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**GAME CHANGER: THE PHILIPPINES' ASSERTIVE
TRANSPARENCY CAMPAIGN**

HOW THE PHILIPPINES REWROTE THE
COUNTER GRAY ZONE PLAYBOOK IN 2023

COL. RAYMOND M. POWELL, US AIR FORCE (RET.)
BENJAMIN GOIRIGOLZARRI, PH.D.

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ABSTRACT

In 2023, the Philippines introduced an innovative new approach to countering China's state-sponsored gray zone actions through a tactic termed "assertive transparency." This refers to the systematic and purposeful use of visual evidence to expose these activities to the public. The authors contend that to be most effective with this novel information operations campaign should be considered one important tactic within a larger strategy to deter and defeat malign gray zone activities. Within this context, Manila's assertive transparency sets three necessary conditions for success. First, by strengthening the Philippines' national resilience to prioritize support for the long-term gray zone contest. Second, the strategy has proven effective in building international support to increase the nation's moral and material leverage against the perpetrator. Lastly, it imposes reputational costs against Beijing to force a change in its risk-benefit calculations. The authors observe that the first two lines of effort have already yielded substantial gains for Manila and give specific examples of greater national resilience and international support. While reputational costs have also been imposed, an analysis of whether these costs will be translated into the desired impact of causing a behavioral change on the part of Beijing will be premature at this early stage. While its impacts have been impressive, Philippine leaders cannot assume that assertive transparency alone will produce sufficient deterrent value to win the West Philippine Sea. The authors conclude that the ultimate success of this assertive transparency campaign will depend on whether the Philippines can effectively sustain and leverage it into a broader gray zone strategy and whether other nations will follow suit within the maritime domain and other non-military domains. Ultimately, assertive transparency represents a potentially revolutionary innovation in counter-gray zone operations worthy of study and emulation among the free-and-open community of nations. It has already proven to be a great equalizer in the West Philippine Sea contest. It could be the Philippines' indispensable contribution to an increasingly contentious and dangerous global gray zone fight.

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Late on Friday, December 8th 2023, three small vessels belonging to the Philippines' Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) slipped their moorings along the eastern shore of the Bataan peninsula in Manila Bay and began a treacherous journey westward. The ships were carrying “oil subsidy and grocery packs to over 30 Filipino fishing vessels” at Scarborough Shoal, which Filipinos known as *Panatag Shoal* or *Bajo de Masinloc*.¹ While there would normally be nothing particularly hazardous about the trip, as weather and sea conditions were calm, the BFAR crews knew they would encounter an unfriendly reception committee when they arrived.

This is because the shoal has yet another name—one assigned to it by its hostile occupying force: *Huangyan Dao*.

Located about 120 nautical miles west of the northern Philippine island of Luzon, Scarborough Shoal has for centuries been a vital destination for fishing villages up and down the coast of Zambales province. In April 2012, however, Chinese ships seized the shoal and have controlled access to it ever since.² From that time, the beleaguered Zambales fishing villages have lost up to 70 percent of their income due to these controls and depleted fish stocks, according to some estimates.³

As the BFAR boats left port, recent satellite imagery and automatic information system (AIS) tracking data indicated at least two China Coast Guard (CCG) and four Peoples Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) of the large *Qiong Sansha*

Yu fleet patrolling the shoal's southern entrance. The coast guard ships were known to carry powerful water cannons, which they frequently use to intimidate and control foreign vessels in Chinese-claimed maritime zones.⁴

Figure 1 . China Coast Guard and Militia Ships Gathered near Scarborough Shoal's Southern Entrance (8th of December 2023)



Source: Starboard Maritime Intelligence, <https://starboard.nz/>

The 30-meter BFAR vessels carried no weapons, but what they did carry was a small bevy of embedded journalists, who soon would have quite a story to tell. For over 12 hours on December 9th, the BFAR vessels would be blocked, harassed, and water-cannoned at least eight times by China's much larger ships, which also reportedly used a long-range acoustic device to bombard their crews with deafening noises. One of the BFAR boats also suffered damage to its communications and navigation gear.⁵

The spectacle of these massive, 100-meter coast guard ships looming over and inundating the much smaller and defenseless BFAR boats made for gripping journalism, and the visual evidence was quickly beamed directly back home—first to news studios in Manila and shortly thereafter to audiences throughout the Philippines and across the globe.

China’s response was almost as swift but much less effective in persuading either Filipino or global audiences, with official foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin discordantly intoning that “... for some time, the Philippines has been sending people to ... intrude into adjacent waters and airspace of China’s *Nansha* [Spratly] Islands and *Huangyan Dao* ... We once again urge the Philippines to stop hyping up maritime disputes between China and the Philippines, and stop its infringement of China’s sovereignty and provocation at sea.”⁶

Meanwhile, the South China Sea Probing Initiative, a Peking University think tank that routinely engages foreign audiences to assert Beijing’s talking points, made an even more obnoxious argument on social media: “If you didn’t find fault with China every day, the situation of Philippine fishermen in that area would be much better.”

