

Sea Power in the Philippine Context

Navigating Turbulent Waters

18 October 2024 | 10:00 AM to 12:00 NN
Seminar Room 1, UP Asian Center



UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES
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An aerial photograph of a Philippine Navy fleet in the South China Sea. The fleet includes the BRP Darang (PS-18), a large amphibious transport dock ship, and the BRP Limasno (PS-26), a medium endurance cutter. Other smaller vessels are visible in the background. The water is dark and choppy, with whitecaps visible. The ships are white with dark hull numbers. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

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"Philippines accuses China of plans to occupy more features in South China Sea."

Authored by Sonal Gera | Published: Apr 03, 2021, 21:38 IST <https://www.wionews.com/world/philippines-accuses-china-of-plans-to-occupy-more-features-in-south-china-sea-375301>

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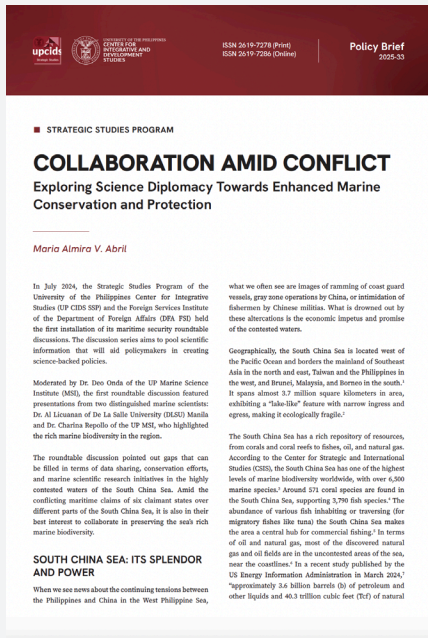
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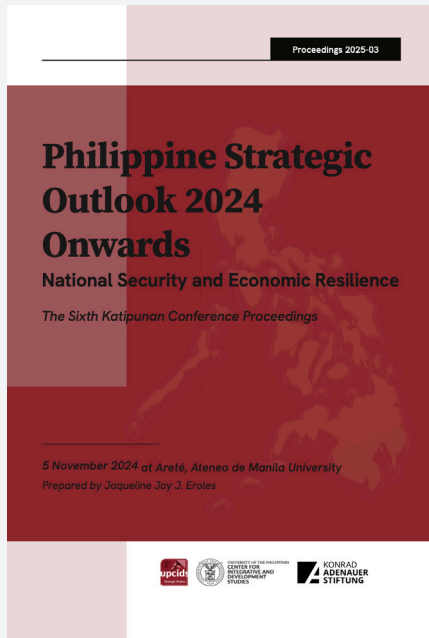
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Sea Power in the Philippine Context

Navigating Turbulent Waters

Captain Dianne Faye C. Despi, PN

UNPACKING THE PHILIPPINES' SEA POWER AND MARITIME NATION

Opening the discussion, Captain Despi pointed to global shipping routes, highlighting that “the Philippines is almost covered in white” on maps of maritime traffic due to its central role in global shipping and trade. Similarly, submarine cable maps revealed the Philippines as “a hub where the submarine cables are actually connected to each other,” emphasizing the dense maritime traffic through and around the archipelago. This reinforces the country’s strategic position as a bridge for goods, services, people, and even data and information connectivity.

With the sea’s broad and strategic advantages, Captain Despi urged a complete departure from the “classic moat mindset,” which regards the waters surrounding the Philippines as a natural bulwark, has been rendered obsolete by advances in missile technology and the porous nature of the country’s maritime borders. She emphasized, “Missiles developed by China . . . can reach us in 4 to 11 minutes,” underscoring the urgency of reevaluating outdated perspectives.

MAHAN'S ARTICULATIONS OF "SEA POWER"

To contextualize the Philippines' maritime challenges, the speaker referenced Alfred Thayer Mahan's seminal work, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*.¹ Mahan identified six key attributes that underpin a nation's sea power: geographical position, coastline configuration, extent of territory, population, character of the people, and character of the government.

Reflecting on the Philippines' strengths and limitations, Mahan noted, "Our population and character as [a] seafaring people are significant assets, but the government must also recognize and support these capacities."

