

## Chapter 6

### RESOLUTE, PRUDENT AND INCLUSIVE: A PHILIPPINE PERSPECTIVE ON IMPROVING STABILITY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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At the heart of the chessboard of great power competition in the Asia-Pacific lies the South China Sea, a major regional waterway host to a hotly-contested territorial and maritime dispute involving China and several Southeast Asian countries. Since the 2000s, China has actively sought to bring East Asia under its sphere of influence, and it has significantly increased its assertive behaviour to reinforce its claims and secure strategic sea lines of communication and trade in the South China Sea.<sup>1</sup> These aggressive actions, which include the development of military structures in artificial islands and coercive activities by their maritime law enforcement agencies and militia against government and fishing vessels of other claimant states, have created a volatile situation which carry significant implications for the future of the region.

Recognising the detrimental effects of open conflict on regional and global security, the escalating tensions in the South China Sea raise the question of how to prevent conflict and improve stability in the area. This predicament is particularly salient to the Philippine strategic calculus: as a claimant state in the South China Sea, a treaty ally of the United States, a neighbour and economic partner to China, and a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the country has a critical role in managing tensions, preventing conflict escalation, and improving overall stability in the disputed seas, all while maintaining strategic autonomy in pursuit of its national security and economic interests. The challenge requires a resolute yet prudent foreign and security policy agile enough to maximise opportunities while minimising the risks of conflict.

With this premise, this chapter will provide a Philippine perspective on the current situation in the South China Sea and the prospects for cooperation to improve stability, highlighting the complexity of the country's position as it balances the pursuit of national interest, regional stability, and strengthening cross-regional linkages with global partners. The first part will be a discussion of the current state and trajectory of the situation, which will be followed by the political, diplomatic, and military efforts by the Philippines in order to avert conflict escalation. This chapter will end with specific recommendations on prospects for cooperation and joint activity with external partners, which include undertaking substantive roles in regional and cross-regional initiatives, improving enforcement capacity with respect to international maritime regulatory frameworks, and encouraging multi-level, multi-sectoral cooperation for maritime domain awareness – all

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Chubb, *Dynamics of Assertiveness in the South China Sea: China, the Philippines, and Vietnam 1970-2015*, Special Report no. 99, NBR Special Report (National Bureau of Asian Research, 2022).

with the overall objective of preventing escalation and improving stability in the contested maritime space.

### **Conflict escalation possible, but not inevitable**

China has been using a diverse array of military and non-military instruments to coerce and intimidate other claimant states in the South China Sea. It has deliberately altered the strategic space and dictated the operational tempo at sea as they moved from mere declarative and demonstrative assertions through domestic legislation and unilateral administrative activity, towards coercive and aggressive behaviour below the threshold of armed conflict, all aimed at interfering with other claimants' lawful activity in the area. Despite repeated statements of commitment to peace and stability in the maritime region,<sup>2</sup> Beijing's gradual yet substantial increase in aggressive activity on the ground has exacerbated the trust deficit between itself and Manila, especially since the latter has constantly been at the receiving end of its intimidation in the South China Sea.

Faced with worrying levels of China's aggressiveness in the disputed waters, coupled with domestic political pressures and uncertainties over US defence commitments, the Philippines employed a 'transparency initiative' which sought to expose Chinese hostile behaviour at sea to the international community. This 'naming-and-shaming' approach, first used during the Aquino administration, was instrumental for the Philippine government to rally domestic and international support against China's coercive tactics.<sup>3</sup> In turn, China's response to transparency had been escalation, especially as any accommodation could be interpreted by their domestic population as acquiescence, or weakness.<sup>4</sup> The China Coast Guard (CCG) and maritime militia have already normalised ramming and the use of water cannons against Philippine government and fishing vessels; conducting dangerous manoeuvres which cause significant harm to Filipino lives and property;<sup>5</sup> and violating international maritime safety conventions.<sup>6</sup> This is expected to

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<sup>2</sup> Xiaodong Chen, "China: An Anchor for Peace and Development in the South China Sea," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 27, 2025, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg\\_663340/bianhaisi\\_eng\\_665278/bianhaixiangguanxinwen\\_665280/202504/t20250401\\_11585883.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg_663340/bianhaisi_eng_665278/bianhaixiangguanxinwen_665280/202504/t20250401_11585883.html).

