

Issue

Brief

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Examining Manila's Contemporary West Philippine Sea Strategy

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Abstract

As China pursues its expansionist ambitions in the greater South China Sea, Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. is working to enhance the country's ability to exercise its sovereignty and sovereign rights. Towards this end, Manila is expanding its strategic options through robust external partnerships and national policy recalibrations to secure its lawful waters in what it calls the West Philippine Sea. There are concerns, however, about whether this strategy can be sustained in the long term given two possible scenarios: in the 2028 Philippines election, the rise to the presidency of Sara Duterte, current Vice President and daughter of Marcos Jr.'s predecessor; and later this year in the United States, an electoral victory for Donald Trump. Given China's proclivity to exploit any inconsistencies in Manila's approach, the government of Marcos Jr. must lay the groundwork for continuity in the Philippines' maritime security strategy and persist in a path of economic and defence self-reliance.

President of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., has put the security of the West Philippine Sea^a at the centre of his mandate as chief architect of Philippine foreign and security policy. Marcos Jr. has made this position clear even before his inauguration in June 2022.¹ Upon his declaration as President-elect, Marcos Jr. emphasised that his administration would uphold the 2016 Arbitral Award that invalidated China’s claims over the West Philippine Sea.² In his first State of the Nation Address (SONA) in July 2023, the president stated that Manila “will not abandon even one square inch of the territory of the Republic of the Philippines to any foreign power.”³

Nearly a year since, the most critical challenge for Manila remains: how to keep the West Philippine Sea secure amid China’s growing expansionist and belligerent ambitions. Since 2008, Beijing has been pursuing a more aggressive policy in the greater South China Sea involving, one, the large-scale deployments of its navy, coast guard, and maritime militia, and two, the continuous militarisation and building of artificial islands. These activities are in direct contravention of international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In the West Philippine Sea, China has been operationalising a *de-facto* exclusionary policy that entails harassing and blocking Philippine vessels within the Southeast Asian country’s lawful Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Lately, the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) has also increased the frequency of its water cannon attacks on Filipino vessels and their crew.⁴

Realising Beijing’s unwillingness to diminish its expansionist ambitions, Manila has embarked on a multidimensional West Philippine Sea strategy with two essential dimensions. First, the Marcos Jr. administration has been framing the West Philippine Sea issue through a people-centric lens. This is crucial given that, at least theoretically, when public support remains relatively intact, it stabilises a government’s position. Second, by signalling its intent to contribute towards keeping the Indo-Pacific’s maritime domain free, open, and rules-based, Manila has been able to deepen and broaden its partnerships with both traditional and non-traditional partners that share similar regional goals. In emphasising the Philippines’ agency, the Marcos Jr. administration underscores a defence-oriented strategy that seeks to improve the country’s maritime security capabilities to defend the status quo rather than provoke it

a What Manila calls the part of the South China Sea that encompasses the Philippines’ lawful exclusive economic zone.

while also keeping all lines of communication with Beijing open for potential negotiations.

However, while the current administration works to maximise the potential of its West Philippine Sea strategy, various obstacles need to be addressed, given the historical inconsistencies in Manila's approach towards the maritime domain. Therefore, the challenge for the Marcos Jr. administration will be to provide the Filipino people and Manila's partners an assurance of long-term continuity.

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The First Dimension: A People-Centric Approach

One of the most notable developments in Manila's contemporary West Philippine Sea strategy is the consistency in framing it through a people-centric lens. For instance, the Maritime Zones Act, passed by the Senate in February 2024, is designed to serve as a legal and international law-based framework that would enhance the capacity of various national agencies to secure the resources in the Philippines' territorial sea, exclusive economic zone, and archipelagic waters for the welfare of the Filipino people.⁵ Moreover, the adoption of the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defence Concept is aimed at safeguarding every Filipino's inalienable right over the Philippines' waters and resources. This point was summarised by Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro in April this year, when he stated that such a framework was crucial to develop the Philippines' capabilities to secure its entire territory and EEZ "in order to ensure that our people and all the generations of Filipinos to come shall freely reap and enjoy the bounties of the natural resources that are rightfully ours within our domain."⁶

