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Close Encounters: China’s Little Blue Sailors and Hybrid Tactics at sea

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Abstract:

The staggering growth in size and capabilities of the People’s Liberation Navy (PLAN) to support their national commercial activity across the globe has made Beijing one of the century’s maritime powers. Together with such growth, China has also been gradually widening its territorial ambitions and increasing its assertiveness, leading to a rise in tensions with its neighbors in the region. The numerous encounters between the Chinese Coast Guard and Philippine vessels taking place over the last years, including the ones in August 2023, have highlighted the problematic rhetoric ongoing in the region, showcasing Chinese hybrid tactics at sea and the willingness to keep using them to get its way.

Keywords:

China, Philippines, South China Sea, Hybrid Warfare, Maritime militia, Coast Guard.

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*NOTE: The ideas contained in the Opinion Papers shall be responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

Introduction

As Chinese commercial interests have increasingly expanded across the globe through their Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), so have their military capabilities requires to protect their trade. At the same time, Chinese maritime ambitions have led Beijing to challenge the system set up by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), in contested maritime regions such as the Spratly Islands, the Scarborough Shoal and the waters within the «nine-dash line».

During the summer of 2023, several incidents between the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and their Chinese counterpart raised the alarms in the region, pushing Manila to consider the establishment of their own maritime militia. Although Chinese maritime hybrid tactics are well known to many as one of the primary expressions of Beijing's challenge to the international order laid down by UNCLOS, the numerous hostile encounters with the Philippine Coast Guard have highlighted how determined is China to get its way and extend its control over international waters.

In their attempt to overwhelm vessels from the Philippine and other regional navies, China relies on its Coast Guard and a fleet of irregular maritime militias to exert influence and expand its control over the region. Building upon the recent work by Spanish Navy Captain Abel Romero,¹ this paper deepens on Chinese hybrid tactics in the region, as well as on the most relevant events which have taken place around the Philippine Sea over the last years. It also describes the powerful reaction that Chinese activities have prompted among its neighbors in the region, drawing many of them closer to the United States in an attempt to control Chinese ambitions and the threats that come with them.

Chinese Hybrid Tactics at Sea

When Nicholas Spykman's *The Geography of Peace* was published in 1944, soon after the passing of the Yale Professor, Japan was one of Washington's worst nightmares in the Pacific, while China was an ally at that point. Still, Spykman foresaw that it would be China, with its extensive coast along the East and South China seas, who would pose the biggest threat to U.S. interests in the region.² Decades after, Spykman's vision has

¹ See Note 3 below.

² VÁZQUEZ, Gonzalo (2022) «Spykman, MacArthur, and the Logic behind the US obsession with Asia Pacific», *Australian Naval Review*, Issue 2, 2022.

become a solid reality. China's rise as a maritime power over the last two decades, and specially under the rule of Xi Jinping since 2013, has been followed with increasingly demanding territorial claims around the South China Sea region.³ During the so-called «Century of Humiliation», which extends from the Opium Wars in the 1840s until the founding of modern-day People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, China was subjected to a series of invasions and neglect largely because of its inability to defend its vast coastline from the sea. Having one of the longest coastlines in the world, but not a Navy that provided protection around them, took a toll on the Asian nation to such an extent that it is taught in Chinese schools even today. Fully conscious about this, constructing a Navy with the proper means to protect Chinese vital interests at home and its commercial interests abroad has been one of President Xi's main focuses since he came to power a decade ago. During this time, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has become the biggest Navy by number of hulls.⁴

But more importantly, Beijing has also become increasingly demanding with the territories along the South China Sea region. Through an extensive use of maritime militias as a geopolitical tool to exert its influence around China's territorial waters, China has gone beyond the 200-mile limit of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) treating the entirety of the South China Sea as its own backyard. In doing so, it uses large numbers of civilian vessels (including fishermen) to assert control across the region, supporting its claims by drawing a region known as the Nine-Dash Line (seen in the image above) connecting a series of islands and important points. With them, Beijing avoids direct military confrontation and accountability while still ensuring the denial of other forces from the region. These civilian personnel are known as little blue sailors,⁵ and the claims and means employed in the quest to fulfill the mission assigned to them have come at a cost for the Philippines and most of the countries in the Indo-Pacific region.

³ ROMERO JUNQUERA, Abel (2023) «The rise of China as a maritime power», Analysis Paper 58/2023, https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2023/DIEEEA58_2023_ABEROM_China_ENG.pdf (Accessed 29 August 2023).