<sup>3</sup> Aries Arugay and Edcel Ibarra, "Something Old, Something New: The Philippines' Transparency Initiative in the South China Sea," Fulcrum, May 6, 2024, <https://fulcrum.sg/something-old-something-new-the-philippines-transparency-initiative-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>4</sup> Paulette Gutierrez, "China's Pushback Against the Philippines' Maritime Strategy: The Limits of Transparency," The Diplomat, September 2, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/09/chinas-pushback-against-the-philippines-maritime-strategy-the-limits-of-transparency/>.

<sup>5</sup> Reuters, "Rift Deepens between the Philippines, China over South China Sea," Reuters, October 13, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/rift-deepens-between-philippines-china-over-south-china-sea-2025-10-13/>.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs, "DFA Statement on 11 August 2025 Incident at Bajo De Masinloc," August 12, 2025, <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/statements-and-advisoriesupdate/37026-dfa-statement-on-11-august-2025-incident-at-bajo-de-masinloc>.

continue in the foreseeable future as China shows no signs of backing down on its escalatory behaviour.<sup>7</sup>

Although both sides continue to issue statements affirming their commitment to de-escalate tensions while upholding their own positions in the dispute,<sup>8</sup> the area is more volatile than ever. Accidents at sea remain to be the likely source of conflict, and the potential for escalation due to miscalculation is high, especially as China's key maritime actors find ways to project a patriotic and politically irreproachable front in line with the nationalistic political environment under Xi Jinping.<sup>9</sup> In the quest to prove themselves amidst recent corruption probes and achieve political leverage for personal gain, CCG or militia personnel may resort to more aggressive manoeuvres, risking operational blunders at sea. This is exacerbated by a lack of a codified rules of behaviour amongst coast guards and other law enforcement agencies operating in the South China Sea that specifies procedures and assurance measures and provides protocols in avoiding maritime incidents. Further, although regional navies have the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES), a non-binding multilateral instrument adopted by the Western Pacific Naval Symposium containing safety procedures, a communications plan, and manoeuvre instructions for naval ships and aircraft<sup>10</sup>, there are also significant limitations to its effectiveness. Aside from loopholes such as the lack of salient provisions on naval surveillance activities and submarine operations, it remains the case that most maritime incidents in the South China Sea involve civilian law enforcement vessels and aircraft – something that the CUES does not cover.<sup>11</sup>

In this sense, fears of escalation in the medium term are definitely not unfounded, but this does not mean it is inevitable. After all, communication lines remain open, and both China and the Philippines are willing to negotiate as both states recognise the massive human and economic costs of war. For the Philippine government, the National Maritime Council and its National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea continuously monitor and assess escalation dynamics in the area for the purpose of developing calibrated and coordinated responses amongst national agencies involved, which include the National Security Council, the Department of Foreign Affairs, and the Department of National

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<sup>7</sup> Julia Gatdula et al., “The Latest on Southeast Asia: South China Sea Updates,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 23, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/latest-southeast-asia/latest-southeast-asia-south-china-sea-updates>.

<sup>8</sup> Sebastian Strangio, “China, Philippines Pledge to De-Escalate Tensions in South China Sea,” The Diplomat, July 3, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/07/china-philippines-pledge-to-de-escalate-tensions-in-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>9</sup> Kacie Miura, “Strongman Politics and China’s Foreign Policy Actors: Maritime Assertiveness under Xi Jinping,” *International Affairs* 99, no. 5 (2023): 2101-2018, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaad178>.

<sup>10</sup> Western Pacific Naval Symposium, “Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea,” 2014, [https://maritimessafetyinnovationlab.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/cues\\_2014.pdf](https://maritimessafetyinnovationlab.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/cues_2014.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Anh Duc Ton, “Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea and Its Practical Limitations in the East and South China Seas,” *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs* 9, no. 4 (2017): 227-39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18366503.2017.1326075>.

Defense, among others. Some of the measures that the Philippines has undertaken to reduce tensions will be discussed in the next section.

