

■ STRATEGIC STUDIES PROGRAM

Defending the West Philippine Sea

Japan's Crucial Role in Countering Gray Zone Operations in the Maritime Domain

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During the commemorative summit for the 50th anniversary of the ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. was asked in a media interview to share his thoughts on the current approach of the Philippines in dealing with its maritime dispute with China. While he has remained open to the possibility of working with President Xi Jinping through peaceful dialogue and consultations, President Marcos Jr. said that his administration's diplomatic efforts with China have shown no signs of progress. He admitted that traditional methods of diplomacy, such as a *démarche* or a diplomatic protest, have not been effective (Mangaluz and Lazaro 2023).

President Marcos Jr. then stressed the crucial need for a paradigm shift as tensions in the maritime domain continue to rise. He said the situation with China is heading in a poor direction and would remain the same if the Philippines does not change its ways (Mangaluz and Lazaro 2023). In line with this, President Marcos Jr. urged the Philippine government “to move the needle”

and develop a new concept or approach to maintaining peace and stability in the West Philippine Sea.

Under his leadership, cracks in the country's relations with China have become more noticeable. While he has consistently advocated for the peaceful resolution of disputes, China has intensified its coercive and illegal activities in the maritime domain. Aside from its construction and militarization of artificial islands in various parts of the West Philippine Sea, it has also deployed its coast guard and maritime militia to intimidate and harass Philippine vessels in the disputed waters.

On December 6, 2023, the House of Representatives (HOR) adopted House Resolution No. 1494 to condemn China's aggression in the West Philippine Sea (Cervantes 2023a). The resolution described in detail China's coercive and illegal activities in the maritime domain, including its dangerous maneuvers against Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) vessels, harassment of Filipino fishermen in Bajo de Masinloc (Scarborough Shoal), and

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unauthorized marine scientific research activities. In addition, it also mentioned China's frequent harassment of Philippine vessels conducting rotation and resupply (RORE) missions to the BRP² Sierra Madre (Cervantes 2023a). Overall, the resolution urged the Philippine government to assert and protect its sovereign rights in line with the 2016 arbitral ruling and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). It also emphasized the importance of modernizing the PCG and developing a self-reliant defense posture program to maintain peace and stability in the West Philippine Sea.

Following the adoption of the resolution, House Speaker Martin Romualdez issued a statement demanding immediate and concrete actions from China. He said that China's deliberate blocking of civilian and humanitarian missions in the West Philippine Sea is a "blatant violation of international norms and a direct challenge to the country's sovereignty and rights" (House of Representatives 2023). Reaffirming the stance of the Philippine government, Speaker Romualdez called on China to respect the country's sovereignty and engage in peaceful dialogue to resolve disputes. He also stressed the importance of upholding international law and urged the international community to support countries in protecting their sovereign rights (House of Representatives 2023).

Over the years, China has repeatedly accused the Philippines of "irresponsibly" escalating tensions in the maritime domain. This fabricated narrative has been circulating across its official channels and mainstream media. Despite China claiming to be the victim in the maritime dispute over the West Philippine Sea, it has continued to employ gray zone operations to put pressure on the Philippines and eventually gain control of the disputed waters.

The Threat of Gray Zone Operations

Gray zone operations are ambiguous and subversive actions intended to achieve political and security objectives without armed conflict (Morris et al. 2019). They are often employed to gradually destabilize and

weaken a target state using non-military or non-kinetic tools. China has relied on these operations to advance its strategic interests while avoiding the perception that it is provoking conflict in the West Philippine Sea (Misalucha-Willoughby 2023).

Recent incidents in the West Philippine Sea have highlighted China's use of gray zone operations in the maritime domain. For instance, a vessel operated by the China Coast Guard (CCG) directed a military-grade laser at the BRP Malapascua during a RORE mission near the Ayungin Shoal last February 2023, temporarily blinding a PCG personnel on duty. The CCG vessel also issued illegal radio challenges and engaged in dangerous maneuvers that risked collision (Dela Cruz 2023).