⁴ PAGE, Lewis (2023) «China now has the world's biggest navy: but the U.S. fleet would still win in a fight – for now», *The Telegraph*, 19 May. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/05/19/chinese-navy-plan-worlds-biggest-usn-top-for-now/> (Accessed 28 August 2023).

⁵ STAVRIDIS, James (2016) «Maritime hybrid warfare is coming», *US Naval Institute*, Proceedings, Vol. 142/12/1,366, December. Available at: <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2016/december/maritime-hybrid-warfare-coming> (Accessed 28 August 2023).



Figure 1: Map depicting the current delimitation of Exclusive Economic Zones and Chinese claims through the “nine-dash line” (Source: UNCLOS, BBC).

This challenge, which has also been dubbed the «war without gunsmoke», creates significant dilemmas for the U.S. joint force, while they also undermine allied and partner confidence in Washington’s resolve and allow China «to incrementally expand positional advantage contest and, if necessary, strike U.S. vital interests first»⁶ Through it, Beijing embraces an operational concept that includes the coordinated use of media/public opinion; psychological warfare; and legal warfare to shape the battlespace by creating a favorable strategic and operational environment prior to hostilities. [...] When engaged

⁶ LEIMBACH, Wendell B. & DUCKWORTH, Eric (2022) “Prevailing without gunsmoke in the South China Sea», *US Naval Institute, Proceedings*, Vol. 148/11/1,437, November. Available at: <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2022/november/prevailing-without-gunsmoke-south-china-sea> (Accessed 21 August 2023).

against the United States, the combination of the three modifies regional expectations and raises doubts about the legitimacy of U.S. presence.

Among Chinese irregular forces used to pursue their objectives is the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia, or PAFMM. It is composed of civil personnel working in the maritime sector, and who are tasked with patrol, reconnaissance and auxiliary support operations. They use smaller boats (mostly between 30 and 50 meters long), and according to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative,⁷ in 2021 there were at least 120 vessels. With them, they are able to threaten the safety of other vessels operation across the region, and are also considered an asymmetric threat due to their ability to threatening towed sonar arrays.⁸ In a hypothetical wartime scenario, such as a conflict over Taiwan or a standoff with a U.S.-Philippine coalition, they could perform a wide variety of missions including mine-laying, Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) operations, anti-aircraft raiding, and electronic warfare.⁹

Review of Recent Events

One of the most relevant places where China has repeatedly attempted to assert its dominance within the Nine-Dash Line is Scarborough Shoal, a maritime feature which lies about 120 miles from the Philippines but is also claimed by China and Taiwan. In 2012, several Chinese fishermen occupied the shoal and upon the arrival of Filipino armed sailors, a clash of several weeks erupted between both countries.¹⁰ It was eventually settled on the basis of UNCLOS, with the ruling being made in favor of Manila, but Beijing did not officially recognize it. Since then, Chinese claims over the islands within the Nine-Dash Line, which Beijing has tried to fortify and militarize in order to have better

⁷ The AMTI is an initiative launched by the Center for Strategic and International Studies which aims to promote transparency in the region. It is an interactive, regularly-updated source for information, analysis, and policy exchange on maritime security issues in Asia. See: <https://amti.csis.org/about/> (Accessed 29 August 2023).

⁸ LEIMBACH, Wendell B. & DUCKWORTH, Eric (2022) «Prevailing without Gunsmoke in the South China Sea», *US Naval Institute*, Proceedings, Vol. 148/11/1,437, November. Available at: <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2022/november/prevailing-without-gunsmoke-south-china-sea> (Accessed 27 August 2023).

⁹ KNOLL, David, POLLPETER, Kevin, and PLAPINGER, Sam (2021) «China's Irregular Approach to War: The Myth of a Purely Conventional Future Fight», *Modern War Institute*, 27 April. Available at: (Accessed 28 August 2023).

¹⁰ GREEN, Michael et Al. (2017) «Counter-Coercion Series: Scarborough Shoal standoff», *CSIS*, May 2022. Available at: <https://amti.csis.org/counter-co-scarborough-standoff/> (Accessed 23 August 2023).

chances of claiming them, have been a regular trouble for Manila.



Figure 2: Scarborough Shoal (Source: NASA).