### **Defusing tensions while building capability: No contradiction here**

Alongside the famous words “Filipinos do not yield” during President Ferdinand Marcos Jr’s address to the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2024<sup>12</sup> and his outright challenges calling out Chinese aggression in the West Philippine Sea,<sup>13</sup> the importance of restraint in easing tensions and preserving stability in the South China Sea has also been a recurring theme in several of his international speeches.<sup>14</sup> In one of his most recent pronouncements during the East Asia Summit in Malaysia, he underscored the need for “constructive diplomacy, coupled with restraint, de-escalation and respect for international law” in relation to the South China Sea.<sup>15</sup>

This is not doublespeak, nor a contradiction; in fact, it reflects the prudent strategic position the Philippine government is taking with the South China Sea disputes as it seeks to defuse tensions while maintaining its legal entitlements and jurisdiction over its maritime zones and rallying domestic and international support. This is substantiated through the use of various diplomatic tools and law enforcement instruments such as the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG). Although some of the most visible Philippine activities, whether unilaterally developing its capabilities and capacities or multilaterally patrolling and exercising alongside international partners have been branded as provocative,<sup>16</sup> it should be understood that the Philippines is not especially provoking confrontation or conflict. Aside from responding to repeated harassments and incursions to its own territory, its activities should be interpreted as an exercise of agency as a sovereign nation

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<sup>12</sup> Presidential Communications Office, “PBBM Tells Global Defense Forum: ‘I Do Not Intend to Yield, Filipinos Do Not Yield,’” News Releases, May 31, 2024, [https://pco.gov.ph/news\\_releases/pbbm-tells-global-defense-forum-i-do-not-intend-to-yield-filipinos-do-not-yield/](https://pco.gov.ph/news_releases/pbbm-tells-global-defense-forum-i-do-not-intend-to-yield-filipinos-do-not-yield/).

<sup>13</sup> Presidential Communications Office, “PBBM Asks China to Stop Aggression in WPS, May Return US Typhoon Missile System,” News Releases, January 30, 2025, [https://pco.gov.ph/news\\_releases/pbbm-asks-china-to-stop-aggression-in-wps-may-return-us-typhoon-missile-system/](https://pco.gov.ph/news_releases/pbbm-asks-china-to-stop-aggression-in-wps-may-return-us-typhoon-missile-system/).

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Basilio, “Philippines Starts War Games amid South China Sea Tensions,” BusinessWorld Online, November 4, 2025, <https://www.bworldonline.com/breaking-news/2025/11/04/709899/philippines-starts-war-games-amid-south-china-sea-tensions/>; Presidential Communications Office, “PH Eyes ‘Paradigm Shift’ to Deal with China on WPS Issue – PBBM,” December 19, 2023, [https://pco.gov.ph/news\\_releases/ph-eyes-paradigm-shift-to-deal-with-china-on-wps-issue-pbbm/](https://pco.gov.ph/news_releases/ph-eyes-paradigm-shift-to-deal-with-china-on-wps-issue-pbbm/); Harlene Delgado, “Marcos Tells China, ASEAN: Failure to Restrain ‘Provocative, Dangerous Actions’ in SCS Threatens Peace, Stability,” ABS-CBN News, October 28, 2025, <https://www.abs-cbn.com/news/nation/2025/10/28/failure-to-restrain-provocative-dangerous-actions-in-scs-threatens-peace-stability-1321>.

<sup>15</sup> Presidential Communications Office, “President Marcos Calls for Diplomacy with De-Escalation, Respect for Rule of Law during East Asia Summit,” October 27, 2025, [https://pco.gov.ph/news\\_releases/president-marcos-calls-for-diplomacy-with-de-escalation-respect-for-rule-of-law-during-east-asia-summit/](https://pco.gov.ph/news_releases/president-marcos-calls-for-diplomacy-with-de-escalation-respect-for-rule-of-law-during-east-asia-summit/).

<sup>16</sup> “China’s Military Warns Philippines against Provocations in South China Sea,” Reuters, September 14, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-military-warns-philippines-against-provocations-south-china-sea-2025-09-14/>.

that aims to secure its legal territory, ensure the viability of its natural resources, and protect its people from harassment and undue influence.