Figure 2 . South China Sea Probing Initiative Post on X (8th of December 2023)



Source: X, https://x.com/SCS_PI/status/1733483248783598057?s=20

Twenty-four hours later and over 600 kilometers to the south, a much larger flotilla of CCG and PAFMM ships thronged around two small boats—the *Motor Launch (M/L) Kalayaan* and wooden-hulled *Unaiza May 1 (UM1)*—and their 44-meter Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) escorts, *BRP Cabra* and *BRP Sindangan*. The Philippine vessels were there to carry out their monthly resupply of a beleaguered naval outpost aboard the *BRP Sierra Madre*, a World War II-era ship grounded but continuously manned at Second Thomas Shoal (*Ayungin* Shoal to the Philippines, *Rena'i* Reef to China) in the Spratly Islands since 1999, in an effort to stem China's inexorable West Philippine Sea advance. Since that time, China has imposed and increasingly tightened a blockade against these resupply missions, employing the full arsenal of militant measures against any perceived threat that the Philippines might successfully repair or replace the deteriorating ship.⁷

*Figure 3 . Philippine Boat Resupplies BRP Sierra Madre
(2022)*



Source: Western Command, Armed Forces of the Philippines,
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=395459405949693&set=pcb.395460185949615>

M/L Kalayaan, pressed into service after *UM1*'s longtime companion *UM2*, was damaged in a collision with a CCG ship during an October resupply mission, was itself damaged by CCG water cannons before it could reach its objective. *BRP Sindangan* was forced to take it under tow back toward the Palawan coast as *BRP Cabra* pressed forward with *UM1*. Both of these remaining vessels soon also came

under water cannon fire, with *UMI* also suffering a minor collision with a larger CCG ship.

Despite these belligerent tactics, *UMI* arrived successfully at the *Sierra Madre* and offloaded not only its supplies but also two high-ranking dignitaries, Armed Forces of the Philippines Chief of Staff General Romeo Brawner and the Commander of Western Command, Vice Admiral Alberto Carlos. Philippine audiences were soon treated to photos of the two senior officers eating lunch and encouraging the outpost's defenders, a vivid representation of a pugnacious and resilient nation standing up to a powerful aggressor.

By the end of the day, while these small BFAR, PCG and resupply vessels

Figure 4 . General Brawner and Vice Admiral Carlos Lunch with Troops Aboard the BRP Sierra Madre



Source: Joseph Morong, GMA Integrated News,
https://images.gmanews.tv/webpics/2023/12/sierra_madre_121023_2023_12_10_19_12_00.jpeg

clearly ended up on the short end of the latest West Philippine Sea scuffles, it was Beijing that suffered the greater tactical defeat. Its South China Sea gray-zone strategy of harassment and coercion—one that has worked so brilliantly in the shadows—is now backfiring under the bright glare of Filipino cameras.

This is because 2023 has been a truly remarkable year. It is the year when the Philippines turned on the spotlight and changed the gray-zone game in the South China Sea.

A Dangerous Game

This “game” is not a fun one. It is an increasingly dangerous and consequential contest for sovereign rights in the West Philippine Sea, over which China has demonstrated an increasing will and capability to enforce its exorbitant and discredited maritime claims.⁸ Projecting power from its recently constructed artificial island bases, China’s expanding navy, CCG, and PAFMM fleets now routinely hound the Philippines’ much smaller and sparser security vessels despite frequently operating over a thousand kilometers from China’s shores.

China has achieved its South China Sea preeminence over its maritime neighbors by relying on an increasingly mature and sophisticated gray-zone strategy, through which it achieves its security objectives by using a variety of opaque, deniable, and often illegal—or at least legally ambiguous—schemes and maneuvers without resorting to conventional military force.⁹ Together, these comprise an ever-evolving playbook of gray zone tactics used to menace its rivals while (until recently) escaping much of the international censure such heavy-handedness would otherwise warrant.¹⁰

This playbook includes several pages devoted to simple detection-avoidance methods such as turning off or falsifying required vessel identification transponder data—commonly known as “going dark” and “spoofing,” respectively.^{11 12} It also features the proliferation of South China Sea outposts, from the massive permanent military bases built up during China’s audacious artificial island-building campaign to the small floating outposts created by the PAFMM’s Spratly Backbone Vessels. These ships receive generous government subsidies to deploy into the Spratly Archipelago, where they frequently tie themselves together into “rafts” in order to establish a semi-permanent PRC presence.¹³

