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Summary

As the year approaches its end, the Philippines has become more active in protecting its maritime interests. The Department of National Defense has been hard at work to secure the country's territorial integrity. Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana announced that the military's air domain coverage in the West Philippine Sea has been increased from 27% to 57%. The increase in activity has been attributed to recent acquisitions such as surveillance radar and aircraft as well as unmanned aerial vehicles.

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Domestic Developments

As the year approaches its end, the Philippines has become more active in protecting its maritime interests. The Department of National Defense has been hard at work to secure the country's territorial integrity. Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana announced that the military's air domain coverage in the West Philippine Sea has been increased from 27% to 57%. The increase in activity has been attributed to recent acquisitions such as surveillance radar and aircraft as well as unmanned aerial vehicles. Other acquisitions also include two ships from South Korea and a radar system from Japan. He also said that the military is fulfilling its "strategic priorities" despite the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in the WPS. Such priorities include the completed infrastructure in a number of maritime territories such as Kalayaan/Spratlys Islands, Batanes Group of Islands, Sulu Sea and the Philippine Rise, and an increased military presence on the Fuga Islands which recently made headlines because of the possibility of investments coming from state-owned companies in China.

Aside from this, the Philippine military Western Command conducted a "Gas-Oil Platform Takedown" exercise, a simulation of an attack on a Philippine oil platform close to the West Philippine Sea. WESCOM described the exercise as a means of testing "operational readiness and interagency coordination.

In response to the draft China law allowing its coast guard to use weapons on foreign ships in Chinese-claimed reefs, a high-ranking officer of the Armed Forces of the Philippines also maintained that they will increase their presence in the West Philippine Sea.

As China maintains its aggression and expansion in the disputed area, the Philippines finds more value to the supposed to be abrogated Visiting Forces Agreement. The suspension of the termination of the VFA has been

extended for another six months. [A statement](#) from the Department of Foreign Affairs said that the suspension would allow both parties to seek a long-lasting and more effective mutual defense arrangement.

The U.S. Embassy applauded the decision, citing that the U.S. will continue to strengthen an already deep-rooted bilateral relationship with the Philippines. Secretary Lorenzana met with U.S. Charge d'Affaires John Law to discuss the two countries' "robust and deep-rooted military cooperation". The U.S. Embassy officials assured Secretary Lorenzana that there will be no change in the defense alliance regardless of who the president would be. In that same meeting, precision guided military equipment amounting to \$18 million USD, or P869 million pesos, would be delivered in December.

Meanwhile, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte continues to hail China as an economic partner. His lift of the moratorium on oil and gas exploration in the West Philippine Sea in October, paves the way for the resumption the joint oil exploration talks with China. A statement from Chinese foreign ministry confirmed that China and the Philippines have come to an agreement on the joint exploration of oil and gas resources in the South China Sea. Department of Energy Alfonso Cusi encouraged [other possible interested parties](#) such as ASEAN neighbor states for possible cooperation in the disputed area.

While this has [raised alarms and warnings](#) to be cautious in dealing with China-backed companies in the West Philippine Sea, it has also sprung hope that the South China sea disputes can have a formula for a peaceful settlement. According to [Former Supreme Court Justice Antonio Carpio](#), once a commercial agreement is reached between China and the Philippines, it translates to China's recognition of the sovereign rights of the Philippines in the West Philippine Sea. Furthermore, once China makes similar agreements with other states, their respective EEZs will be recognized as well.

In the international arena, President Duterte [appealed for countries to](#) "resist the urge to militarize features, to intimidate and to use other coercive actions" in the disputed area. He also urged states not to make it a "locus of power play", follow UNCLOS, and to fast-tracking the [Code of Conduct](#) for regional stability and political cohesion.

International Developments

The whole world watched the proceedings and awaited the results of the United States' presidential elections in November. While the Trump administration does not want to exit quietly and [without controversies](#), the vote counts ultimately lead to the [victory](#) of now President-elect Joe Biden.

The Biden-Harris team is yet to be inaugurated in January but countries hope for a positive influence and engagement in the region, especially with China. Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong suggested that the Biden administration should develop an "overall constructive relationship" with China. Beijing expects the incoming administration to meet China halfway, manage differences and push for the advancement of Sino-U.S. ties on the right track. There is hope that the relationship between the two countries would be much improved.