Diplomacy remains Manila's primary tool in managing the South China Sea issue with Beijing. With the Department of Foreign Affairs at the helm, the Philippines has maintained regular dialogue and utilises its diplomatic channels with China whenever incidents at sea occur. The annual Bilateral Consultation Mechanism (BCM) has been the main avenue where both countries engage in constructive dialogue over ways forward in Philippines-China relations. Both states recognise the need to rebuild trust and restore confidence in bilateral relations and have been actively exploring ways to cooperate despite the disputes. The 9th BCM in 2024 saw the signing of the Arrangement on Improving Philippines-China Maritime Communication Mechanisms, with both agreeing on the need to continue discussions on maritime cooperation between coast guards, and exploring possibilities for marine scientific cooperation.<sup>17</sup>

Shortly after the June 2024 incident at Ayungin Shoal where CCG personnel harassed a rotation and reprovisioning (RORE) mission of the Philippine Navy that led to the injury of a Filipino sailor, the Philippines and China negotiated a provisional understanding regarding Philippine resupply missions to avoid further escalation of tensions in the area.<sup>18</sup> The agreement covers an “exchange of information” regarding these resupply missions when they are conducted.<sup>19</sup> In the 10th BCM last January 2025 in Xiamen, both nations agreed to continue its implementation, and the Philippines reiterated the country’s commitment to the peaceful resolution of disputes, and the need for pragmatic cooperation.<sup>20</sup> However, despite keep lines open between the two countries, China’s intransigent stance in bilateral negotiations has limited the capacity of the BCM and other diplomatic measures in reducing the intensity or frequency of coercive incidents, as well as in realising practicable middle-ground alternatives. In light of more recent harassments of Filipino government vessels and fisherfolk by the CCG and Chinese militia, the Philippines is responding through filing diplomatic protests and deploying law

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<sup>17</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs, “PH, China Convene 9th Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on the South China Sea,” Department of Foreign Affairs, July 2, 2024, <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/dfa-releasesupdate/35075-ph-china-convene-9th-bilateral-consultation-mechanism-on-the-south-china-sea>.

<sup>18</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs, “Philippines and China Agree on Arrangement for Rotation and Resupplying (RORE) to BRP Sierra Madre on Ayungin Shoal,” July 21, 2024, <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/statements-and-advisoriesupdate/35166-philippines-and-china-agree-on-arrangement-for-rotation-and-resupplying-rore-to-brp-sierra-madre-on-ayungin-shoal>.

<sup>19</sup> Bea Cupin, “Manalo: No Notification, Just ‘exchange of Info’ on Missions to Ayungin Shoal,” *Rappler*, July 30, 2024, <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/dfa-manalo-says-no-notification-just-exchange-info-ayungin-shoal-missions/>.

<sup>20</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs, “Philippines and China Convene 10th Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on the South China Sea,” January 16, 2025, <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/dfa-releasesupdate/36032-philippines-and-china-convene-10th-bilateral-consultation-mechanism-on-the-south-china-sea-2>.

enforcement personnel to ensure the safety of Filipinos engaged in lawful economic activities in the area.<sup>21</sup>

As the National Maritime Council has maintained, the Philippines “will not be the one to provoke”.<sup>22</sup> Hence, the PCG was placed at the forefront of maritime operations in the West Philippine Sea, the area under the Philippine claims. This is according to the perspective that civilian law enforcement ships are seen as more suitable for disputed areas since they are less provocative, thus having a lower propensity for conflict escalation<sup>23</sup> and higher potential for preventive diplomacy.<sup>24</sup> The PCG, despite numerous harassments and dangerous manoeuvres against them by China’s maritime militia and the CCG, exercises maximum tolerance as it continuously conducts patrols and establishes presence in the Philippine exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Further, with the thrust towards de-escalation, the PCG has also launched programs such as “Angels of the Sea”, which utilises an all-female radio operator crew specifically aimed at defusing tensions during encounters with Chinese vessels at sea.<sup>25</sup> Regionally, the PCG has also been active in the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum, where they seek to develop protocols to establish common procedures on engagements at sea for the shared waters of the region.<sup>26</sup>

On the side of the military, aside from its steady capability development in line with its shift of focus to external defence, it has prioritised exercising restraint and ensuring adherence to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and internationally-recognised protocols while conducting its routine operations in the West Philippine Sea.<sup>27</sup> The Philippine military continues to conduct routine maritime patrols and air surveillance flights to monitor the situation in the Philippine EEZ and maintain a presence in the area,

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<sup>21</sup> Dexter Cabalza, “PH Files New Diplomatic Protest vs China for Dec. 12 Attack on Fishermen,” *Inquirer.Net*, December 16, 2025, <https://www.inquirer.net/463060/ph-files-new-diplomatic-protest-vs-china-over-dec-12-attack-on-fishermen/>.

