

## KARAGATAN OBSERVER | DECEMBER 2021 – JANUARY 2022

### **Summary**

The Philippines was struck by Typhoon Odette on 16 December 2021. In the aftermath of the storm, Philippine allies and partners demonstrated their capacity to speedily respond to the country's needs. It is this exact interconnectedness that the Philippines must continue to foster and build upon. As 2022 began in earnest, the international community welcomed a report from the United States (U.S.) definitively refuting China's maritime claims in the South China Sea.

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### **Storm Clouds in the Indo-Pacific**

The issue of Taiwan remained on the forefront as the year 2021 came to an end. The island democracy [warned](#) that China could launch a surprise attack in the guise of a military drill. [President Tsai Ing-wen](#) said on New Year's Day that China's military conflict is not the answer to the current situation. Taiwan's parliament passed in early January 2022 an [extra spending bill](#) for defense capabilities.

States opposed to Chinese aggression continue to make steps to ensure regional security and stability. Taiwan [expressed gratitude](#) to Australia for its consistent "record" of support and called for closer relations and increased dialogue. Japanese and U.S. armed forces have drafted an [emergency plan](#) for joint operations. Former Japanese Prime Minister [Shinzo Abe](#) called China's "military adventure" as "suicidal", and urged like-minded states to cooperate to increase Taiwan's relevance on the international stage.

Overt support for Taiwan has come alongside attempts at neutrality. During the 2021 Summit for Democracy, a map depicting Taiwan and China in separate colors was cut off from a video. A [report](#) came out that the U.S. did not want to be seen as “being at odds” with its One China Policy. Meanwhile, President Rodrigo Duterte declared that [the Philippines would remain neutral](#) in the event of a conflict between Taiwan and China, citing the potential for war from a single “miscalculation.” [Cagayan Governor Manuel Mamba](#) opposed plans for a joint U.S.-Philippines exercise so as to avoid a Chinese reaction, alluding to the proximity to Taiwan as a “*powder keg*”.

Calling Taiwan “[the biggest tinder-box](#)”, China repeatedly warned that any attempt at “independence” would be met with “[drastic measures](#)” upon Taiwan and an “[unbearable price](#)” for its supporters, specifically the U.S. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 2022, China sent the [second largest incursion](#) on record into Taiwan’s airspace. The sustained pressure on Taiwan has already caused an accidental crash, likely a result of [fatigue among Taiwanese pilots](#). Nevertheless, China is expected to face [difficulty in its invasion](#) should it choose to proceed.

Meanwhile, North Korea began 2022 with [three days of missile testing](#) from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> to [global condemnation](#). North Korean leader [Kim Jong Un](#) vowed on New Year’s Day to bolster his country with upgraded weaponry.

### ***Battening Down the Hatches***

The region continues to see advances in security ties and military build-up, changes in foreign policies, and shifts in domestic politics, all to [varying degrees across Southeast Asia](#). ASEAN held its [first navy drill with Russia](#), a “security twist” amid engagement with China and the presence of AUKUS. As these occurred, ASEAN’s negotiations for the Code of Conduct with China “*went nowhere*”, as Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. [stated](#). Despite the stall in negotiations, China [reiterated](#) in mid-January that it would not “bully” its neighbors in the South China Sea.

The most explicit examples of anti-Chinese defiance came in January 2022 from the U.S. First, the US report [refuting China’s maritime claims](#); secondly, the US’ [largest naval exercise in the Philippine Sea](#) since October 2021.

### ***Region-wide examples at deterring China varied***

[Germany’s frigate Bayern](#) continues its freedom of navigation trip across the South China Sea, a representation of Germany’s commitment to the rules-based international order, as stated by its Federal Foreign Office. The [USS Benfold](#) did the same around the Paracel Islands. South Korea likewise revealed its “[anti-access/area denial \(A2/AD\) plan](#)” – a combination of anti-ship ballistic missiles with satellite intelligence.

Japan made significant progress in the past two months. It signed a [Reciprocal Access Agreement](#) with Australia – a testament to their [deepening relationship](#) amid common experience of earning China's ire regarding Taiwan. Japan also [increased its defense cooperation](#) with the U.S. Furthermore, Japan's Defense Ministry also had notable revelations: researching [railguns](#) to counter Chinese hypersonic missiles, conducting its own [freedom of navigation operations](#), while noting 332 days of Chinese incursions in its territorial waters in 2021 alone. It has also agreed to establish a [security hotline](#) with China.

