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Issue Brief

The Emerging Contours of the Philippines' Maritime Strategy

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S*ummary*

China's illicit actions in the South China Sea have become a major security and foreign policy challenge for Manila. It has rejected China's vast territorial claims in the region as inconsistent with the international law. In response, the Philippines has stepped up cooperation with allies and friendly nations.

In the last two decades, China has been pushing its excessive maritime claims through coercive tactics in the South China Sea. China has refused to respect the 2016 arbitral ruling that gave the Philippines sovereignty over its exclusive economic zone. China’s illicit actions have become a major security and foreign policy challenge for Manila. The Philippines has revived its old defence alliances and is building new security partnerships as well as undertaking new maritime strategies to address some of the asymmetries in the maritime space *vis-à-vis* China.

Stepping up Cooperation with Allies and Friendly Nations

On 8 July 2024, the Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr. and Japan’s Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa in the presence of the Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, signed the landmark Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA). The formal negotiations for the RAA which began in November 2023 has been concluded in a record time and is Japan’s first with a Southeast Asian country. The RAA will enable larger and more complex joint military exercises and grant the Self-Defence Forces greater access to the Philippine bases, potentially even enabling rotational deployments.¹

The Philippines in recent years has extensively participated in several bilateral and mini-lateral defence cooperation with like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific. Some of these include trilateral peace and security cooperation with Japan and the United States concluded after the summit held in Washington DC on 11 April 2024. This was followed by a meeting at the Indo-Pacific Command headquarters in Hawaii of the defence ministers of the three countries along with their counterpart from Australia, leading to the formation of SQUAD.²

In recent years, the Philippines under President Marcos Jr. has been strengthening its relations with its ally the United States and establishing Strategic Partnerships with Australia, Japan, Vietnam, Brunei and also with other member states of ASEAN. Given the recurrent incidences in the South China Sea in recent years, the Philippines has sought to counter Chinese assertiveness by enhancing cooperation with its traditional security ally, the US. The Philippines and the US on 2 February 2023 announced a deal which would give American forces access to four more military sites in the Southeast Asian country. This announcement is as per the

¹ Gabriel Dominguez and Jesse Johnson, “[Japan and Philippines Ink Key Military Pact in Defense Ties Upgrade](#)”, *The Japan Times*, 8 July 2024.

² Rommel Jude G. Ong, “[Beyond the Squad: Ideas for the Philippines to Work with a Northeast Asian Minilateral Arrangement](#)”, *Fulcrum*, 3 July 2024.

Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) signed in 2014 that enabled the American military to station troops and weapons at sites across the Philippines.³

The 2024 edition of the Balikatan, an annual exercise between the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the US, witnessed the participation of 16,000 military personnel in exercises relating to amphibious operations, combined arms, aviation operations, and information and cyberspace operations.⁴ With the ASEAN countries, given their shared interests and concerns, the Philippines is pursuing a trilateral collaboration with Indonesia and Malaysia in the Celebes Sea. The Philippines is also pursuing a more robust collaboration with other regional powers such as South Korea and India with whom it shares a common vision of the Indo-Pacific.⁵ The recent delivery of the Brahmos anti-ship missile system from India for the Philippine Marine Corps indicates the positive trajectory of the defence relations which will support the architecture for regional stability.

Upping its Maritime Strategy

In May 2024, at the Shangri-La Dialogue, President Marcos Jr., articulated in his speech the primacy of his country’s national interest, his foreign policy and national security agenda, and the importance of contesting China’s use of hard power to support its excessive maritime claims.⁶ President Marcos Jr., emphasised on upholding and preserving the integrity and physical unity of the country through international law including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which ‘...clarified the limits of each state’s maritime zones and defined the extent with which they could exercise sovereignty, their sovereign rights, and jurisdiction over those zones...’ The ASEAN vision on the South China Sea as a ‘sea of peace, stability, and prosperity’ according to Marcos Jr., remains for now a distant reality on account of the maritime differences which gets widened due to illegal, coercive, aggressive and deceptive actions violating sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdictions.⁷

The UNCLOS, agreed upon in 1982 and in force since 1994, adopted 12 nautical miles as the extent of the baseline for territorial waters. It also added to the baseline

³ Mike Ives, [“A Primer on US-Philippines Military Ties”](#), *The New York Times*, 2 February 2023.

⁴ [“Philippines and U.S. Conclude Balikatan Exercise, Shoulder-To-Shoulder”](#), U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Pacific, 10 May 2024.