<sup>22</sup> Bea Cupin, “View from Manila: Lies, Propaganda after Chinese Ships’ Collision in Scarborough Shoal,” *Rappler*, August 18, 2025, <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/view-manila-collision-disinformation-scarborough/>.

<sup>23</sup> Sam Bateman, “Regional Navies and Coastguards: Striking a Balance between ‘Lawships’ and Warships,” in *Naval Modernisation in Southeast Asia*, ed. Geoffrey Till (Routledge, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> It should be noted, however, that despite having a front of being a civilian law enforcement agency and employing white-hulled ships at sea, the CCG is a paramilitary force under the ambit of the Central Military Commission according to Articles 82 and 83 of the China Coast Guard Law of 2021. James D. Llewelyn, “Preventive Diplomacy and the Role of Civil Maritime Security Cooperation in Southeast Asia,” *Strategic Analysis* 41, no. 1 (2017): 49–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2016.1249178>.

<sup>25</sup> Agence France-Presse, “Philippine ‘Angels’ Aim to de-Escalate South China Sea Encounters,” *ABS-CBN*, March 7, 2025, <https://www.abs-cbn.com/news/nation/2025/3/7/philippine-angels-aim-to-de-escalate-south-china-sea-encounters-1529>.

<sup>26</sup> Michael L. Uy, “ASEAN Coast Guard Forum 2024 to Build SEA-PEACE,” Philippine Information Agency, June 6, 2024, <https://pia.gov.ph/news/asean-coast-guard-forum-2024-to-build-sea-peace/>.

<sup>27</sup> Priam Nepomuceno, “PH Navy Exec Sees More Accidents in WPS amid ‘illegal’ China Presence,” *Philippine News Agency*, August 12, 2025, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1256355>.

and supports the missions of civilian law enforcement agencies also present in the waters near Bajo de Masinloc (Scarborough Shoal) and the northern Philippine islands.<sup>28</sup>

### **Charting a course for stability in the South China Sea**

While the Philippines continues to show resolve in upholding its lawful activities in the South China Sea, it recognises that avoiding conflict escalation and maintaining stability in the area requires the support of partners all over the region, and beyond. As Manila seeks a nuanced and careful approach towards Beijing without jeopardising its own interests in the strategic waterway, it has focused on domestic capability buildup, pragmatic negotiation, and rallying support from international partners.<sup>29</sup> Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), Australia, Canada, and several European nations have been instrumental in enhancing regional capabilities in maritime security, law enforcement, and defence. The Philippines seeks to pursue activities centred on building an inclusive regional security architecture while strengthening the agency of smaller states and ensuring stability and predictability in the South China Sea.<sup>30</sup> Initiatives should thus avoid placing unnecessary emphasis on United States-China rivalry and focus on building a peaceful, inclusive, and stable region, promoting practical cooperation relating to indivisible goals at sea, and maintaining a free, open, and safe waterway vital to regional and global economic development. With this, there are two major recommendations that this chapter puts forward: to uphold the importance of international regimes and multilateral cooperative mechanisms, and to encourage multi-level cooperation on common areas of interest in the maritime domain. For the Philippines, this requires undertaking a greater agenda-setting role in regional and cross-regional initiatives, improving unilateral and multilateral enforcement capacity with respect to international maritime regulatory frameworks, enhancing national awareness of critical maritime infrastructure, and developing overarching national strategies and institutional mechanisms for maritime domain awareness.

**Uphold importance of multilateral cooperative mechanisms and international regimes.** Known as “stabilisers” and “legitimisers” of the international order,<sup>31</sup> middle-power countries are known for their aspiration for a distinct role in international affairs, credibility based on soft power resources, coalition-building ability based on values and

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<sup>28</sup> Gabryelle Dumalag and John Eric Mendoza, “WPS Spokesperson Clarifies: AFP Has Never Left Panatag,” *Inquirer.Net*, August 19, 2025, <https://www.inquirer.net/453181/wps-spokesperson-clarifies-afp-has-never-left-panatag>.