The functions of sea power extend beyond military applications. According to Mahan, sea power is "not just military firepower but also merchant shipping, trade, and the ability to project influence beyond shores." These functions, which include sea control, trade protection, and maintaining order at sea, are as relevant today as they were in Mahan's era.

RECALIBRATING SEA POWER FOR COASTAL STATES AND THE IMPERATIVE FOR A STRATEGIC RESET TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE MARITIME POWER

Turning to the challenges faced by smaller coastal nations like the Philippines, Captain Despi argued that traditional great-power naval strategies are impractical. Instead, the purpose of smaller coastal powers should be "offense." They should be able to avert war from reaching the Philippines' shores. In this regard, she resonated with Jacob Børresen's concept of seapower for coastal states, where the main strategy is characterized by "deterrence and maintenance of sovereignty."²

1 A. T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, 1660-1783 (Cambridge University Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511783289>.

2 Jacob Børresen, "The Seapower of the Coastal State," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 17, no. 1 (1 March 1994): 148-75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399408437544>.

According to Captain Despi, a balanced navy is one that fully engages the whole of government, enabling the navy “to perform several activities across the spectrum of conflict.” This navy should innovate and engage in asymmetric warfare capabilities to assert the country’s sovereignty. As an example, the Battle of Tsushima Strait illustrates the importance of updated and real-time systems, regardless of size. Captain Despi noted how Ukraine’s defensive success against Russia demonstrates the value of “imagination and innovation in employing available resources effectively.”

The speaker clarified, however, that the focus on “deterrence and sovereignty maintenance over offensive capabilities” does not necessarily mean the development of a niche navy with a specific function; instead, she argues for a balanced yet comprehensive navy, that is the realization of the “sum of a nation’s capabilities . . . to be able to use and pursue its objectives on the sea.” According to Captain Despi, the country’s naval power should be the synergy of the military, the civilian-military-civilian maritime law enforcement agencies (CMLEA), which includes the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), Department of Agriculture (DAR); the diplomatic corps, media, businesses, the scientific community, the academic and the overseas Filipinos.

The confluence of various government agencies and institutions, and the participation of the civilian population can help realize the comprehensive maritime power:

So, when you say comprehensive maritime power, as Mahan had said, it’s not just naval and commercial, but it’s actually bigger than that. So, when we say naval power, it’s not just about the navy. It’s about the capacity of your military to be able to put forward and pursue your objectives on the waters, on your own waters especially. Next is commercial or the blue economy. The third is scientific technological, which includes marine science and technology, environmental protection, and sustainability. So, this is also part of what we call comprehensive maritime power. Next is the institutional legal, which covers maritime regimes, our rights, entitlements, and corresponding law enforcement capability. So, it’s important not to just have those rights and entitlements written on paper but to have an actual strong law enforcement capability and be able to enforce it on the ground. Lastly, it’s sociocultural. So, I will relate sociocultural to maritime education and national values more.

Recalibrating the involvement of various domestic institutions and sectors can positively impact the regional aspirations of the country's sea power. Captain Despi argued: "When we want to be relevant when sea power needs to be relevant, it needs to focus on the multidimensional nature and interconnectedness of security challenges in the maritime domain." This suggests that, while issues in the West Philippine Sea may appear to be the primary maritime security concern, it is important not to overlook other critical matters, such as border control and piracy, and be able to address these national security concerns as well.

MARITIME STATECRAFT: ADDRESSING SEA BLINDNESS

Captain Despi first recommended providing a conceptual definition for "maritime statecraft" that reinforces the essential arguments of her discussion: "[M]aritime statecraft is this process of wielding the levers of the state in a concerted way to fulfill national purposes relating to the sea." In particular, citing the US Secretary of the Navy, this is further defined as "consolidating naval power, maritime logistics, ocean science, and blue economy as tools of diplomacy, economic leverage, and geopolitical influence."

Before outlining key areas of concern, Captain Despi shared the importance of addressing sea blindness as a major roadblock in strategically building and shaping the country's maritime sea power. Citing Cropsey (1997), sea blindness is the "strategic befuddlement of powers that forgot, neglected, or were otherwise distracted from their maritime character." To be in the best position to rethink and re-strategize towards realizing the country's sea power, Captain Despi urged the audience to recognize the pitfalls of "sea blindness" resulting from the dominant thrust of the military to focus on internal security, which has stunted the country's external deterrence and defense capabilities.