In December 2022, Manila expressed serious concerns over the swarming of Chinese vessels over contested waters, which had been ongoing for many months according to a Philippine commander. When discussing the incidents and the constant interdiction of Beijing's militia, the Chief of Defense claimed they «maintain that activities which violate our sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction, and undermine the peace and stability of the region, are unacceptable».¹¹

Several weeks after the declarations, the U.S. and the Philippines agreed upon the access to four additional military bases in the islands, which have the potential to enhance allied capabilities to respond against any potential aggression by China in the region. Although not stationed there definitively, the bases will also be a major hub for joint military training between the two nations, as a means to boost interoperability. China responded soon after the announcement claiming «this would escalate tensions and

¹¹ (2022) «Philippines concerned over Chinese vessels `swarming´ in disputed waters – defense chief», *Reuters*, 14 December. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/philippines-concerned-over-chinese-vessels-swarming-disputed-waters-defence-2022-12-14/> (Accessed 19 August 2023).

endanger peace and stability in the region». ¹²

Later in August 2023, a video was circulated by the Philippine Coast Guard taken from aboard one of their vessels was taken when «BRP Malabrigo» and «BRP Cabra» were on their way to the Sabina Shoal for a resupply. Several Chinese warships were around the region, and while en-route to the shoal, Chinese vessels CCG 5304, CCG 5201, CCG 4203, and CCG 5402 showed up and conducted maneuvers to block and separate *Cabra* from the AFP supply boat it was escorting. ¹³ Upon publishing the video, the Philippine Coast Guard expressed their discontent over such actions: «The Philippine Coast Guard strongly condemns the China Coast Guard's dangerous maneuvers and illegal use of water cannons against PCG vessels.» ¹⁴



Figure 3: A Chinese Coast Guard ship fires a water canon to a Philippine military resupply mission in early August 2023. (Source: Philippine Coast Guard via France 24).

¹² (2023) «U.S. secures access to new strategic base sites in the Philippines», *The Maritime Executive*, 2 February. Available at: <https://maritime-executive.com/article/u-s-secures-access-to-new-strategic-base-sites-in-the-philippines> (Accessed 21 August 2023).

¹³ MAHADZIR, Dzirhan (2023) «VIDEO: China Coast Guard blast Philippine Military resupply with water cannons», *USNI News*, 7 August. Available at: <https://news.usni.org/2023/08/07/video-china-coast-guard-blast-philippine-military-resupply-with-water-cannons> (Accessed 26 August 2023).

¹⁴ CHEN, Heather & KWON, Jake (2023) «Philippines accuses China of firing water cannons at its ships in the South China Sea», *CNN*, 7 August. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/08/06/asia/philippines-chinese-vessels-south-china-sea-intl-hnk/index.html> (Accessed 26 August 2023).

As a result of the events in the summer of 2023, the Philippines announced their intention to start conducting joint patrol operations with the United States before the end of the year.¹⁵ Acknowledging the fact that they can no longer withstand Chinese aggressions in the region by themselves, the Philippines are now eager to strengthen their bilateral ties and cooperation with other regional partners. Initiatives such as these are a positive step taken against Chinese grey zone tactics, and could certainly lay the foundation for future cooperation in the region among Indo-Pacific allies.

China relies on these hybrid tactics to get its way in the region, and the growing strength of this militias is bound to remain strong for the foreseeable future. According to a former US defense official, «there's no way they (China) can pull that operation off without it being pre-planned and there being real-time communication between the two».¹⁶ This reinforces the argument that, in order to deter further Chinese incursions and threats to smaller vessels, the rest of countries have to step up their presence in the Philippine Sea and mounting a joint maritime force with sufficient power.

Soon after these events took place, China published an updated version of their national map, following a trend that has been taking place since 2006. With these updates, Beijing aspires to make corrections to what it considers as erroneous or problematic; although they are actually used as an instrument to legitimize their growing territorial claims. With its latest update, however, many neighbors have formally protested against the enlargements of Chinese territory that the map adds, including the contested areas of the South China Sea and other territories belonging to Malaysia and India as their own. As can be seen in the image below, the new map has evolved from the Nine-Dash Line to a Ten-Dash Line, and it also contests several regions across the South China Sea with other neighbors.¹⁷

¹⁵ DAGUNO-BERSAMINA, Kristine (2023) «Philippines, U.S. expected to start joint patrols in West Philippine Sea by year-end NSC», *PhilStar*, 5 August. Available at: <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2023/08/05/2286446/philippines-us-expected-start-joint-patrols-west-philippine-sea-year-end-nsc> (Accessed 20 August 2023).

¹⁶ LENDON, Brad (2023) «'Little Blue Men': Is a militia Beijing says doesn't exist causing trouble in the South China Sea?», *CNN*, 12 August. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/08/12/asia/china-maritime-militia-philippines-tensions-intl-hnk-ml/index.html> (Accessed 21 August 2023).