<sup>29</sup> Dianne Despi, *Navigating Countercurrents: Manila’s Intricate Dynamics with Beijing and Taipei, Triangular Dynamics* (National Bureau of Asian Research, 2025), <https://www.nbr.org/publication/navigating-countercurrents-manilas-intricate-dynamics-with-beijing-and-taipei/>.

<sup>30</sup> National Security Council, *National Security Policy 2023-2028* (National Security Council, 2023), [https://nsc.gov.ph/images/NSS\\_NSP/National\\_Security\\_Policy\\_Manual\\_FINAL\\_E-COPY\\_with\\_WATERMARK\\_140823.pdf](https://nsc.gov.ph/images/NSS_NSP/National_Security_Policy_Manual_FINAL_E-COPY_with_WATERMARK_140823.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Eduard Jordaan, “The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers,” *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies* 30, no. 1 (2003): 165–81.

principles consistent with the existing international order, and governance capacity.<sup>32</sup> Highlighting these strengths of its middle-power partners, the Philippines must work together with like-minded nations in upholding and strengthening international regimes to ensure a stable and peaceful South China Sea. Consequently, as the Philippines is thrust into a central role in improving regional stability, the country can also serve as a major hub bringing together its neighbours and other more geographically distant partners in forging flexible, multilateral issue-based frameworks for cooperation. Aside from reinforcing cross-regional linkages, the inherent inclusivity of these multilateral mechanisms allows for each country's voice to be heard, ensuring against diplomatic isolation.

ASEAN has the capacity to bring the major powers to the table as dialogue partners, and it has played a significant role in fostering an environment of trust and mutual assistance in the region. Capitalising on its role as a convenor and agenda-setter, ASEAN may steer future conversations towards promoting openness, transparency, equality, adherence to a rules-based framework, good governance, and mutual benefit and respect for international law to push the negotiations for the Code of Conduct (COC) on the South China Sea forward.<sup>33</sup> **The Philippines, as ASEAN Chair for 2026, could include this as one of its major agenda items during its tenure, with a perspective that a South China Sea COC would prevent untoward incidents, enhance trust, and provide mechanisms for crisis management.** Additionally, there is a significant opportunity to **strengthen existing joint strategic dialogues such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus** on shared security concerns in the vast regional maritime domain, and leverage its cross-regional dialogue partnerships with the European Union (EU) and the Gulf Cooperation Council for greater cooperation on global maritime safety and security.

Moreover, promoting stability requires a certain level of predictability in actions, and this could be done through developing international regulations to guide behaviour in the shared maritime domain. One of the key priority areas underscored in the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is ocean governance, in line with the related 2022 EU agenda.<sup>34</sup> This builds upon the experience and expertise of EU nations on negotiating international frameworks for ocean governance, ocean sustainability, and ensuring safety and security at sea. This is a critical area for cooperation in pursuit of stability in the South

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<sup>32</sup> Moch Faisal Karim, "Middle Power, Status-Seeking and Role Conceptions: The Cases of Indonesia and South Korea," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 72, no. 4 (2018): 343-363; Ziya Öniş and Mustafa Kutlay, "The Dynamics of Emerging Middle-Power Influence in Regional and Global Governance: The Paradoxical Case of Turkey," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 2 (2017): 164-183, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2016.1183586>.

<sup>33</sup> Association of Southeast Asian Nations, "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific," June 2019, [https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific\\_FINAL\\_22062019.pdf](https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> European Parliamentary Research Service, *EU Agenda for International Ocean Governance*, Briefing (European Union, 2022), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/739196/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)739196\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/739196/EPRS_BRI(2022)739196_EN.pdf).

China Sea, as these international regimes set guardrails to manage risks, prevent miscalculations, and ensure predictability in actions. Additionally, **further implementing agreements such as the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) and improving the enforcement capacity of surrounding states should also be a priority for multilateral cooperation.**

