



KARAGATAN OBSERVER

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Summary

It is a challenging time for the Philippines. As of publication, the Maritime Zones Bill has yet to be signed into law. This leaves the Philippines in a precarious state and only further emphasizes existing vulnerabilities. Without the Maritime Zones Bill, the situation in the West Philippine Sea (and in other Philippine waters) has remained status quo: China has acted with impunity and the Philippines has responded with restraint. China has intensified its incursions, the Philippines defaults to patient resistance. This cannot hold for long.

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Barbarians at Sea

China has, over the past three months, engaged in several major incursions into Philippine sovereignty, from water cannon firing to near collisions.

The incidents that occurred since then include the massive [increase of Chinese vessels](#) prior to the 2024 Balikatan Exercises, a [water cannon attack near Scarborough Shoal](#) that prompted a summoning of the Chinese envoy, the [blocking of the Atin Ito convoy](#) in mid-May, the [theft of airdropped supplies](#) and the [ramming of a Philippine Coast Guard ship](#) on the same day, and the swarming [harassment at Ayungin Shoal](#) in mid-June.

Yet Chinese activities are not contained to their physical presence in the West Philippine Sea. China continues to [insist](#) that it is not responsible for any escalation. It has [accused](#) the Philippines of “illegally occupying” Pag-asa Island. It has spread lies about a supposed “[pact](#)” involving Ayungin Shoal and an [alleged leak call](#) between Chinese officials and a Filipino admiral. The Department of Information and Communications Technology has identified [several Chinese firms disguising themselves](#) as Western-based recruiting members of the Philippine military for part-time jobs. Chinese [research vessels](#) were seen near the Philippine Rise.

While the Philippines does not consider any of these an armed attack, it has been noted that China has become [more aggressive](#), especially the Chinese Coast Guard. War is [not in the national policy](#) of the Philippines. The United States (US) reiterated in early April that the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) will be [activated](#) if any Philippine asset or individual is attacked. President Marcos himself explicitly stated a few days later that the MDT would be [invoked](#) if any Filipino was killed due to Chinese action.

Tossed Salads and Scrambled Eggs: The Mess Inside

Aside from Chinese actions, the Philippines also suffers from internal divisions and concerns. Members of the previous Duterte administration such as [Atty. Harry Roque critiqued](#) the “hardline” approach of the Marcos administration, especially concerning Ayungin Shoal. He argued for demilitarizing it and turning it into a fisherfolk shelter. Senator Imee Marcos, the sister of the president, [criticized the recent Executive Order](#) to establish a maritime council, arguing that it could invite foreign interference. Senator Robinhood Padilla filed a [resolution](#) to have a hearing on the “benefits” of the Balikatan Exercises.

The greatest of these issues is the continued lack of a proper maritime security framework, bolstered by ironclad legislation. The Maritime Zones Bill was passed almost half a year ago, yet despite its supposed priority status, it has not been signed by the President

The division is seen even in local governments. Fishers from Zambales [pleaded](#) to visiting lawmakers for long-term solutions against Chinese activity. Meanwhile, [Zambales governor](#) Hermogenes Ebdane Jr. said that because China does not recognize the 2016 arbitration award, then it cannot be enforced.

Chief of these internal concerns is the [issue of Chinese nationals](#) residing in the country. An appeal was forwarded to the national government from the [Multinational Village](#) in Parañaque City concerning Chinese men employed by Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs) allegedly “numbering in the thousands.” The government [responded](#) with a probe. However, the most famous [example](#) of this is suspended Mayor (of Bambang, Tarlac) Alice Guo, who is under investigation by the Department of the Interior and Local Government for allowing Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs) in her municipality. It was [proven](#) in late June that the suspended mayor is a Chinese national named *Guo Hua Ping*. The matter is still undergoing extensive investigation.

Analysis: Let the Philippines not be a byword among the nations

The geopolitical situation in the Indo-Pacific has, according to Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in early April, [reached](#) a “historic turning point.” Singapore’s foreign minister [warned](#) of a “bleak” future for the region if tensions continued to rise.

While the vigor to defend national sovereignty remains strong, the Philippines faces a myriad of issues, from its western front to within its own local governments. The greatest of these issues is the continued lack of a proper maritime security framework bolstered by ironclad legislation. The Maritime Zones Bill was [passed](#) almost half a year ago, yet despite its supposed priority status, it has not been signed by the President. The situation in the Philippines has yet to impress the need for the [National Security Council](#) to convene, however, the [danger of miscalculation](#) grows with each new incident.

The Philippines, as [noted](#) by the president himself, must be more proactive in its pursuit of security. Already there are steps in the right direction such as reaching out to partners for stronger relationships ([Europe](#)), continuing to deepen relations with regional neighbors ([Japan](#)), institutionalizing what is recognized by international bodies (the [2016 arbitration award](#); seeking United Nations [recognition](#) of continental seabed), and addressing unconventional problems (enacting a national plan for [cybersecurity](#), especially amid [Chinese technology](#) in everyday Filipino use; the transparency [program](#) against Chinese vessels). But these are not enough. Proactive action entails a change in thinking.

A framework that truly utilizes the “[whole-of-nation](#)” approach. In whatever manner it formulates, it must have the Maritime Zones Act and it must be [centered](#) on, what the president called, “peaceful disposition.” This does not mean it cannot go on the offensive. The operationalization of the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept (CADC) by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) embodies this shift towards a proactive defense posture. The CADC aims to safeguard national territorial integrity and ensure unimpeded access to natural resources within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). However, the full realization of the CADC’s objectives hinges crucially on the enactment of the Maritime Zones Bill. This legislation is essential to provide the legal framework necessary for the AFP to execute its strategic goals effectively. Without the Maritime Zones Bill, the Philippines risks compromised security and diminished regional stability, highlighting the urgent need for legislative action to fortify national defense capabilities.

It must do what it can to ensure long-term support from its allies if anything that it wishes to accomplish (military modernization, cybersecurity, environment) is to succeed. Recent initiatives such as the [partnership](#) between the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and Philippine Space Agency (PhilSA) to utilize space technology for maritime domain awareness underscore this commitment. Furthermore, the [substantial Japanese investment](#) in five large patrol ships for the PCG signifies a significant step towards enhancing the country's maritime security posture. These developments align with the Philippines' Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept (CADC), which prioritizes external defense. Joint military and law enforcement exercises, like the recent one in Western Mindanao, [demonstrate](#) the nation's growing capacity to protect its territorial integrity and exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

The US has an overwhelmingly [negative](#) view of China and the Philippines can solidify American favor by presenting itself as a [stalwart ally](#) against China. This would align with the recent US [announcement](#) of a regional framework. It would do well for the Philippines to have the [same strong relationship](#) with the US as Japan and South Korea have. The Philippines can do the [same with Europe](#), strengthening relations while also bolstering its regional position. While China can feel threatened by this, it is also likely that it will [further restrain](#) its actions by seeing a united front. Indeed, China would not feel otherwise if it was not attempting its [diplomatic outreach](#) in the region.

Every turning point is also a moment of transformation. The Philippines, however slowly, is growing stronger in its security. But this is a hollow victory without any proper framework to fall back on. The sooner the Maritime Zones Bill becomes law, the better it will be for national security and the wider security of the region.