Symptoms of sea blindness in the Philippines include stagnant governance approaches, inadequate maritime infrastructure, low knowledge production on maritime affairs, and insufficient institutional expertise. The speaker remarked, "If we don't know how to use a navy, how can we direct, implement, and provide the budget for it?"

Thus, she proposed key areas that must be addressed to build the country's maritime power.

The Need for a Comprehensive Maritime Strategy

According to Captain Despi, a maritime strategy should establish particular maritime goals. She says, "It is not just a Navy thing." This includes prioritizing sectors such as industry, science and technology, transport and infrastructure, education, and defense.

Cost-efficient platforms, joint operations among military and civilian agencies, and robust international partnerships were identified as essential components of this strategy. The speaker highlighted the importance of fostering partnerships that are reciprocal rather than one-sided, urging the government to ask, "What can we offer our international partners? What should we develop to become a better partner?" To Captain Despi, this is not only a question of attracting and building alliances but also "strategic partnerships" that not only involve government-to-government partnerships but also explore possible academic and business collaborations.

The synergy of various agencies can also effectively leverage the promise of a blue economy. Specifically, the confluence of military, academe, and the scientific community can work together to protect and also exploit the country's exclusive maritime resources and entitlements.

Scaling Up Diplomatic and Strategic Partnerships

Captain Despi also noted the need to revisit and possibly retool diplomatic partnerships by carrying out an inventory of the Philippines' capacities. "conduct[ing] an inventory of our capacities . . . it's not enough to keep accepting things . . . we should be able to presenting things to others so we would actually be a good partner and not just look like a good partner." She insisted on the importance of tangible contributions while identifying barriers to deeper engagements, such as technology transfer, budget constraints, and infrastructure limitations, like secure ICT infrastructure and systems for information exchanges.

While the country's geostrategic location endows it with unique opportunities, cultivating these requires strategic alignment and targeted development.

An “omnidirectional approach” can also be explored, where government-to-government relations are foundational to other industry/business and civilian sector engagement, such as the academe.

Strong Service: CMLEA and the Navy

To develop robust maritime law enforcement agencies, civilian agencies can operationalize the recently signed Maritime Zones and Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act to define clear agency roles and task delineations, outline accountability mechanisms, and map implementation workflows, as Captain Despi noted, “A law is not an end . . . it is the first step. We need to animate it and put feet on the policy.”

Agencies can cohesively address initial areas of concern, such as border protection across all sectors, maintenance and repair of maritime assets, and enhancement of surveillance capacity. Across the uniformed agencies, joint operations can be pursued to further operationalize the transition from internal to external defense, as outlined in the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept (CADC).

Education and Research as Pillars of Maritime Development

Recognizing the critical role of education and research, Captain Despi called for developing degree programs in maritime policy and establishing research centers dedicated to maritime and naval affairs. She shared this observation: “For a maritime nation, we have surprisingly few research institutions focused on these areas,” they observed. Local and international academic collaborations were also recommended to foster innovative solutions to maritime challenges.

Presentation

Captain Nerelito P. Martinez, PN (MNSA)

The discussion evolved from the theoretical foundations of the nation's maritime power to the operational developments regarding the Philippine Navy's maritime security initiatives, as presented by Captain Martinez, the Assistant Chief of Naval Staff for Plans (N5). He emphasized the Philippines' advantageous geographical position and the significant role of maritime routes in safeguarding the nation's defense, economic stability, and sovereignty. He described the sea as the "lifeblood" of the archipelago, connecting its varied islands and serving as a vital corridor for ongoing trade and commerce. Nonetheless, this maritime prosperity faces threats from aggressive activities in the West Philippine Sea, marked by rising tensions among major powers.

In addressing these challenges, Captain Martinez underscored the need to align the country's defense posture with its maritime identity. He highlighted the shift from internal to external defense priorities, as evidenced by the approval of the revised Horizon 3 modernization projects and a 6.4 percent increase in defense spending for 2025. The Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept (CADC) and the newly enacted Self-Reliant Defense Posture (SRDP) Revitalization Act were cited as foundational measures for achieving self-sufficiency in defense production and reducing dependence on foreign manufacturers. These initiatives aim to strengthen the nation's maritime capabilities while addressing gaps in infrastructure, such as the maintenance and repair of maritime assets, surveillance systems, and border protection across all seaboard.