These events have prompted President Marcos Jr. to summon Chinese Ambassador Huang Xilian. He discussed and expressed his concern regarding the increasing frequency and intensity of China's actions against the PCG and Filipino fishermen (Parrocha 2023). The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) also filed a diplomatic protest condemning the aggressive actions of the CCG. DFA spokesperson Ma. Teresita Daza reiterated that the Philippines has the prerogative to conduct activities within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ), and reminded China that it does not have any law enforcement rights over the Ayungin Shoal (Al Jazeera 2023).

Unfamiliar with scenarios involving nonmilitary or nonkinetic tools, the Philippine government has struggled to assess and quantify the risks associated with gray zone operations. Its efforts to identify patterns in the way that they are used have been limited. This is because these operations are designed to evade detection by remaining below the threshold of armed conflict (Harrington and McCabe 2021). The lack of a clear understanding of gray zone operations within the country's defense establishments has also constrained its capacity to establish effective countermeasures. Unlike conventional military tactics that can be deterred with modern defense equipment and weapons, countering gray zone operations in the West Philippine Sea requires a more cohesive and comprehensive strategy.

² BRP stands for *Barko ng Republika ng Pilipinas* (Ship of the Philippine Republic).

Current Policy Measures and Initiatives of the Philippine Government

Since taking office in June 2022, President Marcos Jr. has remained committed to defending the country's sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction in the West Philippine Sea. Signaling a clear departure from the foreign policy stance of the previous administration, he has actively promoted the country's strategic interests abroad. He has also explored new areas of cooperation with allies and partners in the region. Aside from fostering economic partnerships, President Marcos Jr. has also taken significant steps to strengthen the country's security ties with like-minded states such as the United States, Japan, and Australia. This strategic redirection can be seen in his foreign and security policy decisions, including the revival and expansion of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the United States, the signing of a strategic partnership agreement with Australia, and the proposed Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) with Japan.

President Marcos Jr. has encouraged the country's allies and partners to participate in joint maritime and air patrols. In February 2024, the Philippines and the United States completed their third Maritime Cooperative Activity (MCA) in the West Philippine Sea. The activity included advanced planning and maritime communication operations to further develop interoperability between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) (Mendoza 2024). Along with several naval and air assets from the US Navy, the Philippine Navy deployed the BRP Gregorio del Pilar to survey an undisclosed area within the country's EEZ. The MCA was first launched in November 2023, as part of a series of initiatives approved by the Mutual Defense Board-Security Engagement Board (MDB-SEB) of both countries (Gita-Carlos 2023). Its second iteration took place on January 3–4, 2024. It included passing exercises, communication checks, cross-deck exercises, joint patrols, officer of the watch (OW) maneuvers, and fixed-wing flight operations (Nepomuceno 2023).

Last year, the Philippines and Australia also conducted their first joint maritime and air patrol, following the strategic partnership agreement that President Marcos Jr. and Australia Prime Minister Anthony Albanese signed in September 2023 (Wyeth 2023). The AFP and the Australian Defense Force (ADF) participated in goodwill activities, including joint maneuvers, communications exercises, and maritime domain awareness patrols (Culley 2023). The Philippine Navy deployed the BRP Gregorio del Pilar and the BRP Davao Del Sur, while the Royal Australian Navy sent the HMAS³ Toowoomba. The Philippine Air Force and the Royal Australian Air Force also took part in the activity. In a statement, President Marcos Jr. underscored the importance of the joint maritime and air patrol in fostering closer cooperation with Australia. He also reaffirmed the shared commitment of both countries to support the rules-based international order and a peaceful, secure, and stable region (Lariosa 2023).

After the success of its joint maritime and air patrols with the United States and Australia, the Philippine government has been considering the possibility of facilitating similar arrangements with other countries, particularly those that share a common interest in defending the West Philippine Sea. According to the Department of National Defense (DND), potential partners include Japan, France, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom (Royandoyan 2023).

President Marcos Jr. has also reached out to the other members of the ASEAN in an effort to maintain peace and stability in the disputed waters. During his state visit to Vietnam in January 2024, he met with Vietnamese President Vo Van Thuong to find and discuss ways to manage and prevent incidents in the disputed waters. The two leaders also witnessed the signing of an agreement between the PCG and the Vietnam Coast Guard (VCG) to establish a Joint Coast Guard Committee (JCGC) and a hotline communication mechanism (Sadongdong 2024). According to President Marcos Jr., the memorandum of understanding (MOU) seeks to develop a comprehensive partnership between the two coast guards through initiatives such as capacity-building programs, as well as personnel and ship exchanges (Presidential Communications Office 2024).

