

KARAGATAN OBSERVER | JULY 2021

Summary

July has been filled with big events affecting Philippine defense, security, and foreign policy such as the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party, the 75th anniversary of ties between the Philippines and the United States (U.S.), the 5th anniversary of the 2016 Arbitration Award, the last State of the Nation Address by President Duterte, and the restoration of the Visiting Forces Agreement.

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China's Nationalism

China began the month with a celebration of 100 years of the Chinese Communist Party. President Xi Jinping delivered a [strong nationalist speech](#) where he promised that China would no longer be bullied or oppressed. He emphasized that any enemies of China would be met by "[a great wall of steel](#)". The statement was not hollow bravado. Satellite imagery shows China constructing [a new missile field](#) of approximately 120 nuclear silos. It is also making extensive use of its [bases across the region](#). China's desire to uphold its claims in the region is reinforced by its "[driving away](#)" of a U.S. warship from the Paracel Islands and its conducting of [naval drills](#).

The anniversary statement was a defensive one, yet President Xi made a point later in the speech that reunification with Taiwan was a "historic mission". The determination of China to see this through was seen when a state-publication released [a three-stage surprise attack plan](#) on Taiwan. A [recent report](#) to the U.S. Congress revealed that China's military modernization was partially aimed at "addressing the situation with Taiwan militarily". The modernization is proceeding steadily as China announced a [new destroyer](#) to add to its fleet. China's violation of Taiwanese airspace intensified to [four incursions](#) within the first week of July.

The subject of Taiwan has gained prominence since the speech. The released invasion plan [prompted fears](#) of an imminent global conflict that would involve the United States and its regional allies. Rear Admiral Mike Studeman, U.S. Pacific intelligence chief, said that an invasion of Taiwan was a "[danger on all fronts](#)".

Japan publicly revealed a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would be an "[existential threat](#)" to its security. While the Japanese call for a peaceful resolution to the issue, the proposal to defend Taiwan alongside the U.S. marked the

[highest-level remarks](#) on the subject. China responded that it would [retaliate with nuclear weapons](#) if Japan intervened in the conflict with Taiwan.

Interest in the South China Sea

European interest in the South China Sea continues to grow. The European Union is being [pushed](#) to involve itself more with Taiwan.

A recent addition is the involvement of Russia. While Russia has primarily been in weapons sales, its involvement in the region could help [advance its interests](#) that could undermine U.S. alliances and international rules-based order. Russia recently mimicked Chinese language in condemning [the British](#) Freedom of Navigation Operations in the Black Sea, which was expected to be on its way to the South China Sea.

Germany and China's defense ministers held a [dialogue](#) early in the month. The German defense minister urged China to uphold the arbitration award in the South China Sea. China responded by saying that disagreements should be properly managed. Germany has been attempting to [balance its ties](#) with China and Taiwan.

The first of the ships of HMS Queen Elizabeth's Carrier Strike Group of the [UK entered the South China Sea](#) on the 24th. France announced that, in collaborating with South Pacific nations, it would launch a [coast guard network](#) to counter predatory fishing behavior.

"Upholding Sovereignty"

China's speech at the start of the month highlighted the nationalist desire to defend a country's sovereignty. Vietnam took cues from this and applied it on a [socio-cultural front](#), with its Authority of Broadcasting and Electronic Information calling on Netflix to remove an Australian spy show for presenting China's claims on a map. Vietnam pertained to the showcase of these images as a violation of its sovereignty. It is but an example of Vietnam exploiting ["nationalist rage"](#) against China.

The Philippines has also gained strides in asserting its sovereignty. It secured a [massive investment from a French firm](#) for a shipyard project. [One of two ships](#) is set to arrive from Japan in late July. The ship is modelled after those used by the Japanese Coast Guard.

Early in the month, the Philippine Coast Guard [peacefully repelled](#) unauthorized Chinese and Vietnamese fishing vessels near Marie Louise Bank. This was [successfully repeated](#) against a Chinese warship. Senator Hontiveros praised these developments as proof that the Philippines can defend itself [without resorting to war](#). National Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said that China was [wary of confronting civilian ships](#) while President Rodrigo went so far as to say that it was now [easy](#) to drive the Chinese away from Philippine waters.

The U.S. has also stepped up its cooperation with its allies in the region.

President Duterte lauded the [celebration of 75 years](#) of diplomatic relations between the Philippines and the U.S., highlighting the common value of a peaceful region. The U.S. [delivered millions worth](#) of weapons and ammunitions to the Philippines, a testament to "longstanding commitment."

This commitment is seen throughout the region. Another example is the new [Maritime Training Center](#) in Indonesia. A collaboration between Indonesia and the U.S., the center is expected to enhance maritime law enforcement for Indonesia's coast guard and to provide proof of the U.S. effort to increase security capabilities. The U.S. and Australia also held [Talisman Sabre 21](#), Australia's largest bilateral military exercise. The event was [monitored by Chinese spy ships](#). The U.S. also facilitated [trilateral talks](#) with Japan and South Korea. Among the issues was the [denuclearization](#) of the Korean Peninsula.