To secure maritime zones and enforce sovereignty, the Philippine Navy has developed the Strategic Basing Plan to protect critical sea lanes, chokepoints, and archipelagic waterways. Legislative measures such as the proposed Maritime Zones Act and Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act are central to this effort.

As Captain Martinez observed, “A law is not an end . . . it is the first step. We need to animate it and put feet on the policy.”

Collaboration has surfaced as a consistent focus, both within the country and on the global stage. Enhancing maritime situational awareness necessitates the institutionalization of the Philippine Navy's Maritime Situational Awareness System (MSACS) and the development of space-based monitoring capabilities through collaborations with the Philippine Space Agency (PhilSA). The Navy's involvement as co-chair of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus working group on maritime security alongside Japan (2024–2027) further demonstrates its dedication to promoting regional stability and protecting the environment.

Diplomatic and strategic partnerships must be recalibrated to prioritize relationships with nations that respect the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and recognize the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling. Partnerships, however, must be reciprocal. As Captain Martinez stated, “It's not enough to keep accepting things . . . we should be able to present things to others so we would actually be a good partner and not just look like a good partner.”

Beyond defense, the Navy emphasized the need for an omnidirectional approach to maritime governance, involving the academe, private sector, and civil society in shaping the maritime domain. Education and research were highlighted as pillars of maritime development, with calls for the establishment of specialized degree programs in maritime policy and expanded investments in research centers. These efforts aim to address knowledge gaps and foster innovative, data-driven solutions to maritime challenges.

Before ending his presentation, Captain Martinez affirmed the Navy's commitment to safeguard the nation's waters and to uphold its maritime sovereignty. He reiterated the importance of a unified, whole-of-society approach to achieving these objectives: “The Navy will continue its vigilance and efforts until true freedom and security are realized in our waters.”

Open Forum

Captain Xylee Paculba, PN (Ret.)

1. How can the Philippine Navy and other maritime stakeholders enhance their response to nontraditional security threats while also managing traditional security challenges such as territorial disputes?

Captain Martinez

Captain Martinez emphasized the Philippine Navy's dual capacity to address both traditional and non-traditional security threats. He clarified that nontraditional threats often fall under "military operations other than war," encompassing emergencies such as natural disasters and human-caused crises. He stated, "The Air Force of the Philippines is always ready. We have the resources, we have the assets, and we have the procedures and personnel 24/7 to respond to any call for emergency."

To ensure preparedness, the Navy continuously conducts capacity enhancement and maintains the readiness of its assets for quick deployment. This operational readiness extends to both traditional military operations and responses to nontraditional emergencies. Martinez highlighted the importance of interagency coordination, stating, "We cannot just go there and present ourselves. We always do things through the chain of command." He assured participants that the Navy is poised to respond with urgency when called upon to manage any security threat.

Captain Despi

The speaker highlighted a nuanced perspective on addressing nontraditional security concerns, emphasizing the importance of balancing military readiness with the empowerment of civilian agencies and communities. While acknowledging the Navy's critical role in disaster response and humanitarian assistance, Capt. Despi argued: "The Navy should really focus a lot on trying to build the warfighting capability," suggesting that other stakeholders should take a more active role in addressing non-traditional security issues.

Captain Despi called for stronger civilian maritime law enforcement agencies and greater involvement from local government units (LGUs). Empowering the public to contribute to resilience and civil defense was also identified as a key strategy. “Civil defense is a very big part of trying to address non-traditional security issues,” the speaker noted, urging a broader distribution of responsibilities beyond the armed forces.

Specific nontraditional threats, such as human trafficking and smuggling, were highlighted as areas where institutional safeguards and public awareness are essential. Captain Despi concluded by stressing the need to “empower and give the people a chance to really help out in protecting themselves,” reinforcing the importance of a multi-sectoral approach to security challenges.

2. Is there a move to include other maritime stakeholders, such as the Philippine Coast Guard, in the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) joint exercise DAGIT-PA to rehearse and prepare for future non-traditional and maritime security threats?

Capt. Martinez

Captain Martinez confirmed that the AFP’s joint exercise Dagat, Langit, Lupa (DAGIT-PA) is evolving to address nontraditional security threats in the maritime domain. He explained that the exercise, traditionally an interoperability activity among the AFP’s major services, is expanding to include other maritime stakeholders, such as the Philippine Coast Guard, the PNP Maritime Group, and the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR). These agencies are integral to addressing challenges like terrorism, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and other maritime security issues.

