

# Countering China Starts with the Philippines

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## Abstract

As China escalates its assertive tactics in the South China Sea, the United States must take bolder action to support its regional allies and partners, starting with the Philippines. This article argues that the United States should begin directly escorting Philippine vessels within their exclusive economic zone, employing nonlethal measures like water cannons to counter Chinese harassment. This measured but resolute stance would send a clear deterrent signal to Beijing, build confidence with Manila and other Asian allies, and emulate the gray-zone tactics China itself uses. Additionally, the United States should encourage the Philippines' "assertive transparency" strategy to rally broader international condemnation of China's expansionist claims. While stopping short of overt military conflict, this multifaceted approach would demonstrate the United States' reliability as a regional security partner and put pressure on China to adhere to international norms. Concrete action to defend the Philippines' sovereignty is a critical first step in countering China's ambitions across the Indo-Pacific.

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The United States ought to initiate the escorting of Philippine ships within their exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and confront Chinese aggressors utilizing similar tactics deployed against rival states. This entails readiness to employ water cannons and other nonlethal measures against Chinese vessels while ensuring the safe passage of Philippine vessels. Such actions will foster trust with the Philippines and other Asian allies and partners, simultaneously conveying an unmistakable message: the United States staunchly supports nations facing bullying tactics from China.

China endeavors to impose a Monroe Doctrine with Chinese characteristics across Asia, leveraging its revamped Maritime Traffic Safety Law of 2021 as a tool to unlawfully police foreign vessels beyond its rightful jurisdiction, extending throughout its self-proclaimed ten-dash line (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> To counteract this, the United States must cultivate trust among our regional partners and allies while conveying a resolute message that Beijing cannot arbitrarily assert dominance over other na-

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<sup>1</sup> "Topic: China's Maritime Traffic Safety Law" (fact sheet, US Indo-Pacific Command, 21 August 2023), <https://www.pacom.mil/>; and Colin Clark, "New Chinese 10-Dash map sparks furor across Indo-Pacific: Vietnam, India, Philippines, Malaysia," *Breaking Defense*, 1 September 2023, <https://breakingdefense.com/>.

tions. A tepid response to China's illicit activities will dissuade Asian partners and embolden China to expand the application of its Maritime Traffic Safety Law into other spheres, posing even greater threats to international commerce in the East and South China Seas.

China's belligerence manifests prominently within the Philippines' EEZ, marked by a decade-long pattern of Chinese harassment intensifying notably in 2023, with 2024 poised for further escalation.<sup>2</sup>

Though the United States has restated its commitment under the 1951 US–Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty to defend Philippine vessels in the South China Sea, Washington's resolution to follow through on that commitment remains unproven.<sup>3</sup> Providing escort to Philippine ships within their EEZ would convey a resolute message to China and compel Beijing to contemplate the repercussions of its aggressive maneuvers should they target US interests. These escort operations would strategically maintain a stance below the threshold of conflict, mirroring the gray-zone tactics employed by China.

Recent joint patrols with the Philippines and the forthcoming announcement of trilateral patrols with Japan later this year underscore Washington's acknowledgment that mere rhetoric and official declarations are insufficient to dissuade China.<sup>4</sup> However, these measures fall short, as illustrated by China's provocations on 5 March and 23 March 2024, resulting in injuries to numerous Philippine sailors.<sup>5</sup> These incidents unfolded as China endeavored to blockade the Philippines from resupplying Second Thomas Shoal well within its internationally recognized EEZ.<sup>6</sup>

