [paper](#) from the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies argued that all presidents since the Ramos administration have demonstrated consistent behavior when it comes to the South China Sea. Namely, they have all (1) engaged in bilateral diplomacy with China and (2) multilateral diplomacy through ASEAN, (3) acted with the law of the sea as a basis, (4) maintained alliances, and (5) modernized the military. The differences are in the degrees and the priorities. The Marcos Jr. administration is focusing on the latter three points, bolstered by the people's express [desire](#) for the Philippines to assert itself.

The Maritime Zones Bill, once signed, will be the first concrete step for the Philippines to harmonize its domestic maritime policies with its commitments to international instruments, particularly with UNCLOS. It will also synergize with defense policies such as the [proposed](#) Philippine Self-Reliant Defense Posture Program Act (passed the House in January), [updated plan](#) for Horizon 3 military modernization ([wherein](#) it will last for a decade and cost approximately P2 trillion) and with the CADC. The military modernization is specifically [focused](#) on archipelagic defense, but includes other aspects such as [counterintelligence](#) and [training](#) for biological and chemical warfare. Acquisitions included [submarines](#) and the [possibility](#) of other non-traditional assets such as hovercrafts. Political will for modernization has [grown](#) due to China's continued incursions.

Maritime security has served as a consistent factor in recent relations with other countries. The Philippines has received assistance from [Germany](#), [India](#), [Czech Republic](#), [South Korea](#), and most especially the US. [Relations with the US](#) appear to be at its peak. With the [confirmation](#) of the locations for the additional EDCA sites, [assurance](#) from the US Indo-Pacific Command of sustained cooperation and [more](#) high level engagements, and [upcoming trilateral](#) with Japan. The Philippines sees relations with the US as unlikely to change, [no matter who wins](#) the upcoming US Presidential elections.

Over the first three months of 2024, the Philippines has proven that it will not back down, and so it remains challenged to continue its improvements.