

KARAGATAN OBSERVER | ANNUAL RECAP 2021

Summary

The special annual recap for 2021 corroborates the yearly events from past *Karagatan Observer* issues and is compiled together for a single, concise, and comprehensive report.

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China and the Indo-Pacific

In June 2021, President Xi declared the nationalist desire of China to defend its sovereignty claims over the entirety of the South China Sea. China's actions throughout the year used this desire as its primary motivation.

In late January, China passed the controversial Coast Guard Law authorizing the Chinese Coast Guard (CGG), and by extension the Chinese Maritime Militia (CMM), to use "*all necessary means*" to prevent threats from foreign vessels in its claimed territories. President Xi boasted of a "*great wall of steel*" against China's enemies, alluding to significant strides in weapons advancement. In February, China boasted the largest navy in the world. From the creation of additional nuclear silos to the testing of hypersonic missiles, China ensured the world knew how serious it was on this front.

China greeted the New Year with twelve days of incursions in Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) and throughout the months steadily increased the number, hitting its apex in September. By October 22, Chinese incursions was at 692. Other states in the region suffered incursions such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia. China also increased its hostility towards Australia, specifically towards its deepening relationship with Taiwan and statements made by Defense Minister Peter Dutton.

Throughout the year, concerns increased over a possible invasion of Taiwan. While others predict an invasion could occur within the next six years, others are convinced that President Xi will make it his primary objective to secure his legacy before his window of opportunity closes. Born from the early concealment of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and exacerbated by China's outright

breaches of international law and diplomacy ever since, the world has steadily stood in opposition to Chinese's desires.

The US Alliance: Steps Backward and Steps Forward

The US Alliance suffered a series of blows in mid-2021 with the fall of Afghanistan. The mishandling of the US withdrawal drew criticisms and concerns from all over the world – most notably from Taiwan. The US quickly scrambled to reassure its allies in the Indo-Pacific of its commitments. However, this took another setback when AUKUS, the trilateral initiative between the US, the United Kingdom, and Australia, was announced. Many states in the region criticized the possible proliferation of nuclear weapons. China's Global Times capitalized on these missteps to smear any US activity or presence in the region – particularly when it came to Taiwan. However, the region understood that, despite its varying misgivings, adherence to the US Alliance was safer than having none at all. The US continuously and consistently engaged with its partners throughout the region, reaffirming several times its respective commitments.

There were three countries of note that made significant changes in its foreign policy and rhetoric in terms of their relationship to China: Taiwan, Australia, and Japan.

As China repeatedly intruded upon Taiwan's ADIZ and declared Taiwanese independence as tantamount to war, reports flowed throughout the year of the seriousness in which Taiwan took its defense. In September, President Tsai Ing-wen stressed that a Chinese victory over Taiwan would undermine the "security architecture" of the region that has allowed for unprecedented peace and development since the end of the Second World War. From expanding its military to retrofitting civilian vessels, Taiwan has made it clear that its existence is on the line.

Australia has openly aligned itself with Taiwan. Defense Minister Peter Dutton has linked Australia's national security with that of Taiwan's, arguing the same as President Ing-wen. Its inclusion into AUKUS has made it clear that it is with the system perpetuated and protected by the US Alliance. Japan has made a similar connection. Rhetoric from the Japanese government and its concrete changes to policy has reassured Taiwan to the point that half its population believes that Japan would come to Taiwan's defense. Japan's support has caused China to threaten it with nuclear retaliation.

The US Alliance, composed of many Western countries, the QUAD, its regional partners such as the Philippines, and in agreement with the UN, has repeatedly condemned China's breaches of international law and gray-zone activities which skirt at the possibility of open conflict. Even as ASEAN desires to be neutral in the rivalry between the US and China, it too has spoken of the importance of the rule of law and asserted the need for an established Code of Conduct to keep the peace.

The Philippines at the Crossroads

The Duterte administration's penultimate year saw the Philippines make significant strides in several areas of foreign policy: military modernization, enhancing bilateral ties, discussion on maritime zones, and the Visiting Forces Agreement. All these took place as the Philippines had to contend with multiple Chinese incursions and inconsistencies in its own government. And, as the year came to an end, the campaigning for upcoming 2022 elections took center stage.

China has been a constant thorn throughout the year. From research ships with escorts from the CCG or CMM to the incidents in the Julian Felipe Reef (Whitsun Reef) in March and Ayungin Shoal (Second Thomas Shoal) in November; from hundreds of military and fishing vessels spread through the archipelagic waters to its use of vaccine diplomacy, the Philippines responded by the only means at its disposal – exposure and diplomacy.

Reactions to Chinese activities notably hardened as the months passed. President Duterte's relaxed attitude towards the Chinese (as seen after Julian Felipe Reef incident) grew more assertive, notably denouncing Chinese activities after the Ayungin Shoal incident. Sectors from all across the country also united under the common cause of defending Philippine sovereignty – the academe, fisheries organizations, the legislative branch, and most of the 2022 presidential aspirants.

The actions of the Philippines towards the Chinese vessels at Julian Felipe Reef showed the world that the act of exposure can be an effective strategy in deterring future incursions. The filing of diplomatic protests has proved the Philippines' commitment to the rule of law and the 2016 Arbitration Award. The ultimate retention of the Visiting Forces Agreement, after months of back and forth, established the US as a much-needed partner to ensure Philippine defense. The rhetoric of various 2022 candidates made it clear that sovereignty is non-negotiable for the Philippines, especially in the face of a more powerful hostile state like China.

Moving Forward

Events in 2021 highlight the importance of balancing relations among major powers for the Philippines. As demonstrated by the various foreign and security policy recalibrations under President Duterte, the Philippines cannot and should not rely on China or the United States alone. Diversifying relationships with other states that share its interest in maintaining the rules-based order and continuously modernizing the military to protect and uphold its sovereignty will be key to the vision of an independent foreign policy.

The coming year will be crucial for the Philippines and for other states with interest in the region. Foreign powers will keep a close eye on the elections and try to influence its outcomes for their gain. Significant issues such as the Arbitration award, the reinvigoration of ties with the US vis-a-vis the West Philippines, and cooperation with Beijing will hinge in the Philippines' transition into new leadership in 2022. The future of the next generation of Filipinos is at stake. It is up to the Filipino voters to decide on who to instate as its next chief architect of foreign policy and commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of the Philippines.