³ HMAS stands for "His Majesty's Australian Ship."

To reinforce the country's military and law enforcement presence in the West Philippine Sea, the Philippine government, despite previous setbacks, has pushed for measures to accelerate the modernization of the AFP and the PCG. Early this year, President Marcos Jr. approved its plan to fast-track the acquisition of new weapons and equipment, such as multi-role fighters, radars, and missile systems (Mangosing 2024). He also directed the DND to conduct a strategic review with the AFP to ensure that the deployment of the country's military forces is responsive to the region's evolving security landscape (Flores and Punongbayan 2023). Several policy measures to modernize and transform the PCG have also been filed in the HOR and the Philippine Senate.

In recent years, the Philippines has become a target of disinformation campaigns, particularly on issues related to its maritime dispute with China. These campaigns are intended to propagate pro-China rhetoric and downplay China's use of gray zone operations in the maritime domain. To address this concern, President Marcos Jr. has allowed government agencies to monitor, document, and publicize incidents in the West Philippine Sea, an initiative that was not practiced during the previous administration. Local and foreign journalists have also been permitted to join civilian and humanitarian operations in the disputed waters as part of a broader strategy to curb disinformation and impose reputational costs on China (Powell and Goirigolzarri 2023). In addition, the National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea (NTF-WPS) has actively coordinated with the PCG and other relevant agencies to ensure that the dissemination of public information is transparent and unbiased. According to PCG spokesperson Commodore Jay Tarriela, this initiative enables the Philippine government not only to demand accountability from China but also to raise public awareness and build international support. He encouraged the international community to become more vocal and transparent against actions that defy international law and disrupt peace in the region (Ombay 2024).

Although these policy measures and initiatives demonstrate the firm resolve of the Philippine government to defend the West Philippine Sea, they remain inadequate in the face of an increasingly assertive China. As it continues to create uncertainties in the disputed waters, it is crucial for President Marcos Jr. and his administration to strengthen the country's cooperation with its allies and partners in the region.

Without their support, it would be challenging for the Philippine government to build a credible defense posture and develop a cohesive and comprehensive strategy to counter gray zone operations.

This could be a new opportunity for Japan—a major security actor whose ties with the Philippines have thrived in recent years—to play a more significant role in maintaining peace and stability in the region. Driven by its vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), Japan could provide the Philippines with a strategic advantage in dealing with its maritime dispute with China and countering China's use of gray zone operations in the West Philippine Sea.

Japan's Crucial Role in Countering Gray Zone Operations

After President Marcos Jr.'s five-day official visit to Japan in February 2023, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida visited the Philippines from November 3–4, 2023. The goal was to discuss a wide range of issues with the Philippine government, including the current situation in the West Philippine Sea. In a historic first, he delivered a policy speech in front of the members of the Philippine Congress wherein he reaffirmed Japan's commitment to further strengthen its strategic partnership with the Philippines. Referring to the Philippines as an “irreplaceable” partner, Prime Minister Kishida also emphasized the importance of fostering multilayered cooperation among allies and like-minded states in the region to maintain and strengthen the free and open international order based on the rule of law (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023).

The strategic partnership between Japan and the Philippines has continued to become stronger and more resistant to change. Aside from reinvigorating its alliance with the United States, the Philippines has harnessed the positive momentum in its relations with Japan to deepen cooperation on defense and security. This is evident in the number of key initiatives and agreements that both countries have signed in recent years. Recognizing the importance of maintaining peace and stability in the region, President Marcos Jr. and Prime Minister Kishida have consistently worked together to take the partnership to new heights.

In line with its new FOIP plan, Japan has steadily supported the Philippines, particularly on issues in the West Philippine Sea. Its fourth pillar, which focuses on

“extending efforts for security and safe use of the sea to the air,” has allowed Japan to assist the Philippines in improving the capabilities of the PCG (Lalu 2023).