¹⁷ YEH, Nadya (2023) «China's New Map draws outrage from its neighbors», *The China Project*, 31 August. Available at: <https://thechinaproject.com/2023/08/31/chinas-new-map-draws-outrage-from-its-neighbors/> (Accessed 1 September 2023).

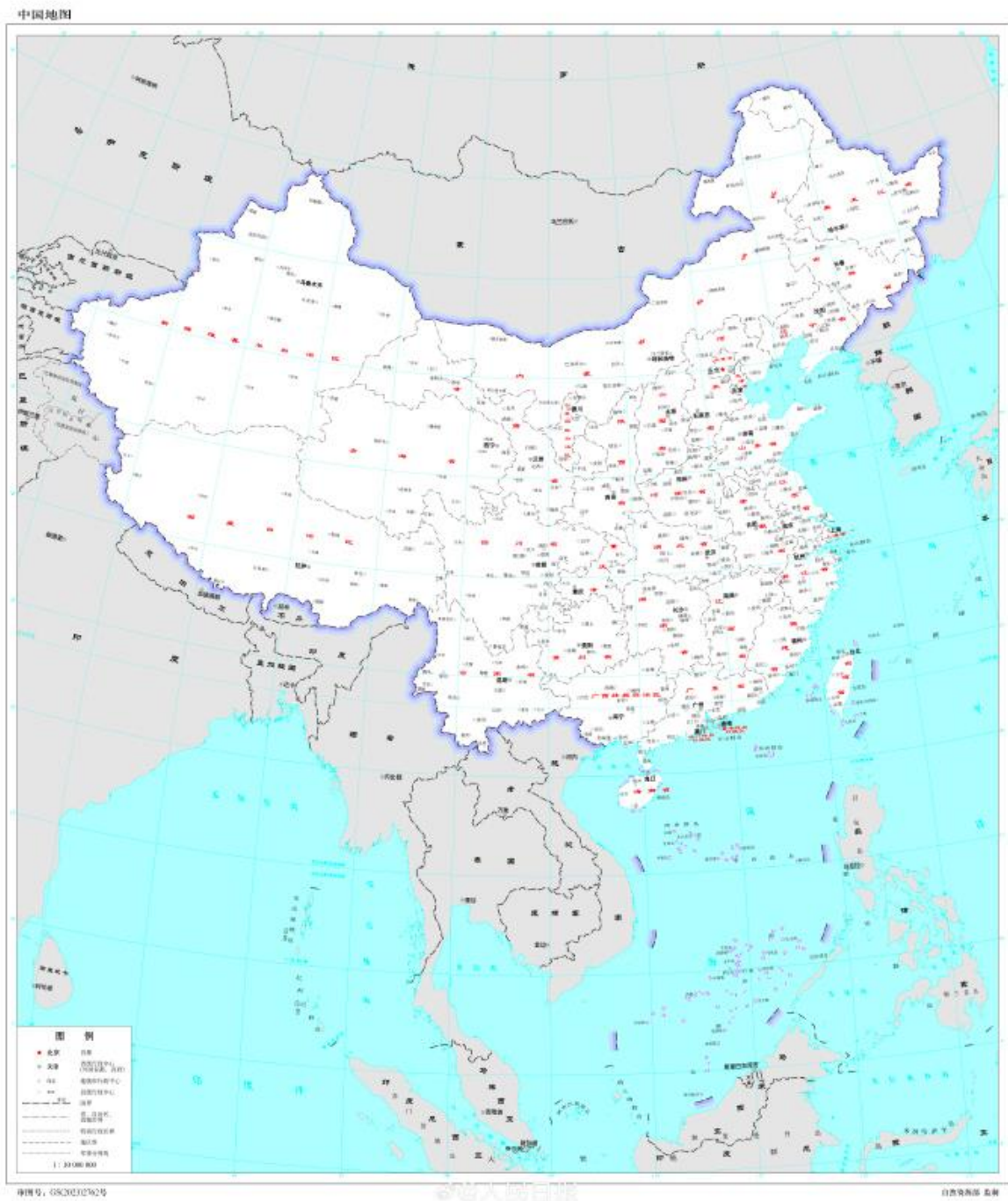


Figure 4: New China National Map (Source: Global Times).