### ***The Philippines: Resolved for 2022***

After Typhoon Odette ravaged the Philippines in mid-December, relief donations and funds were provided by [the country's many allies](#). The Philippine Navy demonstrated the versatility of its vessels by assembling a 19-ship [flotilla for humanitarian aid](#) to affected communities. The damage of the typhoon extended also to maritime security facilities, as in the case of the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) station in [Kalayaan, Palawan](#), having been *"totally washed out"*.

However, whilst recovering from Typhoon Odette, the Philippines welcomed 2022 with a handful of milestones. A prelude of reaffirmations from like minded states including [the United States, Australia, Japan](#), and [South Korea](#) by the end of 2021, has set Manila ready for 2022 in time for leadership change.

The first was the acquisition of [BrahMos missiles](#) from India, equipping the Philippine Navy with the world's fastest supersonic cruise missiles. The contract was [signed](#) on Jan. 28.

The second was the release of the U.S report which was met with [positive reception](#), with some noting that the report [drew heavily](#) from the 2016 Arbitration Award.

The third was the signing of terms of reference between the armies of the Philippines [and South Korea](#) – the beginning of an ironclad alliance which would include military training, technology cooperation, and research and development. Furthermore, it was reported that South Korea would be sending a [Pohang-class corvette](#), as part of the deal signed last December.

The fourth was the [Jessica Soho Presidential Interviews](#) wherein four presidential candidates were able to voice their platforms – notably including their views on the country's maritime security. All [four interviewed presidential candidates](#) vowed to uphold the 2016 Arbitration Award alongside varying approaches to addressing China. A few days later, [five presidential candidates](#) were given an opportunity to further clarify their stances in the Boy Abunda Presidential Interviews.

## ***Analysis***

As the Philippines moves closer to the 2022 national elections, China remains a looming storm over [Filipino politics](#). The [survey](#) conducted by the Social Weather Stations showed that more than 80% of respondents wanted the next administration to enforce the 2016 Arbitration Award, assert the country's rights over the West Philippine Sea, and to seek alliance with other countries. Additionally, more than half of respondents wished for strengthening military capability of the Navy and the Coast Guard, to conduct joint exercises and patrols with allies, and to fully implement agreements such as the Visiting Forces Agreement. Fishers group [Pamalakaya](#) made their endorsement on the conditions of upholding national sovereignty and protecting fishers in the West Philippine Sea.

Presidential candidates have echoed the people's views.

Presidential candidate [Senator Ping Lacson](#) said that President Duterte has failed in his key advocacies, compromising the welfare of Filipino fishermen for friendship with China. Presidential candidate [Leody de Guzman](#) said that the West Philippine Sea should be made into a demilitarized economic zone that benefits Southeast Asians. Presidential candidate Manila [Mayor Isko Moreno](#) reiterated the importance of the West Philippine Sea and military modernization to his "Filipino First, Philippines First" policy. Presidential candidate [Vice President Leni Robredo](#) said that any agreement with China will come only after China recognizes the 2016 Arbitration Award. Conversely, some fear that [Ferdinand Marcos Jr.](#) will repeat, or even aggravate, the current administration's approach to China. Indeed, Marcos has declared that he [would not seek US assistance](#) if negotiations break down, arguing for continuing the current administration's bilateral dialogue. In partial agreement, Presidential candidate [Senator Emmanuel Pacquiao](#) expressed his plans to set-up a 'peace panel' concerning China and the West Philippine Sea, hinting also at plans to prepare for conflict should the need arise.

The Philippines in 2022 stands as a fulcrum to Indo-Pacific politics. Already, its [purchase of the BrahMos missiles](#) has shown how India can become a more reliable partner and how other states in Southeast Asia can [diversify its security posture](#).

The Philippines must continue to be wary of China as it approaches the national election in May. China used 2021 to solidify its stratagems: [economic interdependence](#), supplying [untested arms](#) (which the Philippines must bear in mind as it accepts [donations from China](#)), sustained harassment of its rival claimants from Japan's Senkaku to the West Philippines Sea, and [fortifying](#) its facilities in contested territory with military-civilian programs.

Beijing has since shown no signs of ceasing, but the [new president of the Philippines](#) could potentially impact China's tactics in the South China Sea.