In line with these efforts, Manila, through the active participation of the National Security Council and the Philippine Coast Guard, has amplified its transparency initiative in the West Philippine Sea.⁷ By welcoming both national and foreign journalists on board PCG vessels, the strategy aims to publicise the atrocities being committed by the CCG and Chinese maritime militia against Philippine vessels and their crew, including fishermen. Tackling such constant bullying, particularly against civilians of the country, has become a unifying cause among Filipinos. An additional focus of this transparency initiative is to highlight the impact of China's expansionism and belligerence on the Philippines' food and energy security interests.

The Marcos Jr. administration is also spearheading various programs, such as the Livelihood Activities to Enhance Fisheries Yields and Economic Gains from the West Philippine Sea (LAYAG-WPS) Project, which creates opportunities for Filipino fishermen to voice their concerns and provides them with the awareness to exercise their rights in the West Philippine Sea more effectively.⁸ Such initiatives allow civil society groups to participate in the government's whole-of-nation strategy, reflecting the operationalisation of the 2023-2028 National Security Policy. Indeed, civil society groups have declared their support for the government's current policy in the West Philippine Sea and have shown willingness to contribute alongside official efforts.⁹

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The success of such a people-centric framing is reflected in the growing public support towards the Marcos Jr. administration's West Philippine Sea strategy. Yet, it is important to note that support for the current government's maritime security strategy should be viewed as a separate parameter compared to its general trust ratings, which can be gleaned in other surveys. For example, based on the December 2023 OCTA Research Group survey, 77 percent of Filipinos supported Manila's efforts to push back against foreign expansionism.¹⁰ In a similar survey conducted by Pulse Asia in December 2023, 67 percent of Filipinos encouraged the Marcos Jr. administration to enhance Philippines external defence capabilities, while 56 percent supported Manila's intent to strengthen security ties with like-minded partners to enhance the country's maritime defence posture in the West Philippine Sea.¹¹ More recently, according to the March 2024 OCTA survey, 73 percent of respondents encouraged Manila to secure its sovereignty and sovereign rights through military and diplomatic initiatives.¹²

Public support for the Marcos Jr. administration's West Philippine Sea strategy could also be attributed to the people's discontent over the approach taken by former President Rodrigo Duterte, who downplayed the 2016 arbitral ruling in the hope of gaining economic concessions from China. This resulted in the compromise of the welfare of Filipino fishermen. In June 2019, for instance, the CCG rammed, and sunk, a Filipino fishing vessel off Reed Bank and left the 22 fishermen on-board to drown; Duterte chose to call it "a little accident."¹³

Perhaps as a result of this stark neglect of public sentiments, there has been a clamour for a more assertive foreign policy in the West Philippine Sea since the beginning of the Marcos Jr. administration. Following a June 2022 Pulse Asia Survey, 89 percent of Filipinos across all socio-economic classes and geographies encouraged the new government to exercise the Philippines' sovereignty and sovereign rights in the West Philippine Sea based on the UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Ruling.¹⁴ It could be said, therefore, that the ability of the Marcos Jr. administration to find a convergence between its policies and the people's sentiment has generated broad support across the country.

The Second Dimension: A Defence-Oriented Position

Even as it is evident that China's expansionism is the most acute challenge to Manila's sovereignty and sovereign rights, the Marcos Jr. administration remains intent to improve ties with Beijing to manage outstanding tensions in the maritime domain. In January 2023, the Philippine President met his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, in Beijing to establish guidelines to manage tensions in the greater South China Sea and avoid any escalation.¹⁵ Since then, however, Beijing has shown no signs of de-escalating tensions, with the CCG and the Chinese maritime militia engaging in provocative and illicit activities within the Philippine EEZ, including ramming and blocking Philippine vessels, often with the aid of water cannons.¹⁶ During China's water cannon attack on a Philippine vessel on 24 March 2024, three Filipino soldiers were injured.¹⁷