US - Philippine Maritime Defense Cooperation

The Philippines are strategically located closing the South China Sea, effectively becoming an ideal basing location for the US or any ally that intends to keep a close eye on Chinese activities across the region. It could be used as a forward deployed base in case of a conflict in Taiwan or anywhere around the South China Sea, in coordination

with Guam and the islands of Japan to the north. They also provide maritime domain awareness

The United States and the Philippines signed in 1951 a Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT), vowing to strengthen their mutual trust and cooperation to safeguard the region against potential threats to their common interests.¹⁸ At the time they signed it, the region was not as geopolitically important as it is today (and neither as challenging). However, seven decades after the Indo-Pacific has become the center of gravity of the global order, with the busiest trade routes in the globe; and a rising China boasting the biggest navy in the world by number of hulls threatens international law and the sovereign rights of its neighbors as laid down in UNCLOS.

According to Article V of the treaty signed between the two countries, «an armed attack on either of the Parties is deemed to include an armed attack on the metropolitan territory of either the Parties, or on the island territories under its jurisdiction in the Pacific or on its armed forces, public vessels or aircraft in the Pacific»¹⁹ This opens up a debate on whether recent actions by China should be considered as an armed attack which thus falls under the scope of what the treaty establishes or not.

Among the most recent deployments by the U.S. to the region, worth highlighting is the latest joint bilateral sail conducted by both countries in early September 2023. With the Philippine Navy's guided-missile frigate «BRP Jose Rizal» and Arleigh Burke-class guided missile-destroyer «USS Ralph Johnson» (DDG 114) from the U.S. Navy, the two nations have conducted training and rehearsed interoperability among their crews, strengthening their position in the region.²⁰

The Philippine Navy also began considering the option of creating their own maritime militia after the August events. According to official sources, the attacks triggered anger among many PCG officials, and the Navy announced they were considering establishing their own maritime militia made up of both navy reservists and civilian fishermen. Many

¹⁸ BUREAU OF POLITICAL-MILITARY AFFAIRS (2022) «U.S. Security Cooperation with the Philippines», Fact Sheet 7 October. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-the-philippines/> (Accessed 18 August 2023).

¹⁹ United States of America and the Philippines (1953) «Mutual Defense Treaty», *United Nations Treaty Series*, No. 2315, p. 136. Available at: <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20177/volume-177-I-2315-English.pdf>

²⁰ (2023) «Philippines, United States conduct bilateral sail», *Naval News*, 4 September. Available at: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/09/philippines-united-states-conduct-bilateral-sail/> (Accessed 4 September 2023).

fishermen have been working with the Coast Guard for years, serving as an intelligence and surveillance instrument with Chinese presence close to their waters. Yet, the possibility of being armed to face their Chinese foes seemed unnecessary for many of them, who responded negatively to the proposal.²¹

Both the U.S. and the Philippines should invest in their military ties and strengthen their maritime presence across contested waters and main hotspots. As Admiral J.C. Wylie put it decades ago, the ultimate determinant of victory is «the man on the scene with a gun».²² The only way you can exercise durable and continuing control over a given region is by deploying ships and sailors to be there and stand up against the enemy's movements. Thus, cooperation among the Philippine and the U.S. Coast Guards which leads to more presence and activity is a prerequisite to face China. As US Naval War College professor Jim Holmes argues, «alliances work best when all of the allies are invested in the common defense».²³

With an increase in presence on the U.S. side over Philippine waters, with vessels that outgun those of the CCG,

Beijing would be forced to send gray hulls to the scene to restore local superiority and reinforce its claims to sovereignty. In so doing it would remind everyone—once again—who is the bully in Southeast Asia. Involving the PLA Navy would also belie the narrative that the China Coast Guard is merely policing sovereign waters that have belonged to China by right since antiquity, and guarding Chinese vessels engaged in lawful commercial activity.²⁴

But the Washington and Manila cannot do it alone, and they should not. The joint maritime patrols are a positive step forward which will yield some positive results in the short term, for other allies must join in order to guarantee long-term success.

²¹ LARIOSIA, Aaron Matthew (2023) «Philippines looks to increase its maritime capabilities in the SCS», *Naval News*, 18 August. Available at: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/08/philippines-looks-to-increase-maritime-capabilities-in-the-scs/> (Accessed 19 August 2023).

²² WYLIE, J.C. (1957) «Why a sailor thinks like a sailor», *US Naval Institute*, Proceedings, Vol. 83/8/654, August. Available at: <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1957/august/why-sailor-thinks-sailor> (Accessed 21 August 2023).

²³ HOLMES, James (2023) «U.S.-Philippine Coast Guard Patrols: Time to Provoke the Provocateur», *19fortyfive*, 16 August. Available at: <https://www.19fortyfive.com/2023/08/u-s-philippine-coast-guard-patrols-time-to-provoke-the-provocateur/>

²⁴ HOLMES, James (2023) «The U.S. Navy is now paying a price for its littoral combat ship mistakes», *19fortyfive*, 21 August. Available at: <https://www.19fortyfive.com/2023/08/the-u-s-navy-is-now-paying-a-price-for-its-littoral-combat-ship-mistakes/> (Accessed 21 August 2023).