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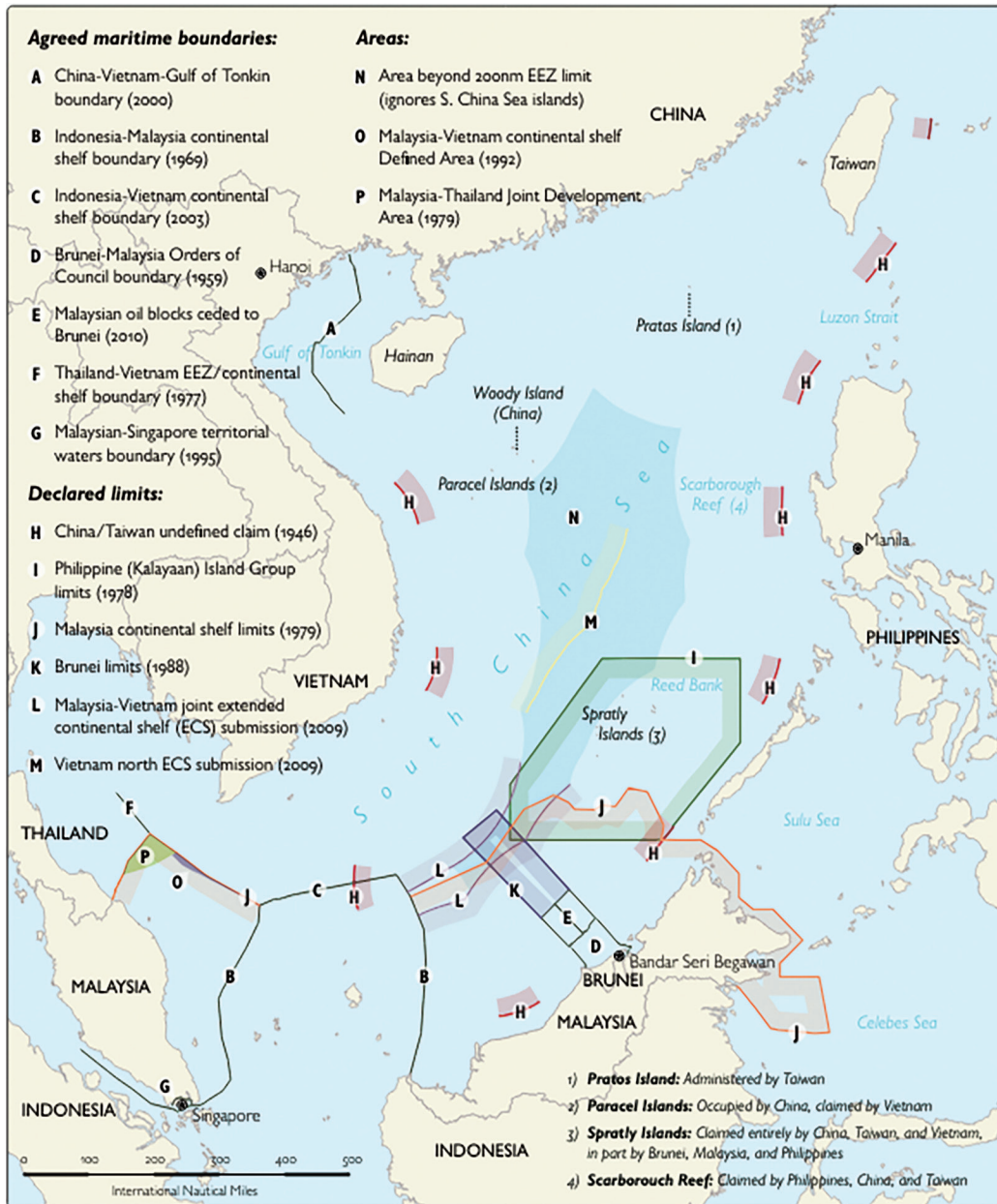
<sup>2</sup> Shannon Tiezzi, "Gregory Poling on Escalating Tension in the South China," *The Diplomat*, 31 December 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Miller, "U.S. Support for the Philippines in the South China Sea" (press statement, US Department of State, 5 August 2023), <https://www.state.gov/>.

<sup>4</sup> Sebastian Strangio, "US, Philippines, China Begin Simultaneous South China Sea Patrols," *The Diplomat*, 4 January 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/>; Phelim Kine, Alexander Ward, and Lara Seligman, "US, Japan, Philippines plan joint South China Sea naval patrols," *Politico*, 29 March 2024, <https://www.politico.com/>; and Office of the Spokesman, "U.S. Support for our Philippine Allies in the Face of Repeated PRC Harassment in the South China Sea" (press statement, US Department of State, 22 October 2023), <https://www.state.gov/>.

