

A Sea Change? U.S.-Philippine Irregular Statecraft in the South China Sea

Description

“Stop calling it the South China Sea. It’s the West Philippine Sea” calling it the South China Sea only empowers Beijing to claim the whole region.

Philippines Navy Commander, April 2023 interview by Jahara Matisek

The South China Sea has long been a source of strained relations between Beijing and Manila. Tensions, however, have started to boil over. China has routinely ignored a 2016 arbitral tribunal [decision](#) finding several of its territorial sea claims, including its “nine-dash line,” as unlawful and infringing on the Philippines’ sovereign rights. As recently as February 17, 2024, the Philippines Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources [accused](#) Chinese fishermen of using cyanide to intentionally destroy the Scarborough Shoal—a contested territory between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea—to prevent Filipino fishermen from fishing there.

Beijing claims [indisputable sovereignty](#) over nearly all of the 1.3 million square mile South China Sea and most of the islands within it. China’s coast guard, navy, and maritime militia vessels routinely harass Philippine patrol and supply boats. While Philippine officials have publicly [denounced](#) such tactics as irresponsible, dangerous, and illegal, China counters that its behavior is “[reasonable, lawful, and professional](#)” and has accused Philippine boats of unsafe behavior. The United States, considering the Philippines a critical regional ally, has, for its part, [voiced](#) its support for the Philippines and called on China to respect Philippine territorial claims and freedom of navigation.

Increased Chinese provocations and Philippine resistance have turned the South China Sea into a key battleground in the United States’ strategic contest with China, offering a chance to counter Beijing’s [gray-zone tactics](#). The United States should expand its existing [defense cooperation](#) and [integrated strategy](#) with the Philippines to include a more robust irregular statecraft approach that builds on the Philippines’ motivation, capabilities, irregular tactics, and maritime domain awareness to strengthen a regional alliance against illegal Chinese activities in the region.

A Slow Boil: Chinese Aggression in the South China Sea

Although China has [repeatedly](#) engaged in aggressive [encounters](#) with neighbors in the South China Sea since 1974, it was not until 1992 that China [claimed](#) the entirety of the sea through a reimagination

of history. Since then, China has employed a [“salami slicing”](#) approach of [systematically](#) legitimizing its increasingly aggressive actions in the region without generating a robust opposition.

In 2012, China [placed](#) a three-hundred-meter-long ball-buoy barrier policed by its coastguard between Chinese and Philippine forces near the Scarborough Shoal. The incident proved to be a precursor to China’s massive [fake island building campaign](#). China has also illegally built up [military infrastructure](#) and deployed fishing boats across the region that [conduct](#) illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing in its neighbors’ EEZs. Some fishing vessels, usually operating with their transponders turned off, also double as China’s maritime militia. Known in the Philippines as [“little blue men”](#), they harass commercial ships, coast guard boats, and naval vessels by [blasting](#) water cannons, [bumping](#) and [ramming](#), shining [blinding](#) lasers, and employing [dangerous](#) maneuvers.

The Philippines has pushed back against such tactics with its own creative methods. The case of the [BRP Sierra Madre](#) provides an important example. In 1999, the Philippines’ navy [intentionally](#) shipwrecked the ship on the Second Thomas Shoal, turning it into a de facto Philippine base. Despite years of [Chinese harassment](#), the Philippines continues to man the Sierra Madre as a [defensive](#) outpost to [resist](#) any attempt by China to forcefully remove it from the shoal. However, the Philippines [recognizes](#) the ship as sovereign territory covered by the 1951 U.S.-Philippine [Mutual Defense Treaty](#) (MDT), posing a potential flashpoint that may [implicate U.S. interests](#).

The Philippines’ efforts notwithstanding, China’s violations of international laws and rules of the sea have only grown increasingly boisterous. On March 5, the Philippines [summoned](#) China’s deputy chief of mission to the country in protest against what it saw as [“aggressive actions”](#) by Chinese naval forces [attempting to block](#) the Philippines’ resupply mission to the Sierra Madre, a confrontation that resulted in four Philippine injuries and damage to two Philippine vessels.

Washington-Manila Relations Punctuated by Beijing

Bolstering collaboration between the United States and the Philippines, particularly through an irregular statecraft approach, would cement regional cooperation in countering an increasingly assertive China. For decades, Manila has [balanced](#) its enduring security pact with Washington in tandem with growing economic cooperation with Beijing. While former President Rodrigo Duterte promoted [pro-Chinese policies](#) and [regularly questioned](#) the 1951 MDT, President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., elected in 2022, ran on a [pro-American platform](#), [reviving](#) the 2014 U.S.-Philippine Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement upon assuming office. This recommitment to the U.S.-Philippine alliance led the United States to announce [four new bases](#) in the Philippines and joint [U.S.-Philippine patrols](#) in November 2023—a first for the region.