The Need for Allied Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

Chinese naval strategy is focused on the concepts of Near Seas Defense and Far Seas Protection, through which it expands the geographic scope of its operations. They add «new emphasis to safeguarding China's economic development and strategic interests by protecting sea lines of communications and engaging in long-distance security missions».²⁵ The first of them focuses on ensuring Chinese territorial sovereignty, while the second is linked to their commercial interests and the need to protect their maritime trade, which they do following the tenets of Alfred Thayer Mahan.

The rise of China as a regional maritime power in Asia Pacific, together with the potential for expanding its influence further afield with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) requires the U.S. and its allies in the region to act. Although the naval strategy described above is not in itself a threat to other regional navies, the constant harassments and hostile behavior displayed by Beijing through its maritime militia requires Allied nations to step up their presence to defend their waters.

Retired Admiral James Stavridis provided a while ago a simple story to exemplify how far could China get with its hybrid tactics over the following years:

On a summer's evening in the sweltering South China Sea, a coastal steamer of nearly 2,000 tons approaches a Vietnamese fishing fleet in the exclusive economic zone of Vietnam, some 150 miles off that nation's coast. The steamer loiters in the area for an hour or two as night falls. Suddenly from the side of the ship three fast speedboats are deployed, each armed with .50 caliber guns and hand-held rocket launchers. For the next hour, the speedboats attack dozens of fishing craft, spraying them with .50 caliber fire, hitting them with grenades, and shooting at survivors in the water.

The surviving fishing boats flee toward the coast, frantically radioing distress calls, which are jammed by small drones operating overhead. [...] China insists its armed forces were not involved and says it suspects gangsters running a protection racket, pirates, or domestic Vietnamese terrorists.²⁶

²⁵ RICE, Jennifer and ROBB, Erik, «China Maritime Report No. 13: The Origins of "Near Seas Defense and Far Seas Protection"» (2021). *CMSI China Maritime Reports*. 13. Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/13> (Accessed 5 September 2023).

²⁶ STAVRIDIS, James (2016) «Maritime hybrid warfare is coming», *US Naval Institute*, Proceedings, Vol. 142/12/1,366, December. Available at: <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2016/december/maritime-hybrid-warfare-coming> (Accessed 21 August 2023).

This simple yet compelling tale illustrates the magnitude of Chinese hybrid tactics in the region, and what China could eventually do in a few years-time if allies do not take note of the events in with the Philippine Coast Guard and face Beijing's aggressive behavior. These events are just the tip of the iceberg of China's playbook on hybrid tactics, with which it hopes to exert its sovereignty far beyond its EEZ, and which will require a high level of international maritime cooperation on the side of Manila's Allies.



Figure 5: Philippine Fleet review for the 85th anniversary of their Armed Forces
(Source: Philippine Navy)

Mindful about this, the Philippine Navy has been increasing its capabilities over the last decade while it has vowed to strengthen its ties with multiple regional allies. In 2016-2017 they acquired their first two Landing Platform Docks (LPD), and in early August 2023, construction began for the first of two additional units.²⁷ They also have two José Rizal-class guided missile frigates, with ASW, ASuW and limited AAW capabilities. They have one corvette and have begun construction of two additional units which will complement the work of the José Rizal frigates,²⁸ and are also growing their current fleet of 10 patrol

²⁷ (2023) «PT PAL Begins construction of the Philippine Navy's LPD», *Naval News*, 10 August. Available at: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/08/pt-pal-begins-construction-of-the-lpd-for-the-philippine-navy/> (Accessed 25 August 2023).

²⁸ NEPOMUCENO, Priam (2023) «Steel Cutting for 2 Navy Corvettes set in May, November: DND»,

vessels and 24 coastal attack craft. The U.S. Navy announced the transfer of two Cyclone-class patrol ships to Manila in March 2023, previously operated by the U.S. Coast Guard, and which are equipped with two MK 38 25mm machine guns and four .50 caliber machine guns.²⁹ A month after, in April 2023, two additional Israeli-made Acero-class patrol boats were commissioned, and more offshore patrol vessels (OPVs) are expected to follow soon.³⁰ With all these new additions to their naval forces, the Philippines will soon boast a strong fleet to support commercial and fishing activities within its EEZ.

Yet, in spite of the gradual improvement in their overall capabilities and the support of Washington, Manila will still need to rely on the support of its regional allies, most of which support its stance against Beijing's coercive methods, and are also boosting their own military efforts to counter Chinese tactics in the region.