⁵ [“Keynote Address of President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. for the 21st IISS Shamgri-La Dialogue”](#), Presidential Communication Office, Government of the Philippines, 31 May 2024.

⁶ Rommel Jude G. Ong, [“Beyond the Squad: Ideas for the Philippines to Work with a Northeast Asian Minilateral Arrangement”](#), no. 2.

⁷ [“Keynote Address of President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. for the 21st IISS Shamgri-La Dialogue”](#), no. 5.

a contiguous zone of 24 nautical miles and an exclusive economic zone and continental shelf of 200 nautical miles. Further, Part VI (Articles 76 to 85) of the UNCLOS has provisions for an extended continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles. There are several conditions which a coastal state has to meet in order to submit particulars to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), in order to establish the outer limits of their continental shelf. This has further created overlapping claims amongst coastal states in the Indo-Pacific region, as being witnessed today in the South China Sea.⁸

President Marcos Jr. in his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue enumerated the legal basis of the Philippines in determining its territorial boundary and sovereign entitlements. Following this on 15 June 2024, the Philippines submitted information to the CLCS to register its entitlement to an extended continental shelf in the West Palawan Region in the West Philippines Sea. Its submission to the UN is after undertaking more than 15 years of scientific research in the West Philippine Sea by the National Mapping and Resource Information Agency (NAMRIA).

The NAMRIA led the Extended Continental Shelf Technical Working Group gathering and processing data on geodetic and hydrographic information, and geophysical and geological information to substantiate the submission. This is the second time the Philippines has made a submission on an extended continental shelf entitlement. In April 2009, Manila made a partial submission on the Philippine Rise, which the CLCS validated in 2012, resulting in an additional 1,35,506 square kilometers of seabed for the Philippines.⁹

The Philippines rejected China’s vast territorial claims in the region as inconsistent with international law, including the UNCLOS. In its latest submission, Manila has asked the UN body to formally recognise the extent of its undersea continental seabed through which it would have exclusive rights to exploit resources. Manila claimed it was entitled to ‘establish the outer limits of its continental shelf’ up to 350 nautical miles (648 kilometers) off the western island of Palawan, the maximum allowed under the UNCLOS.¹⁰ As per Article 76 of the UNCLOS:

The continental shelf of a coastal State comprises the seabed and subsoil of the submarine areas that extend beyond its territorial sea throughout the natural prolongation of its land territory to the outer

⁸ Hew Strachan, “Underwriting Innovation: Maritime Strategy and Geopolitics”, in Alessio Patalano and James A. Russell (eds), *Maritime Strategy and Naval Innovation; Technology, Bureaucracy, and the Problem of Change in the Age of Competition*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 2021, pp. 27–28.

⁹ [“Philippines Makes Official Submission to U.N. on Entitlement to an Extended Continental Shelf in the West Philippines Sea”](#), The Embassy of the Philippines, Singapore, 18 June 2024.

¹⁰ [“Philippines Submits U.N. Claim to Extended Continental Shelf”](#), *The Japan Times*, 16 June 2024.

edge of the continental margin, or to a distance of 200 nautical miles from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured..

Further, Article 77 of the UNCLOS grants the coastal State sovereign rights over the natural resources found on or beneath the continental shelf.¹¹



Figure 1. Overlapping Continental Shelf of the Philippines, China, Malaysia and Vietnam in the South China Sea

Source: [Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative](#).

The undersea region where the Philippines seeks to formally establish its sovereign rights under the UNCLOS covers the Spratlys Islands and overlaps with the claims of other coastal states—China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan. Figure 1 indicates the overlapping continental shelf claims of the Philippines, China, Malaysia and Vietnam in the South China Sea. China has filed a protest against

¹¹ [“Part VI Continental Shelf”](#), UNCLOS.

the Philippines’ request to extend its continental shelf claim in a note verbale on 18 June 2024. China appealed to the UNCLOS not to consider the submission filed by the Philippines, which invoked its rights under the UNCLOS. China stated that it has indisputable sovereignty over the South China Sea Islands and the adjacent waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof.¹²

Further, in a note verbale to UN Secretary General António Guterres on 27 June 2024, Malaysia’s permanent mission to the United Nations also opposed the Philippine submission to formally recognise the extent of its undersea continental shelf, saying it is projected from the baselines of Sabah. Malaysia requested the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf not to examine and qualify the Philippines’ Partial Submission as it clearly disregards its indisputable sovereignty over the state of Sabah.¹³

