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Summary

China continues to see the Indo-Pacific region turn against it. In the spotlight, China's actions in the region prove that its actions and intentions are nowhere benign. Exercising control over the South China Sea gives China access to material underwater to further its economic ambitions. The Asian giant continues to aggressively solidify its claims through gray-zone strategies.

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Political Theater in the Seas

China continues to see the Indo-Pacific region turn against it. In the spotlight, China's actions in the region prove that its actions and intentions are nowhere benign. Exercising control over the South China Sea gives China [access to material underwater to further its economic ambitions](#). The Asian giant continues to aggressively solidify its claims through gray-zone strategies. A tactic that the Philippines continues to see play out since the Julian Felipe Reef incident with nearly [300 ships sighted](#) within Philippine EEZs, it involves the use of a "[maritime militia](#)" [disguised as fishing vessels](#), acting under the umbrella of Chinese military command. The existence of China's armed fishing vessels is not a secret. Other than through a wide array of [open-source research](#), China itself has blatantly admitted this through an officially produced music video. The music video, entitled "[Song of the Sansha Maritime Militia](#)", was released on April 13 2020 on Chinese website [Bilibili](#). Translated lyrics points out the role of the Chinese Maritime Militia (CMM) to protect sovereignty rights and, if necessary, participate and win wars.

The U.S. and its allies, particularly Japan, continue the trend of recent months in meetings and declarative statements. In early May, U.S. met with Japan and South Korea, their [first in-person meeting](#) since the COVID-19 pandemic began. While the meeting was primarily concerned with North Korea, all three states emphasized the importance of a rules-based international order in the region. In that same meeting, U.S. and Japan reaffirmed their opposition to any change in the status quo. Affirmations of the rules-based international order and the sustainment of status quo were reaffirmed at the [G7 meeting](#). Later in the month, U.S. and Japan have also discussed the need for an integrated deterrence through the [use of submarines](#) to hamper the Chinese Navy. [Australia and New Zealand](#) reaffirmed their "strong support for open rules-based trade that is based on market principles". In that same meeting, while China was not named, the two states expressed concern of "economic coercion" and agreed to "work with partners" on issue of security and economic challenges.

In the midst of tackling the Myanmar crisis, the US has reaffirmed its role as a key partner to ASEAN in promoting human rights, the rule of law, and good governance during the [34th US-ASEAN Dialogue](#). The need to uphold a rules-based international order, support for peaceful arbitration of disputes, and the promotion of sovereignty in the Indo-

Pacific were also highlighted. States such as Vietnam and Indonesia continued to advance its interests in the sea. Vietnam revealed its plans to build an [airport at Spratlys Islands](#) to provide economic growth and to assert Vietnamese sovereignty. As a countermeasure to CMM, [Vietnam has also been strengthening its maritime militia](#). Indonesia has revealed its plans to [triple its submarine fleet](#) as a response to repeated Chinese incursions.

Beyond statements, the US and its allies also proved its commitment to the region. The [USS Curtis Wilbur](#) performed a freedom of navigation operation near the Paracel Islands. A spokesperson for the US Navy said that this was the third operation undertaken in 2021. The USS Curtis Wilbur was previously at the Taiwan Strait, the fifth time a U.S. warship travelled those waters. At G7, Japan welcomed Germany sending a frigate to the region to promote security ties. [European involvement](#) in the region also increased. France joined Japan, Australia, and U.S. in a [military exercise focused on “retaking an island”](#), speculated to be practice for retaking the Senkaku Islands in case of a Chinese incursion. [Britain](#) is also set to undergo a naval tour of the Indo-Pacific with an eye on China and the U.S.

Domestic Political Theater

The U.S. and its allies across the world are being proactive in their response to China. The Philippine has done the same, despite internal conflict on how to best approach the matter.

President Duterte has received extensive criticism on how his administration handles Chinese incursions. In turn, Malacañang shot back at its critics for their [alleged roles in the issue](#) and strongly stated that the President should be allowed to continue his [“calibrated” approach](#). As a staunch supporter of the administration, Senate President Vicente Sotto III posited that the Philippines only had the [options of negotiations or war](#).

The Duterte administration’s strategy is the use of diplomacy at the forefront while continuing with military modernization and asserting sovereignty rights when needed. [Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana](#) said as much in a statement that the Philippines would maintain a relationship with China but not at the expense of sovereignty. [Former Senator Juan Ponce Enrile](#) gave a similar statement, claiming that China should not be antagonized but made into a friend “without surrendering our rights.” President Duterte [reaffirmed](#) that he would not waste the country’s current relationship with China.

The internal conflict took a turn in early May when Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin posted [“undiplomatic language” on Twitter](#), blasting China for its activities within Philippine territory. [China’s Foreign Ministry](#) condemned the language, citing that it may “complicate the situation”. The issue of “megaphone diplomacy” was received more positively by some. [Senate Minority Leader Franklin Drilon](#) said that it was an ample strategy in the face of what he called “gunboat diplomacy of China.” [Secretary Locsin apologized](#), an act that some in the Philippines considered unnecessary even if some analysts said that the Twitter outburst undermined his role as a diplomat. Perhaps wishing to avoid similar future incidents from others, presidential spokesperson Harry Roque said that only [he and Secretary Locsin are allowed to speak](#) on the country’s maritime conflicts with China.