Recognising Beijing's unwillingness to respect international law and the legitimate sovereignty and sovereign rights of the Philippines, the Marcos Jr. administration has pursued a two-pronged internal and external balancing approach to improve its maritime security capabilities and exercise its ability to secure its EEZ in a more formidable manner. In terms of external balancing, Manila has deepened and broadened the scope of its security cooperation with its sole treaty ally, i.e., the United States, and its traditional and non-traditional partners as well. This effort has included: increasing US rotational bases under the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA); opening negotiations for a reciprocal access agreement (RAA) with Japan; pushing for deeper integration within the traditional hub-and-spokes network through a US-Philippines-Japan trilateral and the Quad with Australia; setting up a first subcommittee on maritime security cooperation with the European Union; and forging forward-looking security-related memoranda of understanding (MOU) with like-minded partners such as India, Canada, France, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and the Netherlands.

Within a year, Manila was able to position itself at the intersection of interlinked networks of like-minded countries that share the same goal—keeping the Indo-Pacific's maritime domain free, open, and rules-based. More importantly, the Marcos Jr. administration has exercised the Philippines' agency by positioning the West Philippine Sea as the primary focus for maritime security cooperation. Along with strengthening defence alignments, the government is pursuing greater economic cooperation to address China's multifaceted source of power projection.

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The Philippines is faced with a predicament regarding its reliance on Chinese imports as over a fifth of its imports come from China.¹⁸ Moreover, Beijing also monopolises the Philippines' nickel market, with over 90 percent of the critical mineral exports going to China.¹⁹ Given Beijing's notoriety in weaponising commerce and supply chains, this creates strategic risks.²⁰ While Manila's pushback against China in the West Philippine Sea has not affected bilateral commercial relations, the Marcos Jr. administration has sought to offset this potential risk. Therefore, along with harnessing robust defence networks, the Philippines is also improving commercial and investment relations with like-minded partners to enhance national economic resilience.

One of the most notable recent developments is the decision by the US, the Philippines, and Japan to launch the Luzon Economic Corridor during the first trilateral summit between all three leaders in Washington on 11 April 2024. The project envisions linking infrastructure projects like ports, railways, clean energy, and semiconductor supply chains connecting Subic Bay in Zambales, Clark in Pampanga, Manila, and Batangas. Once completed, the Luzon Economic Corridor will lower travel cost.²¹ Moreover, this also allows Manila to redirect its nickel exports away from China by opening its critical minerals market to investors from Japan and the US. The project could also generate local jobs.

In May, US equity firm Cerberus and South Korea's HD Hyundai Heavy Industries forged a partnership agreement to launch shipbuilding operations in the strategically located Subic Bay in the Philippines, which will revitalise the Southeast Asian country's traditional shipbuilding industry. The multi-million-dollar investments from both companies will allow the Philippines to revitalise its offshore wind industry and reposition Subic as a hub for maritime manufacturing.²² This will not only generate jobs, but will also spearhead the transfer of critical knowledge and skills to Filipinos, which could help improve the Philippines' standing in the global market.

Beyond external alignments, the Marcos Jr. administration has also sought to strengthen its national defence capabilities despite resource limitations. On 29 January 2024, Manila approved the 'Rehorison 3', the final stage of a three-phase military modernisation plan that began in 2013 as a response to Chinese expansionism in the West Philippine Sea.²³ The last phase is intended to enhance the Philippines' acquisition of modern weapons and equipment, and will focus on the country's maritime domain awareness, connectivity, surveillance,

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reconnaissance, and intelligence-gathering capabilities. Furthermore, it is essential to highlight that under the current budget, the Philippine Navy will receive the largest allocation among the three branches of the military—the first time in history that its budget allocation was more significant than the Army.