“The main purpose of this exercise is for these different units of the AFP and other maritime law enforcement agencies to seamlessly address or respond to threats in the maritime domain,” he stated. By incorporating these stakeholders, the exercise enhances interoperability while shifting its focus toward nontraditional threats, reflecting a broader and more comprehensive approach to maritime security.

FSI Director General Noel Fernandez III

The next series of questions from FSI Director General Noel Fernandez III surfaced the Navy's measured approach to gray-zone threats, reliance on nonmilitary assets for de-escalation, and readiness to respond when necessary. On security dialogues, challenges in diplomatic engagement with China were attributed to structural preferences and geopolitical tensions.

Stakeholder consultation in strategy development remains uneven, with suggestions for greater institutionalization and political oversight to align military operations with national policies.

1. Is the Philippine Navy prepared to counter swarming threats like those employed by China's maritime militia, and how does it address gray-zone tactics in the West Philippine Sea?

Captain Martinez

Captain Martinez acknowledged the complexity of gray-zone operations, particularly swarming tactics by China's maritime militia. He explained that the Navy avoids escalating tensions by refraining from deploying gray ships (naval vessels) to respond to white or civilian-character ships. Instead, the Navy relies on established protocols and utilizes nonmilitary assets, such as Coast Guard vessels, to de-escalate potential conflicts. Martinez shared a specific example: during a recent ramming incident involving the Chinese Coast Guard and the Philippine Coast Guard, the Navy deployed warships to signal readiness. This response alarmed China, prompting diplomatic caution, as "China does not like to involve its gray ships, as it could escalate into a shooting war." The strategy remains focused on avoiding aggression while maintaining readiness to defend maritime interests.

2. Why did the annual security dialogue between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) end, and is there a possibility of its renewal?

Captain Martinez and Captain Paculba

Martinez noted that during the Duterte administration, the Bilateral Consultative Mechanism (BCM) between China and the Philippines

replaced high-level annual security dialogues. While active, the BCM has facilitated agreements and discussions on issues like fisheries and crisis management. Martinez emphasized that the AFP's role is distinct from diplomacy: "Diplomats do the talking; soldiers do the warfighting." Paculba added that challenges arose because the PLA preferred subnational discussions at the theater command level, which the AFP disallowed, requiring engagements at the leadership level instead. She suggested that tensions need to ease before revisiting such agreements.

3. Is the process of consulting stakeholders institutionalized in the preparation of AFP doctrines and strategies?

Captain Despi and Captain Martinez

Captain Despi explained that while multi-stakeholder consultations are embedded in organizational development processes like the AFP's Transformation Roadmap, operational strategies, such as the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept (CADC), do not always follow the same consultative framework. She warned against branding CADC as a "grand strategy" without sufficient stakeholder engagement, as this could misrepresent its purpose.

Martinez clarified that operational strategies are developed internally first and later aligned with stakeholders, whereas management strategies involve external input from the outset.

Director General Fernandez

Director General Fernandez advocated for the integration of political advisors within operational structures, similar to the practices of contemporary armed forces. He emphasized that this strategy helps align military strategies and activities with national policy viewpoints, reaffirming the military's role as an instrument of national policy.

For the last set of questions entertained during the open forum, the moderator asked members of the audience to raise their questions; thereafter, the panel could address all the questions specifically or as one.

Adrian, UP Laww

A student from the UP College of Law asked three interconnected questions for the consideration of the panel.

1. Do international agreements, such as the recently signed Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement and proposals for similar agreements, effectively protect Philippine maritime zones and sea lanes?

Captain Despi

International agreements primarily contribute to capacity building within the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). Joint exercises and partnerships like those with Japan help enhance capabilities but do not directly ensure protection. She expressed skepticism about the feasibility of broader alliances, such as an “Asian NATO,” given the varied interests of regional states regarding China.

Captain Martinez

While these agreements do not directly protect maritime zones, they bolster “soft power” by shaping global opinion and rallying international support. Such alliances amplify the Philippines’ voice on the international stage, fostering stronger collective action.