Prime Minister Kishida confirmed that Japan had already provided twelve vessels to the PCG during his visit to the Philippines. He also mentioned that Japan would provide funding for the acquisition of five more vessels to boost its capacity to conduct maritime security and maritime safety operations in the disputed waters (Department of Transportation 2023). According to Socio-Economic Planning Secretary Arsenio Balisacan, this initiative would enable the PCG to secure important sea lines of communication and enforce maritime laws in the country’s EEZ (France-Press 2023). In the past, Japan has provided maritime patrol aircraft, radars, and other necessary equipment to the Philippines. It has also dispatched experts and facilitated various training programs for PCG personnel.

The current situation in the West Philippine Sea provides a new opportunity for Japan to deepen its defense and security cooperation with the Philippines and play a more significant role in maintaining peace and stability in the region. Familiar with the threat of gray zone operations in the maritime domain, Japan could provide much needed assistance to the Philippine government as it shifts its focus from internal security operations to territorial defense. For instance, Japan could support the country’s efforts to build a credible defense posture through various policy measures, including the newly launched official security assistance (OSA) program and the proposed RAA.

In April 2023, Japan formally launched its OSA program, which seeks to boost the capabilities of its partner countries and their defense establishments through the provision of defense equipment, as well as funding for military infrastructure development. Following its previous announcement regarding an increase in its defense spending, Japan launched the program in light of China’s growing economic and military power (Nishida 2023). On November 3, 2023, Japan decided to give a 600-million-yen grant to the Philippines through the OSA, making it the first beneficiary of the program in Southeast Asia. The funding would be allocated to the procurement of coastal radar systems, which would

help the AFP to develop and strengthen its coastal surveillance and Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) capabilities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023).

On a different note, Japan and the Philippines agreed to finalize the negotiations for a RAA in December 2023. Like the Philippines’ Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the United States, the proposed RAA seeks to increase interoperability between the AFP and the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) by streamlining processes and guidelines for joint training and exercises (Nepomuceno and Bacelonia 2023).⁴ In addition, it would also allow the JSDF to access bases in the country and eventually conduct rotational deployments (Dominguez 2023). Japan has previously signed similar agreements with Australia and the United Kingdom, both of which came into effect in 2023.

President Marcos Jr. emphasized that the RAA would increase the capability of the Philippines not only in terms maritime cooperation but also in terms of disaster preparedness, alleviation, and adjustment (Presidential Communications Office 2023). Similarly, House Speaker Romualdez stated that the RAA with Japan would be a critical step in addressing security challenges in the West Philippine Sea. He noted that China’s aggressive actions, as well as the region’s evolving security landscape, requires robust and cooperative solutions (Cervantes, 2023b)

In the context of the Philippine government’s new approach in documenting and publicizing incidents in the West Philippine Sea, Japan could contribute in developing a transparent and strategic communications plan by establishing a consistent understanding of China’s use gray zone operations in the maritime domain (Poling, Natalegawa, and Fallin 2023). This would enable the Philippine government to raise public awareness and combat disinformation campaigns. Given its experience in the East China Sea, Japan could also facilitate the collection and exchange of information between the Philippines and its other partners in the region to allow better visibility in the disputed waters.

Lastly, Japan could contribute to countering gray zone operations in the maritime domain by coordinating with the Philippines to advance a trilateral security arrangement with the United States. This would enable the Philippine

⁴ The proposed Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) provides a legal framework for the AFP and the JSDF to conduct joint military training activities in both Japan and the Philippines. The RAA aims to simplify procedures, including the deployment of military personnel and the movement of weapons and ammunition. It is also expected to expand the activities that both the AFP and JSDF could engage in aside from military exercises. Once ratified, it would be Japan’s first RAA with a member of the ASEAN.

government to develop a cohesive and comprehensive strategy to defend the West Philippine Sea. By closely working with Japan and the United States, the Philippine government would have the opportunity to harmonize its policies and initiatives, gradually establishing effective

countermeasures. Collective deterrence is crucial not only for addressing China's aggression in the West Philippine Sea but also for promoting and maintaining a rules-based international order.

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