However, as another essential demonstration of agency, the Marcos Jr. administration emphasised that the Philippines' growing focus on maritime security in the West Philippine Sea should be seen not through bloc politics but a defence-oriented lens based on international law. This has been illustrated in several instances. First, over the security dynamics in Taiwan, the National Security Council has stated that Manila is not interested in interfering in Taiwan's affairs and its role vis-à-vis the US-China power competition.²⁴ Second, the government has decided to limit the number of EDCA bases to the existing count.²⁵ Third, Manila has emphasised that despite China provocatively using water cannons on Filipino vessels, the Philippines will not engage in a reprisal.²⁶ Fourth, Manila's clear message is that it is peaceful negotiations that can resolve the outstanding dispute with China.

Therefore, Manila is signalling that even as it continues to engage with Beijing on multiple levels, the Philippines will not allow itself to be subjected to China's expansionist ambitions at the expense of the country's sovereignty and sovereign rights. Therefore, Manila will do all it can to leverage its expanding partnerships to defend, rather than provoke, what is left of the status quo. This is to apply more cost on China's assertive manoeuvres and level the playing field for more effective negotiations, given that China often engages from a position of power.

While the Marcos Jr. administration has been engaged in a multidimensional strategy to exercise the Philippines' sovereignty and sovereign rights over the West Philippine Sea, concerns loom over the ability of Manila to follow through in the long term. This concern is largely attributed to the possibility of Vice President Sara Duterte winning the 2028 presidential election, and heightened by a February Oculum Survey where 42 percent of the respondents chose the vice president as their leading presidential candidate.²⁷

Such an electoral victory could have ramifications for Manila's foreign policy trajectory. While it is too early to make credible assumptions about the vice president's foreign policy, her recent statements (or lack of it) towards Chinese assertiveness in the West Philippine Sea may provide a hint. Amid China's aggressive manoeuvres against Filipino vessels and fishermen, Duterte has chosen to refrain from making any statements that either condemn Beijing's behaviour in Philippine waters or support Manila's ongoing efforts to enhance its maritime security capabilities. Such a position of appeasement reminds one of the stance taken by her father, the former president.

Under Duterte Senior's administration, Manila disregarded the 2016 ruling and distanced itself from Washington and other Western countries. During that period, Duterte did not visit any Western country, and sought to terminate the Visiting Forces Agreement, which is a cornerstone in the 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty between the Philippines and the US. Such a position was taken to signal Manila's intent to improve ties with Beijing in exchange for economic concessions. While recognising the China challenge in the West Philippine Sea, Duterte endeavoured to diversify Manila's security partners. However, by provoking ties with the Philippines' sole treaty ally and traditional security provider, Manila's strategic options were limited. In addition to the dearth of economic returns, such a move only emboldened China in the West Philippine Sea.²⁸

While the former president eventually made a strategic U-turn towards the end of his term by expressing more support for a stronger US-Philippine alliance, the damage caused by this experimentation created more challenges than benefits for the Philippines' ability to exercise its sovereignty and sovereign rights over the West Philippine Sea.²⁹ Thus, another Duterte presidency creates natural concerns over whether Manila will still intend to continue working with partners, particularly those in the West. Given the Philippines' vacillating

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record vis-à-vis its alignments, it is understandable for Manila's partners to be concerned over the future of Philippine foreign policy after the Marcos Jr. administration if, for instance, the next president would again reshuffle Manila's external policy priorities.

While it is a difficult task to offer a concrete guarantee of continuity given the influence of elite perception in Manila's foreign policy decision-making over the past decades, it will be necessary to at least ensure that existing cooperative frameworks are institutionalised and regularly evaluated through the participation of as many actors as possible, and not just state leaders. Thus, routine meetings and activities must be officially established among bureaucrats, diplomats, lawmakers, decision-makers, and academics to ensure continuity in the momentum of bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral ties, which the Philippines has fostered under the Marcos Jr. administration.