On the other hand, Global Times warned that China should ["not harbor any illusions that Biden's election will ease or bring a reversal to China-US relations"](#). In the past, Biden has been critical on Chinese interference in Hong Kong and the internment of Muslim minorities in the Xinjiang region. While experts say that the "eccentric and destabilizing" anti-China statements under the Trump presidency would not be a part of US policy under Biden, it is not expected to soften its stance in the South China Sea. In a debate back in February, Biden said that the U.S. would defy China's no-fly zones in the South China Sea and emphasized that China "must play by the rules".

Also, under new leadership, Japan is taking a lead role in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy. Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga made his first official visit to Vietnam and Indonesia, recognizing ASEAN's pivotal position in the region. Two weeks prior to this visit, the Japanese government hosted two important meetings,

the Quadrilateral meeting of the foreign ministers of Japan, Australia, India and the US and the India-Japan Foreign Ministers Strategic Dialogue.

PM Suga and U.S. Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David Berger also met and agreed to deter China's "unilateral attempts to change the status quo." A [breakthrough defense pact](#) was signed with Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison which is Japan's first agreement to allow foreign military presence since 1960.

Another measure in strengthening the Quad was initiated by India and the US by signing the [Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation](#). The agreement allows the two countries to share military information including advanced satellite and topographic data such as maps, aeronautical charts and geodetic, geophysical, geomagnetic and gravity data. This comes as relations between. The [Malabar exercise](#) was also held in November, with all Quad members participating.

Analysis

The Duterte administration's foreign policy continues to be challenged by great power relations, between territorial disputes and economic needs. In the West Philippine Sea, China's aggressive behavior and statements pose a threat to the Philippines' sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, it cannot also be denied that as an economic powerhouse, China can be a partner to a developing country like the Philippines. Pressed to step away from the United States to gain friendship with China may be fueling the President's desire to terminate the VFA. As such, the country needs to diversify its [security partners](#) and upgrade its defense and military. Internationalization of the issue by issuing stronger statements in the international community which appears to be President Duterte's newfound strategy would not suffice. Strengthening ties and cooperation with the Quad and other ASEAN countries could help as we attempt to recalibrate relations with the US and China. Even with such measures, there would be no guarantee that it would deter the rising power.

Nonetheless, the defense of Philippine sovereignty has become a subject of debate. For instance, with the Philippine Navy's numbers [stretched too thinly](#), it was [suggested](#) to utilize a maritime militia in the West Philippine Sea. National Security Adviser Hermogenes Esperon [disapproved of such plan](#) and said that it would be ill-advised considering the high tensions in the region. Better-trained and better equipped Navy personnel would be more suited. Despite its great need for defense upgrades, the Philippines still has to be careful and cautious as rash actions may further lead to conflict and unfortunate incidents endangering the region's stability.

Though the Duterte administration does not [foresee](#) any significant changes in the Philippine-U.S. relationship under Biden. Analysts argue that certain facets of a Biden presidency could impact the Philippines such as initiatives to fight corruption, uphold human rights, tackling climate change, and remaining "tough on China". Under the Trump administration, the US promised to support the Philippines in the event of a military attack, but the Biden foreign policy team has not confirmed whether the promise still stands.

The Philippines has a crucial role and strategic position in the midst of the China and United States' rivalry. As Secretary Lorenzana [said](#), "If ever a shooting war happens, Philippines which is right smack in the middle of the conflict will be involved whether she likes it or not." Therefore, we foresee that the United States under a Biden presidency would still try to persuade the country to remain as an ally and push for continued cooperation. While the VFA may be flawed, an outright termination would only benefit China and hinder opportunities that can help provide for the Philippines' defense needs.

The Philippines has carefully balanced (or arguably, hedged) itself by engaging with all parties while doing what it can to protect its sovereignty. Amid uncertainties coming from both the United States and China, the Philippines has emphasized regional stability and cooperation while simultaneously searching for ways to strengthen its own defense capabilities. With other states in a similar situation, the Philippines would benefit from improving its relations with its neighboring states just as Japan, Australia or India, and the United States have done. Diplomacy will still be the Philippines' primary foreign policy tool.