<sup>5</sup> Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, "4 Philippine Sailors Injured, 2 Vessels Damaged in Chinese Attempt to Block Second Thomas Shoal Resupply" *USNI News*, 5 March 2024, <https://news.usni.org/>; and Associated Press, "Chinese Coast Guard Hits Philippine Boat With Water Cannons; Crew Hurt," *VOA News*, 23 March 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/>.

<sup>6</sup> "South China Sea Arbitration Ruling: What Happened and What's Next?" (issue brief, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 12 July 2016), <https://www.uscc.gov/>.



**Figure 1. China's ten-dash line.** (Source: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2012 [Washington: DOD, May 2012], 37, <https://dod.defense.gov/>.)

In recent months, the Philippines has launched a “transparency campaign,” shedding light on China’s aggressive tactics to garner broader international support and condemnation of their actions.<sup>7</sup> While this has elicited some international outcry following the documented harassment of Philippine vessels, substantive actions against China have remained elusive.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, transparency is proving instrumental in securing partnerships for the Philippines. This is evidenced by the recent agreement between the Philippines and Vietnam to bolster cooperation and foster interoperability between their respective coast guards.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, India’s recent steadfast backing of the Philippines can also be attributed to this transparency-driven approach.<sup>10</sup>

The Philippine strategy, coined *assertive transparency* by Ray Powell and Benjamin Goirigolzarri, presents a viable model that warrants emulation by other South China Sea claimants grappling with similar belligerence from China, such as Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia.<sup>11</sup> The United States ought to prioritize engagement with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member-states, urging them to adopt the Philippines’ approach. This initiative would foster consensus among Southeast Asian nations, promoting a unified, multilateral stance to counter this aggression, while soliciting international backing against China’s irredentist overreach.

China typically opts for bilateral negotiations with smaller nations, where it holds considerable leverage. However, a more unified stance by ASEAN and partner nations could compel greater multilateral coordination, diminishing China’s economic, diplomatic, and military advantages. While even unprecedented unity among ASEAN and other regional blocs may not suffice to deter China entirely, it could incentivize the United States, Japan, Europe, and other nations to offer more robust, tangible support. Enhanced cohesion within ASEAN and the international community will exert pressure on Beijing to abide by global norms and international laws, lest China risk becoming an isolated pariah state.

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<sup>7</sup> Ray Powell and Benjamin Goirigolzarri, “Assertive Transparency: The Philippines’ Counter Gray Zone Innovation,” *SeaLight*, 7 October 2023, <https://www.sealight.live/>.

<sup>8</sup> Brad Lendon and Kathleen Magramo, “International backlash grows after Chinese vessel fires water cannon on Philippine boats,” *CNN*, 7 August 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/>.

<sup>9</sup> Khanh Vu, “Vietnam, Philippines seal deals on South China Sea security,” *Reuters*, 30 January 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

<sup>10</sup> Aadil Brar, “China Fumes as India Backs US Ally in Heated Territorial Dispute,” *Newsweek*, 27 March 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/>.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond M. Powell and Benjamin Goirigolzarri, *Game Changer: The Philippines’ Assertive Transparency Campaign Against China; How the Philippines Rewrote the Counter Gray Zone Playbook in 2023* (Manila: Stratbase ADRi Publications, 12 January 2024), <https://adrinstitute.org/>.

Countries on China's periphery will hesitate to confront Chinese encroachment and hostility without a clear demonstration from Washington that the United States will stand by them. Taking decisive action with the Philippines to shield their vessels from Chinese harassment would mark the initial stride in showcasing US resolve and dependability. This gesture will signal to partners that the United States deems their freedom of navigation and security significant enough to confront China, if necessary.

If the United States aims to be perceived as a steadfast ally in the region, it must effectively deter Chinese aggression and harassment. Thus far, Washington's rhetoric-heavy approach has fallen short in altering Beijing's behavior. Adopting a more assertive stance in the South China Sea will foster mutual trust and bolster confidence among regional partners and allies, while unequivocally demonstrating US resolve vis-à-vis China. ✪

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Major Geaney is a logistics readiness officer with multiple assignments and deployments to the Middle East and Pacific region. His articles on China have appeared in the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *Task & Purpose*, and *Defense News*. He has been a featured panelist for the International Studies Association and guest on University Press' *Indo-Pacific Visions* podcast.