Indeed, diplomacy, spearheaded by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), has been at the forefront of the issue. Secretary Locsin said that the DFA has [“exclusive merit”](#) to foreign affairs relations. Diplomatic protests have been filed against China, the latest on [May 29](#) regarding Chinese vessels at Pag-asa Islands. At the [34th ASEAN-United States Dialogue](#), the DFA called on increased maritime cooperation and spoke of the importance of the 2016 Arbitration Award. In that same meeting, the U.S. reaffirmed its commitment to stand by their allies. [Australia](#) and [Japan](#) both reaffirmed their support for the Philippines and the 2016 Arbitration Award.

The Philippines has also successfully asserted its sovereignty rights. The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) dispersed Chinese vessels at [Sabina Shoal](#) several times in the span of a few days. PCG lawyer [Gretch Mary Acuario](#) detailed the event as such: A warning was given and instead of responding the Chinese vessels dispersed before the PCG could reach them.

Analysis

The disputes in the South China Sea are complex and require nuanced responses. There are certain steps and tools that the Philippines can utilize to strongly assert sovereignty rights without compromise and complement the efforts of its allies.

The first step is having a unified stance. [Advocates for the National Interest](#) released a statement calling for unity against China's incursions. The group stressed that there are a range of tools that can be used and partnerships that can be called upon. These are, in part, what the Philippines is already doing. However, its biggest obstacle appears to be the Duterte administration itself. Even as China's increased activities has [turned the Filipino people](#) against it, President Duterte continues to take an inconsistent stance. On one hand, President Duterte has [dismissed](#) the relevance of the 2016 Arbitration Award. Additionally, the Duterte administration has confused the issue by saying that the Julian Felipe Reef was [never](#) a part of the Philippines' EEZ. On the other hand, President Duterte unilaterally asserts that territory such as [Philippine Rise](#) will not suffer foreign intrusion. He has also continuously claims that war will be imminent if he sends additional ships into the [West Philippine Sea](#). The president's constant flip-flopping and misdirection on the issue is what gives his critics cause to call out his mishandling of the situation. The most recent of which is the correction of then Naval Flag Officer in Command, [Admiral Alexander Pama](#) clarifying that the President's claims and rebuttal to the Aquino administration regarding the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident were inaccurate.

The Philippines needs a unified and consistent national policy regarding the maritime conflict. It is detrimental and no longer feasible to have the policy change from administration to administration. With Chinese incursions fresh in the minds of the Filipino people, making this an [election issue](#) for the upcoming 2022 elections is a necessity. That way, complex issues, such as [collaborating with China](#) without compromising national sovereignty, can be debated in the public square and among future presidential candidates. This will help voters decide which among the candidates will be able to handle the delicate act of balancing security and economic relations with the Asian giant. Additionally, finalizing a [map of the Philippines' territories](#), particularly the West Philippine Sea, would show that the country was serious in upholding its sovereignty.

The second step is to continue to upgrade and modernize the country's defensive capabilities. With [Chinese ships spotted](#) in different areas within the Philippines' EEZ, it is imperative for the Philippine Navy and PCG to be able to match and counter future incursions. The Department of National Defense and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) is eyeing the acquisition or has already purchased [secondhand U.S. warships, multi-role fighter crafts, submarines](#) from South Korea, [missile-capable boats such as the Shaldag Mk. V](#) from Israel, [offshore patrol boats](#) from Australia, and the [umbrella cover Spyder](#) (Surface-to-Air Python and Derby) air defense system similar to the Israeli Iron Dome.

However, military and security asset acquisition will not suffice. [Issues of interoperability](#) need to be addressed. Infrastructure also needs to be updated or constructed to support the military's modernization. Some projects include the [expansion of the base in Spratlys Islands, runway repairs on Pag-asa](#), and the [establishment of an artificial research center](#) that could have multiple benefits for all sectors of the Philippines. Additionally, the roles of defense will have to be expanded such as the Philippine Marine Corps' [Coastal Defense Regiment](#) which will operate with and support the AFP and the PCG.

The third step is to continue to collaborate with trusted allies and partners. Currently, the U.S. is the strongest supporter of the Philippines in defending national sovereignty. The fruits of U.S. collaboration can be seen in [workshops on weapons of mass destruction, cybersecurity, and capacity building for maritime law enforcement](#). This only highlights the necessity of the retention of the [Visiting Forces Agreement \(VFA\)](#). As the chief architect of Philippine foreign policy, it is now up to the president to retain the VFA or not.

These are all important to not only uphold the sovereignty of the Philippines but to protect maritime resources and fauna. These waters are necessary for the [livelihood of fishers](#) and for the overall economy. *Probinsyano Ako* Representative Jose Singson Jr. spoke of how Chinese miners have extracted black sand from the Luzon coastline. He warns that the [coastline is receding](#) due to these activities. Security is necessary not only to prevent foreign

incursions but to mitigate maritime incidents. The Philippine Rise is planned to have [lighted ocean buoys](#) installed. Endangered animals like [the blue whale](#) sighted in Philippine waters need to be protected.

With fear of China in mind, Leyte 4th District [Representative Lucy Torres-Gomez](#) warned of possible economic repercussions if the WPS situation is not properly handled. However, it is also important to note that the Philippine economy does not and should not rest on China alone. Overdependence on China will definitely constrain our actions and sovereignty at the seas. Just like in defense and security, diversifying and strengthening economic ties with other nations is also necessary to cushion impacts in the event of an economic fallout with China. China being a close neighbor and friend will be beneficial to the Philippine economy, but China claiming our territorial waters and its resources that will benefit the future generations can also be an economic problem. This will be a critical challenge for the next administration, and an issue that the Filipino voters must consider heavily.