As per the Manila Accord signed on 31 July 1963, an agreement was reached between Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines to resolve the territorial dispute over Sabah peacefully.¹⁴ However, on 18 September 1968, the Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos signed a Congressional Bill for the demarcation of the territorial sea of the Philippines, according to which it had sovereignty over the state of Sabah. The Malaysian Government dismissed these claims by describing it as a violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and described this unilateral action as being aggressive and highly provocative.¹⁵

Malaysia in December 2020 had also submitted a request to the CLCS to extend its continental shelf beyond the 200-nautical mile limit. The Philippines then had rejected Malaysia’s claim as it overlapped with its claims over the Kalayaan Island Group and portions of North Borneo. In a note verbale dated 6 March, the Philippine Mission to the UN noted that Malaysia's submission also overlaps with the country's continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles from the baselines from which the Philippine territorial sea is measured.¹⁶ Sabah’s resource abundance along with its geo-strategic potential makes it crucial to both Malaysia and the Philippines, which has led to the ongoing discord between them for more than six decades.

¹² Jane Bautista, “[China Protests Philippines’ Claim of Extended Continental Shelf](#)”, *Inquirer.Net*, 22 June 2024.

¹³ Pia Lee-Brago, “[Malaysia Opposes Philippines Continental Shelf Claim](#)”, *Phil Star*, 1 July 2024.

¹⁴ Faisal S. Hazi, “[Domination, Contestation, and Accommodation: 54 Years of Sabah and Sarawak in Malaysia](#)”, *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2018, pp. 341–361.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Marston, “[International Law and the Sabah Dispute](#)”, *The Australian Year Book of International Law Online*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1 January 1970, pp. 103–152.

¹⁶ Patricia Lourdes Viray, “[Invoking Arbitral Award, Philippines Rejects Malaysian, Chinese Claims in South China Sea](#)”, *Phil Star*, 11 March 2020.



Figure 2. Map of Sabah

Source: **Map of Malaysia (Political)**.

As indicated on the map in Figure 2, Sabah’s 1,000-mile shoreline is washed by three bodies of water—the South China Sea on the West, the Sulu Sea on the northeast, and the Celebes Sea on the southeast. The nature of Sabah’s western coasts includes sandy beaches suitable for the landing of conventional amphibious craft. Further, the sandy beaches along the shores of Gaya Bay, north of Kota Kinabalu are well suited for a large-scale amphibious landing. The Eastern Sabah with fewer stretches of straight coastline, has correspondingly fewer sandy beaches, muddy shores backed by impenetrable mangrove swamps limiting large-scale amphibious landings and operations. The approaches from the Sulu and Celebes Seas present a maze of coral reefs, submerged rocks, sandbars and so on. These provide a natural deterrence by limiting any operations through only small naval craft.¹⁷

Meanwhile, Vietnam on 20 June 2024, responding to Manila’s submission, did not protest outright but instead said that while coastal states had the right to determine

¹⁷ **“Intelligence Report: Geographic Brief on Sabah”**, Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence, April 1969.

their outer continental shelf boundaries under UNCLOS, when submitting their claims ‘they must respect the legal and legitimate rights and interests of other relevant coastal nations with opposite or adjacent coasts’. The Philippines welcomed Vietnam’s recognition of the submission and stated that it was ready to engage with Hanoi on possible ways forward that would help achieve a mutually beneficial solution to South China Sea issues in accordance with international law, particularly the UNCLOS. Meanwhile, Vietnam has said that it was ready to hold talks with the Philippines to seek a solution that was mutually beneficial for both countries.¹⁸

Conclusion

The Philippines, being the second largest archipelagic nation, finds itself geographically located in one of the world most contested region. The disorder marked by deep geopolitical tension in the maritime space has made it difficult to address issues through dialogue and diplomacy. In order to protect its interests, the Philippines has adopted a strategy of building its defence capabilities by pursuing a more robust collaboration with States with whom it shares common interest. Going forward, diplomacy and dialogue will be crucial to addressing key outstanding issues with its immediate neighbours. Much efforts are also required towards upholding the rule of law in international affairs such as UNCLOS in order to safeguard its interests in the maritime domain. This will require a collective effort with like-minded countries which are committed to peace and in preserving and strengthening the rules-based regional order.

¹⁸ [“Philippines ‘Ready’ to Discuss Continental Shelf with Vietnam”](#), *RFA*, 2 July 2024.

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