2. How should commercial vessels be integrated into the Philippine maritime strategy, considering the costs and challenges of options such as naval escorts, assigning military personnel, or arming vessels?

Captain Despi

Rather than full integration, the focus should be on ensuring the freedom of navigation by protecting commercial vessels from threats like piracy. The Navy’s role is to guarantee “unfettered access” to sea lanes, addressing potential risks from nefarious actors without necessarily embedding military personnel aboard commercial vessels.

Captain Paculba

The Active Archipelagic Defense Strategy (AADS) includes plans to enlist fishing vessels and commercial ships during wartime, equipping them for roles like anti-mining warfare to augment the Navy’s capabilities.

3. Would the proposed shift to federalism address the challenges faced by the Armed Forces, particularly the Navy, in protecting the Philippines' archipelagic territory? How would this affect the role of local government units (LGUs) in relation to military and police operations?

Captain Martinez

The military's mandate to defend and protect the nation remains unchanged, regardless of the form of government. Federalism's potential effects on operations are unclear, but the AFP will adapt as needed to fulfill its responsibilities.

Ms. Carla, FSI

1. What does it mean to do asymmetric warfare in the maritime domain? So, particularly if the adversary has more military capacity and even has bigger paramilitary forces, how do you envision this happening? So, in terms of capabilities, what are we looking into? And like UAVs, smaller boats, submarines, and so on and so forth.

Captain Despi

Asymmetric warfare employs cost-effective strategies to challenge more powerful forces. She promoted the use of cyber capabilities to disrupt the operations of adversaries, steering clear of expensive assets such as submarines. Despi pointed to Ukraine's creative tactics against Russia as a prime example of utilizing smaller-scale, disruptive technologies to gain a strategic edge.

Captain Martinez

Asymmetric warfare is about "establishing a superior strategy against a superior force," focusing on tactics that maximize available resources to counterbalance an adversary's strength.

Mr. Raf, FSI

1. How should the Armed Forces address the shift from internal security operations (ISO) to territorial defense operations (PDO), and how can territorial defense education be improved from the Philippine Military Academy (PMA) to the Command and General Staff Education (CGSE) levels? Additionally, how can these improvements translate into stronger policy involvement at higher levels of governance?

Captain Despi

The Armed Forces must enhance territorial defense education by broadening the focus beyond land-based perspectives to encompass maritime, naval, and air power. She highlighted the need to develop operational concepts and doctrines that address territorial defense in an archipelagic context. Captain Despi expressed a vision for establishing a research center at the Philippine Military Academy (PMA), akin to the Modern Warfare Institute at West Point, to foster innovative thinking and international collaboration. These initiatives aim to shift thinking “from the bottom up” and align educational priorities with external defense requirements.

Captain Martinez

The Armed Forces’ primary mandate is territorial defense (PDO), while internal security operations (ISO) should eventually transition back to the Philippine National Police (PNP). Martinez pointed out that the army is currently functioning more like a constabulary, which deviates from its core military role. Refocusing on PDO will strengthen the military’s capacity for external defense and clarify its mission.

2. Regarding the Philippine Navy Archipelagic Defense Act, should the Strategic Basing Plan 2040 be legislated and incorporated into the civil code? Does detailing strategic points risk telegraphing sensitive plans to adversaries, or is this primarily a political maneuver?

Captain Martinez

The Philippine Navy Archipelagic Defense Act and the Strategic Basing Plan 2040 propose the establishment of forward operating bases to enhance territorial defense. Martinez clarified that legislating the

basing plan would ensure sustained funding and resource allocation for these critical bases, many of which currently lack adequate operational support. He noted, “Legislating them would mean assurance of funding,” which is vital for maintaining and hardening these bases.

3. Have cyberspace and outer space scenarios been integrated into exercises like DAGIT-PA, given their importance as extensions of the battle space?

Captain Martinez

Yes, cyberspace and outer space are included as part of a “multi-dimensional construct of warfighting,” which incorporates land, sea, air, space, time, electromagnetic spectrum, and cyber dimensions. These elements are critical for planning and operations, particularly in utilizing GPS for navigation and weapons systems. Missteps in these areas could lead to operational failures.

Captain Paculba

Cognitive warfare, focusing on influencing populations and decision-makers, is also considered part of the planning and operational framework, further expanding the scope of maritime security exercises.

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