The purpose of institutionalising cooperation is to ensure a relative degree of continuity despite changes in domestic political configurations. A clear benefit of institutionalisation was seen during the Duterte administration when the Philippine and US militaries continued to participate in the Balikatan military exercises. In 2016, Duterte stated that the Balikatan of that year would be the last.³⁰ However, because the Balikatan has been a profoundly institutionalised form of bilateral cooperation between the Philippines and the US, one may argue that the political cost of suspending it would have been great even for Duterte, especially since Manila's defence and foreign policy establishments of that time were also trying to maintain close ties with Washington.

This was in contrast to the April 2020 announcement of then Secretary of National Defence Delfin Lorenzana, regarding the Philippines' halting joint maritime patrols in the South China Sea, which was operationalised for some time during that year.³¹ Today, as the Philippines forges more robust minilaterals and bilateral partnerships, equal effort must be placed in guaranteeing regular and possibly fixed activities such as military exercises, summits, and two-plus-two dialogues. Doing so will provide a certain level of continuity in relations despite changes in political heads.

In addition to addressing the alignment issue, the Philippines will also have to prioritise efforts at improving its national resilience in both economics and defence. This is largely driven by apprehensions over the chances of another Donald Trump presidency in the United States. It is a known fact

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that Trump had a particular disdain for multilateral and regional security and economic cooperation due to concerns over freeriding and of US interests being undermined. Moreover, the former Trump administration also wanted Washington's treaty allies, like Japan and South Korea, to pay more for American security. In an interview with *Time* in April, Trump reiterated a continuation of his protectionist and transactional foreign policy.³² Therefore, if this path is paved once again in the upcoming US election, Manila will have to anticipate the strategic implications for Philippine security and economy.

This means that if Manila seeks to gain more economically from its alliance with the US, it must continue to improve the Philippines' investment climate to guarantee better results from its growing commercial ties with Washington. Under a Trump Presidency, the concept behind friendshoring is unlikely to gain traction in Washington if the costs for American companies will be greater than the profits. Indeed, even as friend-shoring has become a trend under the Biden administration, countries like Vietnam and Indonesia have benefitted significantly more from US and Japanese investments in Southeast Asia than the Philippines. This illustrates the need for the Marcos Jr. administration to maximise effort in ensuring a conducive business climate in the country. This will improve the country's long-term economic prospects as well.

On the matter of defence, while the Philippines has benefitted from importing arms, the government must pursue agreements with its partners that involve potential technology transfers and joint production. Doing so will enhance the Philippines' prospects of revitalising its defence industry and, thereby, lessen its dependence on defence deals based exclusively on a buyer-seller format. However, simultaneous efforts must also be made by Manila to invest in research and innovation while also improving the skillset of its labour force to match the required capacity in laying the foundations of a basic industrial base for defence. Therefore, along with the pursuit of partner diversification, building on self-reliance amidst the unpredictability of interstate relations is equally important.

Conclusion

The Marcos Jr. administration has been demonstrating a commitment to securing the West Philippine Sea based on international law and exercising Manila's sovereignty and sovereign rights over the maritime domain, at a time when China has been expanding its clout in the greater South China Sea. Manila's success in framing the West Philippine Sea through a people-centric lens has generated support from the Filipino people, as found by various nationwide opinion polls. Moreover, by illustrating the Philippines' intent to play a more prominent role in keeping the Indo-Pacific's maritime domain free, open, and rules-based, Manila has forged more robust ties with like-minded traditional and non-traditional partners that share the same goals. More importantly, the Marcos Jr. administration has simultaneously endeavoured to illustrate the Philippines' agency in its growing security alignments by consistently highlighting an approach that is defence-oriented rather than bloc politics-driven.

While Manila has been expanding its policy options to secure the West Philippine Sea, however, there are concerns about whether such a strategy can be sustained in the long term given the possibility of another Duterte administration and the potential electoral victory of Trump in the US. These concerns are heightened by the fact that China is likely to exploit any inconsistencies in Manila's approach. Therefore, to ensure general continuity in the Philippines' West Philippine Sea strategy, it will be necessary to institutionalise partnerships and continue building on national resilience. 

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