Additionally, given the situation in the South China Sea where accidents at sea have the most propensity to trigger international conflict, managing escalation also means increasing predictability and reducing miscalculation. With this, another opportunity for joint activity in the realm of international norms and regulations is regarding the use of autonomous technologies such as unmanned aerial and underwater systems. Observers have noted that all parties in the South China Sea, whether claimants or non-claimants, deploy unmanned systems across air, surface, and subsurface domains,<sup>35</sup> yet protocols on their use remain absent or largely underdeveloped. This situation creates significant gaps, wherein unscrupulous utilisation of these technologies as instruments for intelligence and surveillance or even weaponisation may lead to costly blunders at sea. **To this effect, other issues related to the South China Sea that could benefit from the development of international regulatory frameworks include cyber security, critical underwater infrastructure such as submarine cables, and the regulation of artificial intelligence.** The Philippines, as a beacon of international law and the rules-based order in the region, has expressed its willingness to participate in developing shared legal frameworks and cooperative enforcement over the aforementioned specific issues. This will require **reinforcing its domestic institutional capacity and enhancing national awareness and discourse regarding critical maritime infrastructure, particularly for information and communications.**

**Encourage multi-level, multi-sector cooperation for maritime domain awareness.** Cognisant of the fact that all operations at sea depend on sound decisions based on accurate and actionable information, there are in place robust maritime capacity- and capability-building partnerships between the Philippines and Japan, ROK, Australia, and various European nations focused on maritime domain awareness (MDA). MDA encompasses the detection, identification, and understanding of all kinds of activity in the maritime domain and is vital for preventing illegal activity and miscalculations at sea. Given that miscalculations could spark larger conflict in the South China Sea, MDA is a key cog for the Philippines in improving stability and managing escalation as it provides a common operating picture shared across agencies and partners at any given time.

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<sup>35</sup> Laura Zhou, “‘Strategic’: Why Are Drones Taking off among South China Sea Claimant States?,” *South China Morning Post*, December 3, 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3334927/drones-are-rise-over-south-china-sea-shift-data-driven-strategies>.

However, despite the promulgation of Executive Order 57 s.2024<sup>36</sup> to strengthen the country's maritime security and MDA, there is still a need to address overlapping mandates and redundant efforts of the Philippine maritime bureaucracy, and the ad-hoc nature of its inter-agency maritime security initiatives. For this, **developing a national maritime security strategy with mechanisms designed to improve coordination, accountability, and sustainability is urgent**. This is also to ensure that the various capacity-building initiatives between national agencies and international partners are streamlined to maximise the impacts of new platforms, technologies, and techniques on the country's, and eventually the region's, MDA.

Further, much of Philippine MDA activities are still state-centric and concentrated on specific agencies such as the Navy and the Coast Guard. There is still much room for multi-level, multi-sector initiatives to complement these. As top-down, statist approaches often highlight competing interests, different national values, and distinctive practices, bringing in other sectors and stakeholders across nations may introduce novel solutions to problems which could not easily be detected or addressed at the state level. Hence, there is also a need to facilitate dialogue between and amongst sub-state and non-state actors regarding their roles in MDA, such as between local government units, universities and techno-scientific communities, civil society groups/organisations, and the business sector. All these can be orchestrated and implemented through **creating a comprehensive MDA framework to guide the activities of the National Maritime Center, which was designed to be the country's information fusion centre vital to coordinating maritime security operations**.

Finally, the pursuit of the indivisible goals of environmental protection, sustainability of marine resources, and safety of life at sea may potentially create issue linkages, and thus, inroads for cooperation with China during diplomatic negotiations. These 'low-hanging fruit' are critical in addressing common security concerns in South China Sea, especially given the surrounding nations' shared vulnerability to the detrimental effects of natural and man-made disasters, and environmental degradation. Other related prospects for cross-regional confidence-building between South China Sea claimant states and their partners within and outside the Asia-Pacific region include **building technical capacities for enforcement against irreparable ecological damage to the marine habitat, developing resilient coastal communities, and conducting marine scientific research geared towards the conservation of protected species**.

## Conclusion

China's increasingly aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea poses a great challenge to peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region, and the Philippines is thrust into a vital role that requires a cautious and nuanced approach that minimises the risks of escalation

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<sup>36</sup> President of the Philippines, "Executive Order No. 57," March 25, 2024, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2024/03/25/executive-order-no-57-s-2024/>.

while maintaining strategic autonomy and flexibility. While it implements various unilateral political measures to defuse tensions in the strategic waterway, the Philippines recognises the necessity of cooperating with like-minded middle-power countries in the region and beyond to improve stability in the South China Sea and its surrounding maritime areas. Inclusivity, transparency, and multi-stakeholder cooperation are key in building practical cooperative measures and frameworks to build peace and stability in the region, and in maintaining a safe and sustainable sea vital to regional and global security and economic development.