Japan, just as the Philippines, is one of China's closest neighbors, and has been one of the most prominent examples of the strong geopolitical upheaval that is taking place in the region.³¹ As ascertained by Professor Jim Holmes, Japan is fortifying its southwestern islands to protect its territory and offshore waters, while also living open the option of converting the island chain into a barricade against hostile maritime and air movement.³²

Tokyo is also invested in helping Manila face off the challenge posed by Chinese hybrid tactics. In their latest Official Development Assistance to them, they included a grant for a Satellite Data Communications System to be installed in the Philippine Coast Guard's multi-role response vessels. With it, the activities around their territorial waters and the South China Sea will enjoy an enhanced maritime domain awareness, which is what the

Philippine News Agency, 18 January. Available at: <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1192999> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

²⁹ LARIOS, Aaron Matthew (2023) «U.S. to transfer Cyclone-class patrol ships to Philippine Navy», *Naval News*, 28 March. Available at: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/03/u-s-to-transfer-cyclone-class-patrol-ships-to-philippine-navy/> (Accessed 23 August 2023).

³⁰ (2023) «Philippine Navy commissions two more Acero-class Patrol Boats», *Naval News*, 29 May. Available at: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/05/philippine-navy-commissions-two-more-acero-class-patrol-boats/> (Accessed 20 August 2023).

³¹ COLOM PIELLA, Guillem (2023) «El Zeitenwende japonés: ¿Hacia su plena integración en materia de defensa?», *Revista General de Marina*, July. Available at: <https://armada.defensa.gob.es/archivo/rgm/2023/07/RGMJulio2023Parte06.pdf> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

³² HOLMES, James R. (2023) «Japan's Military is getting ready to take on a rising China», *19fortyfive*, 7 August. Available at: <https://www.19fortyfive.com/2023/08/japans-military-is-getting-ready-to-take-on-a-rising-china/> (Accessed 26 August 2023).

Philippines now need the most.

Vietnam, one of China's closest neighbors, has shown interest in establishing closer cooperation with the Philippines since the 1990s, although they have not yet signed any mutual agreement on the matter. Yet, as a result of the events taking place during summer 2023, the Philippine government expressed their desire to establish closer maritime cooperation with their Vietnamese neighbors as a means to stabilize tensions with China. As argued by some, «If Philippines and Vietnam are united, China will be a bit careful».³³ This looks even more likely after the signing of a strategic association agreement between Hanoi and Washington early in September 2023, with which the U.S. has taken an important step to counter Chinese influence in the region.³⁴

Australia, on the opposite end of the Pacific, has been paying close attention to the evolution of the PLAN and its activities over the past decade. Its most recent «Defense Strategic Review» published in May 2023, acknowledged the growing geostrategic tensions derived from Chinese activities, and pushed for stronger efforts in enhancing maritime awareness. Although it is not clear yet how this will be implemented, or what will the desired «new fleet structure design» look like, it is said that Australia should implement an A2/AD approach similar to the one displayed by China in its waters.³⁵

The strategy argues that «the development of a strategy of denial for the ADF is key in our ability to deny an adversary freedom of action to militarily coerce Australia and to operate against Australia without being held at risk».³⁶ Thus, Australia can also be expected to be willing to cooperate and help the Philippines if that is eventually required, although it will still have to figure out how to implement the new fleet structure design to make a more solid contribution.

³³ (2023) «Philippines and Vietnam plan cooperation agreement on South China Sea», *The Maritime Executive*, 13 August. Available at: <https://maritime-executive.com/article/philippines-and-vietnam-plan-cooperation-agreement-on-s-china-sea> (Accessed 25 August 2023).

³⁴ (2023) «Biden firma un acuerdo de asociación estratégica con Vietnam para contrarrestar a China», *EFE*, 10 septiembre. Available at: <https://efe.com/mundo/2023-09-10/biden-vietnam-acuerdo/> (Accessed 10 September 2023).

³⁵ VÁZQUEZ, Gonzalo (2023) «Adapting to a New Strategic Environment: The Royal Australian Navy and Australia's 2023 Strategic Defense Review», *Center for Maritime Strategy*, 27 July. Available at: <https://centerformaritimestrategy.org/publications/adapting-to-a-new-strategic-environment-the-royal-australian-navy-and-australias-2023-strategic-defense-review/> (Accessed 26 August 2023).

³⁶ AUSTRALIAN MINISTRY OF DEFENSE (2023) «Defense Strategic Review 2023», p. 49. Available at: <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review> (Accessed 3 September 2023).