The U.S. has made it clear that while it seeks for a stable relationship with China, it [will not hesitate](#) to act on security matters.

Internal Disputes

The Philippines' victory at the international court of arbitration in July 12, 2016 was celebrated by various sectors of society and around the world. Statements from the [U.S.](#), [Australia](#), and [other countries](#) previously unaffiliated with the region congratulated the Philippines and called for the upholding of international law. The Department of National Defense [welcomed the support](#) and reiterated the call for a rules-based order. [Vice President Leni Robredo](#) marked the occasion by saying that the Philippines must continue to defend its rights in the West Philippine Sea. She said that the victory was a [missed opportunity](#) for the country to foster cooperation with its neighbors in the region.

On the other hand, President Duterte [trusts China](#) to uphold its power responsibly, despite the fact that [China continues to ignore the ruling](#). The government has reiterated that the ruling was part of international law but is [unsurprised](#) by China's rejection. Because of this, some such as Former Supreme Court Associate Justice Francis Jardeleza proposed [a new baselines law](#) to reinforce the ruling and the country's territorial claims.

The President's trust in China has continued to receive criticism. [Former Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert Del Rosario](#) said that the country should reject the President, listing occurrences throughout the administration's term of "discrediting" the nation. Former Supreme Court Associate Justice Antonio Carpio ["dared"](#) the President to prohibit the Chinese from fishing in Philippine waters.

In the grassroots, fisherfolk in Zambales claim to have been prohibited from fishing in Bajo de Masinloc, a claim that the Philippine Coast Guard says it has received [no reports of](#). This did not stop fishing groups such as Pamalakaya from [pressuring the local government](#) to stand up for the fishers.

[A floating device](#) with Chinese characters have been found by fishers of Bigkis ng Mangingisda and turned over to the Philippine Navy. The Peoples Development Institute identified it as an ocean bottom seismometer, a device for exploring oil, and called it proof of China violating Philippine rights. This was [contradicted](#) by Lt. Gen. Arnulfo Marcelo Burgos Jr., who said that the device was examined by the National Mapping and Resource Information Authority and revealed that the device was not equipped for oil exploration.

Analysis

The month of July was filled with big events and statements that shape the geopolitics of the international environment. As China increases its economic and military power, it grows more confident to assert its claims in areas that it considers as priorities to its national interest such as Taiwan and the South China Sea. Strong statements against major powers are now backed with actions that further strengthen its regional goals to secure its maritime backyard.

ASEAN states such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia continued to protect their sovereignty against Chinese incursions and influence. While small, incremental steps on the national level are important, claimant states can make a stronger point if they adopt [“minilateralist” approaches and strategies](#). In contentious matters such as Taiwan and the South China Sea, progress can be made if like-minded members of ASEAN coordinate and cooperate with major regional as well as external powers, instead of deferring to consensus from all members before acting. While [President Duterte’s supposed neutrality](#) between the two rivalling states may seem beneficial, the country must prepare for greater pressure from the two big powers. The Philippines can learn from other states such as [Singapore](#) on the effects of balancing relations. Establishing deeper relations with other middle powers such as Australia and South Korea would be key.

Earlier in month, the U.S. voiced its hope for a [satisfactory VFA](#). The U.S. has reaffirmed its commitment to the alliance on multiple occasions. A proposed [addendum to the VFA](#) was submitted to the President’s office near the end of July. Upon U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin’s [visit](#) to Manila, National Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana revealed that President Duterte has [cancelled the abrogation](#) of VFA. Secretary Lorenzana also mentioned that bilateral meetings will continue to make [“some adjustments”](#). Arguably, Philippines-US relations remains the country’s best deterrent against China. Maintaining essential components of the alliance is necessary for long-term security. Some such as Senator Francis Tolentino [argued](#) that a regional defense treaty like Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty (which is [no longer in force](#)) would be more effective.

While the Philippine government took a more proactive role in the defense of sovereignty by “verifying and investigating” the report that [Chinese waste](#) was jeopardizing the environment, some experts believe that this could be [related to the upcoming 2022 elections](#). Regardless of the case, it is imperative for the Philippines to have a long-term, whole-of-nation approach in addressing Chinese intrusions in the West Philippine Sea.

Unity must be the defining feature in the maritime policies of the Philippines as internal disputes can deter the nation from focusing on mounting a proper defense of Philippine sovereignty. The President's final [State of the Nation Address](#) did little to foster unity, most especially on the issue of China. However, the President’s decision to retain the VFA is a step in the right direction. Meanwhile, some groups such as [CALL of the Sea](#) have championed for a multi-pronged strategy to reinforce the 2016 arbitration ruling and to defend the country’s sovereignty. Others such as Atty. Gilbert Asuque, former Philippine Permanent Representative to the International Maritime Organization, released a [primer](#) on the country’s maritime zones to foster a unified approach moving forward.