To resist China's antagonistic behavior in the South China Sea and [violations](#) of the Philippines' EEZ, the Marcos administration has adopted an [assertive transparency](#) strategy executed through a [name-and-shame](#) approach. The tactic rests on deterring and defeating Chinese gray zone actions by strengthening national resilience, building international support, and imposing reputational costs on China. The naming and shaming element of this approach rests on quickly sharing information about incidents in the South China Sea as part of a broader [battle of narratives](#) against China regarding the framing of its behavior in the region. For instance, [Commodore Jay Tarriela](#), the spokesperson for the Philippine Coast Guard on the South China Sea, regularly [tweets](#) photos and videos of Chinese vessels conducting dangerous maneuvers against Filipino fishermen and Philippine military vessels, in apparent violation of the [International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea](#). The Philippines has also brought [international](#) and [local media](#) on patrol and resupply missions to the Sierra Madre to document Chinese provocations. The Sierra Madre even has its [own Twitter account](#) to document Chinese provocations of Philippine resupply boats like the one mentioned above to oppose Chinese influence operations in the region.

Irregular Statecraft for Countering Chinese Aggression

The Philippines' increased readiness to assert its maritime claims against China has created an opportunity for the United States to advance its own irregular strategy, exploiting Beijing's reckless behavior throughout the Indo-Pacific. Traditionally viewed as an [asymmetrical advantage](#), Beijing's [gray-zone](#) and [hybrid](#) actions across the region could be made into exploitable liabilities by doubling down on Manila's name-and-shame approach and efforts to increase transparency by casting a spotlight on such activities. Fortified U.S.-Philippines collaboration across militaries and agencies empowers the Philippines to be a [strong defensive node](#) along (and beyond) the [First Island Chain](#).

In order to achieve the concomitant U.S. goals of countering growing Chinese regional aggression while [avoiding](#) military escalation, the United States should look to non-military ways of contesting Chinese objectives in the South China Sea. Such an approach would emphasize confronting Chinese [manipulation](#) of historical narratives and [misinformation](#). That is where the promise of [irregular statecraft](#), which focuses on employing means short of war to erode adversaries' influence, comes in.

Incorporating irregular statecraft into the existing U.S. toolkit in the South China Sea would allow the United States to more effectively build on and support the work the Philippines is already doing to resist Chinese aggression. Supporting the Philippines' strategy of naming and shaming bellicose Chinese conduct would be a particularly worthwhile U.S. investment because regional cooperation in non-dispute related maritime matters, such as fishing, is a critical part of Chinese President [Xi Jinping's maritime strategy](#) for improving China's [international image](#). Furthermore, U.S. support

of assertive transparency is unlikely to provoke a bigger security issue in the South China Sea because [China's projection of sea power](#) also includes diplomatic negotiation, maritime law enforcement, and global maritime governance.

In terms of implementing such support, U.S. forces and interagency personnel can complement the Philippine defense forces' operational awareness of the South China Sea with well-funded resources and new technologies. The United States could, for example, augment a Philippine coast guard monitoring [base](#) at Thitu Island with more and higher-quality resources, surveillance assets, and interagency personnel to deter further Chinese rule-breaking by using recorded offenses to name and shame the country. Similar efforts at other [Philippine outposts](#) around the South China Sea could facilitate the creation of a [common maritime operating picture](#), enabling rapid allied responses against illegal Chinese activities and providing credible information about China's operations to dispel misinformation.

An expansive U.S.-Philippines partnership would also facilitate coalition building among like-minded neighbors in a whole-of-region campaign alongside the 2021 U.S. [Free and Open Indo-Pacific](#) (FOIP) strategy. American credibility and legitimacy in promoting FOIP rests on its ability to reassure allies in the region that laws and norms will be upheld in the face of Chinese threats. Thus, creating a so-called FOIP coalition would signal an important collective willingness to resist and counter China across all domains in the Indo-Pacific by checking, documenting, recording, and highlighting China's predatory actions to a global audience. With American support and Western diplomatic backing, such collective action by neighboring countries would demonstrate a collaborative consensus to counter illegal Chinese actions in [contested](#) EEZs.