India has shown support for the Philippines and are willing to extend their defense partnership.³⁷ New Delhi is with Manila in the quest for ensuring that the rules-based order is withheld at sea, including in the South China Sea. They stated their support for Manila's stance over the disputes around the Nine-Dash Line, and recognized that «China is the only major power that poses a direct threat to its security interests, both on its border and in the Indian Ocean.»³⁸ They have also been adding new assets to their national navy, including four Nilgiri-class P17A stealth frigates which were recently completed, and a planned class of Next Generation Destroyers.³⁹ Other countries have also realized the potential threat of Chinese actions and looking for ways to face Beijing. In late 2021, Indonesia invited the maritime security representatives of its ASEAN partners to discuss possible ways of responding to China's assertiveness, proving how most nations within the association are against Chinese moves.⁴⁰

Concluding Remarks

Which takeaways can therefore be drawn from the events in the Philippine Sea up until the summer of 2023? What can we learn for future encounters with the PLAN?

First of all, Chinese hybrid tactics supporting their naval strategy will remain strong so long as their territorial claims over the region are at the top of Beijing's wish list. The long series of incidents over the last decades, and specially the latest attack by the CCG demonstrates the seriousness of Chinese ambitions for the region, and the training and preparation they have put in to ensure their effectiveness. These movements are in most occasions directly contravening the principles enshrined through UNCLOS, which has prompted many of their neighbors in the Indo-Pacific region to voice their concerns over the situation. Worth highlighting to this regard is the fact that China deliberately ignores

³⁷ ROY CHAUDHURY, Dipanjan (2023) «India, Philippines to upgrade defense partnership; boost maritime cooperation», *The Economic Times*, 30 June. Available at:

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-philippines-to-upgrade-defence-partnership-boost-maritime-security/articleshow/101374489.cms?from=mdr> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

³⁸ LARIOS, Aaron-Matthew (2023) «India revises stance on China-Philippines maritime dispute as New Delhi looks East», *USNI News*, 5 July. Available at: <https://news.usni.org/2023/07/05/india-revises-stance-on-china-philippines-maritime-dispute-as-new-delhi-looks-east> (Accessed 23 August 2023).

³⁹ KRISHNA, Adithya (2023) «India proceeds with new submarines, surface ships development», *Naval News*, 13 August. Available at: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/08/india-proceeds-with-new-submarines-surface-ships-development/> (Accessed 4 September 2023).

⁴⁰ STRANGIO, Sebastian (2021) «Indonesia seeking Southeast Asia coordination on South China Sea disputes», *The Diplomat*, 29 December. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/12/indonesia-seeking-southeast-asian-coordination-on-south-china-sea-disputes/> (Accessed 5 September 2023).

UNCLOS for its demands in the South China Sea, while defending them vehemently to ensure their freedom of navigation and exploration in the Arctic region.

Second, as a result of Chinese movements and the growing concerns mentioned above, the region is experiencing a naval-geopolitical upheaval through which most navies are pushing to strengthen their naval assets in the face of China's aggressions. As of September 2023, the top three countries with the highest rate of ship construction are China, Japan, and South Korea. Japan, having long realized that their defense posture since the end of WW2 had become obsolete vis-a-vis Chinese tactics, has more than doubled its defense budget and is increasing the size of its navy. Seoul has followed Tokyo in this aspect, and together with Australia, the US and other partners, there will be a likely rise of Allied presence to face Beijing's claims.

Lastly, as extensively repeated by professor Jim Holmes, Chinese hybrid tactics require the Philippines and its allies (especially the U.S.) to act against it and mount a serious presence in the region that acts as a deterrent force. To be there to compete and face their adversary. This can be done best through additional deployments by regional navies and coast guards, which provide enhanced regional maritime awareness. Additionally, it can be achieved through firm cooperation among the Philippines, the U.S., Japan, South Korea, Australia, and other smaller navies, allowing them to improve interoperability and train together. Only then will they be in a good position to face off China's maritime militia and deter potential aggressions by Beijing in its quest to uphold the international order as laid down by UNCLOS.

All of the above considerations are useful to understand the current strategic landscape in the Asia-Pacific. At this moment, none of the parties involved in these disputes (nor any other nation in the world) wish them to lead into irreversible escalation. Yet, Manila and its allies must push hard to find the way to deter Chinese hostilities and dissuade possible attacks such as the one witnessed in August 2023. In the end, any measures taken should have the primary goal of ensuring that safety and freedom of navigation prevail in a region of such an importance.

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