Countering China's contrived narrative about its South China Sea claims requires proactive and transparent policies across governments, militaries, and civil societies to release information about Chinese deception. The U.S. government should thus consider [sending](#) National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) vessels on scientific missions alongside Philippine vessels and those of other neighboring countries in the South China Sea to show the American flag. Unbeknownst to many, the NOAA is a uniformed service, falling under the U.S. Department of Commerce. Under 33 U.S.C. § 3063, NOAA vessels placed within the South China Sea could [assist](#) the Philippines with surveilling and mapping [activities](#) as part of an integrated influence operation to expose Chinese aggression. Finally, through the use of [§ 1202 authorities](#) in the U.S. National Defense Authorization Act, the United States could build, train, and support unconventional maritime partner forces from neighboring South China Sea countries to confront Chinese vessels.

In the face of persistent Chinese misinformation, the United States can assist the Philippines in implementing a coordinated international and [multi-stakeholder effort](#) of strategic communication to

showcase how the United States abides by laws and norms in contrast with China. Moreover, the United States can dedicate interagency personnel to train Philippine cyber forces and civil society groups to conduct their own irregular information operations. Washington and Manila could also pursue irregular diplomatic efforts by changing the naming convention for the South China Sea, which gives symbolic legitimacy to China's illegal claims to the region, and instead, promoting the area's [renaming](#) as the [Southeast Asia Sea](#).•

A successful long-term approach on the part of the United States will be defined by three features. First, it will build an enduring foreign policy architecture that promotes democracy, rule of law, and economic prosperity. Second, it will reduce the [number](#) of [Chinese fishing vessels](#) purposefully anchored year-round near other countries' territorial claims in the South China Sea and used as a pretext for the presence of Chinese coast guard vessels. Finally, it will be limited to a supporting role aimed at reinforcing other countries' efforts to lawfully defend their legally defined territorial claims without directly provoking Beijing. Such U.S. irregular statecraft cooperation with the Philippines will enable leaders in Manila to confidently confront and negotiate with Beijing, while promoting dialogue as a primary course of action for resolving future South China Sea disputes.

Conclusion

By supporting the Philippines' assertive transparency strategy to manage risk and counter an increasingly provocative China, the United States can bolster its position as a strategic enabler in the region. Having mutually shared interests in countering China in the South China Sea as part of its broader FOIP efforts, the United States has the opportunity to take the Philippines' approach to the next level by providing technical, strategic, and operational support alongside irregular statecraft efforts. Similarly, the United States has an opportunity to observe Philippine actions while testing various irregular statecraft concepts to assess their effectiveness in countering China. If successful, an irregular statecraft template could be developed to use elsewhere as a way of strategically competing in a de-escalatory fashion and with the help of willing allies and partners.

With a properly crafted irregular statecraft strategy for the South China Sea, the United States can enable and empower its [frontline ally](#) to confidently deter and counter Chinese gray-zone actions while minimizing escalation not only between the Philippines and China, but also between the United States and China.

Amparo Pamela Fabe is a Professor of Financial Terrorism, National Police College, Philippines. She is a 2023 [Irregular Warfare Initiative](#) Fellow and a Fellow of the [Brute Krulak Center](#) for 2024-2026. She has over 50 publications, books, and journal articles, in defense and security. She has been interviewed by the [Voice of America Chinese](#), [Foreign Policy](#), [Straits Times](#), [Benarnews](#) and [South](#)

China Morning Post. Her writings appear in [stratsea.com](https://www.stratsea.com), GNET, and [Geopolitical Monitor](https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com).

Lieutenant Colonel Jahara â??FRANKYâ?• Matissek, PhD, ([@JaharaMatissek](https://twitter.com/JaharaMatissek)) is a [military professor](#) in the national security affairs department at the U.S. Naval War College, Research Fellow at the [European Resilience Initiative Center](#), 2023 [Irregular Warfare Initiative](#) Fellow, and U.S. Department of Defense Minerva [co-principal investigator](#) for improving American security assistance. Lt. Col. Matissek has published over 100 articles and essays in peer-reviewed journals and policy-relevant outlets on strategy, warfare, and security assistance. He is a command pilot that previously served as a [senior fellow](#) for the [Homeland Defense Institute](#) and [associate professor](#) in the Military and Strategic Studies Department at the U.S. Air Force Academy.

Main Photo: Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III is welcomed to Zamboanga, Philippines, Feb. 1, 2023. Austin is traveling to Asia to meet with senior government and military leaders in Korea and the Philippines to advance regional stability, further strengthen the defense partnerships and reaffirm the deep commitment of the United States to work in concert with allies and partners in support of the shared vision of preserving a free and open Indo-Pacific. ([DoD photo by Chad J. McNeeley](#))

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not reflect the official position of the Philippines, US Naval War College, US Air Force, Department of Defense, or US Government. This article was supported by the Air Force Office of Scientific Research under award number FA9550-20-1-0277.

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Date Created

2024/04/02