On the more intrusive side, Beijing has evolved a system of deploying its survey ships and CCG patrols deep into its neighbors’ internationally recognized exclusive economic zones as a means of asserting its claims of jurisdiction over an ever-increasing swath of the South China Sea.¹⁴ This practice has now become so prevalent that its other neighbors, Vietnam and Malaysia, seldom register public complaints despite near-permanent CCG intrusions now tolling well over 300 days per year.¹⁵

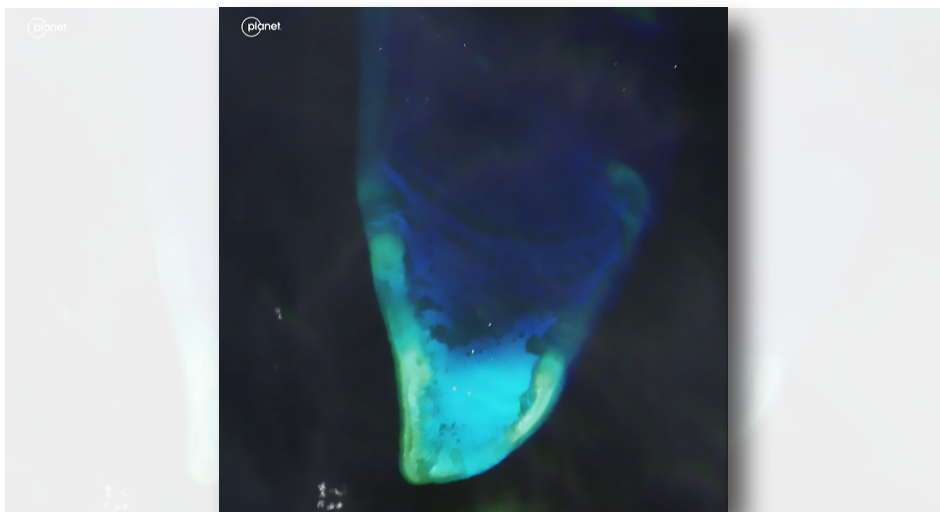
Seldom does not mean never, however. On one extremely recent occasion, Hanoi felt obliged to take its protest public when China deployed the survey ship

Figure 5 . Whitsun Reef, Around 320 Kilometres West of Palawan Island
(December 2023)



Source: Philippine Coast Guard, Inquirer,
<https://globalnation.inquirer.net/223840/pcg-militia-ships-in-julian-felipe-reef-could-be-prelude-to-china-reclamation>

Figure 6 . “Rafted” PRC Militia Ships at Iroquois Reef in
the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone



Source: Col. Raymond Powell, US Air Force (Ret), Planet Labs PBC,
<https://www.sealight.live/posts/china-s-illegal-fishing-fleet-at-iroquois-reef-in-the-west-philippine-sea-images-2>

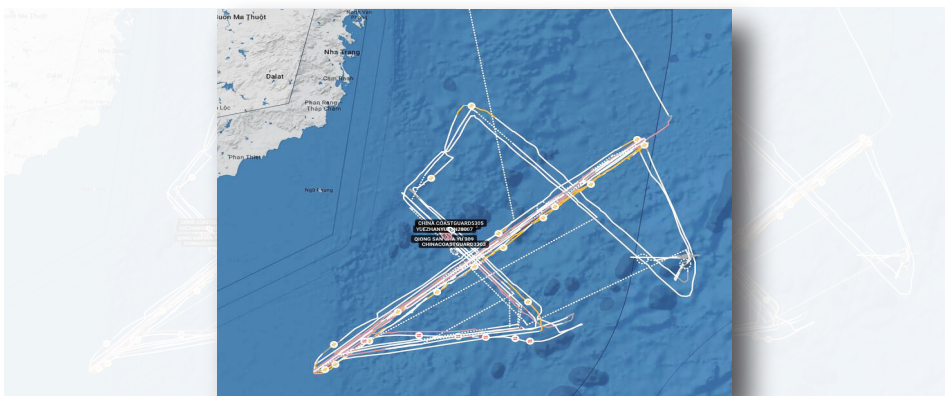
Xiang Yang Hong 10 into the waters off Vietnam's southeastern coast for nearly a month in May 2023, escorted by a flotilla of coast guard and militia ships. The ships followed an unorthodox survey path, the purpose of which flummoxed the Vietnamese government. Analysts later observed that its pattern bore a striking resemblance to the Chinese character 中, the first in a common Mandarin word meaning "China."¹⁶

Figure 7. China Coast Guard Patrols in the South China Sea



Source: Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, <https://i0.wp.com/amt.csis.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Days-patrolled-map-2022-wm.jpg?w=960&ssl=1>

Figure 8. Path of the *Xiang Yang Hong 10* Flotilla Off Vietnam's Coast (May 2023)



Source: Col. Raymond Powell, US Air Force (Ret), Sealight, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/raymondpowell_vietnam-china-vietnam-activity-7067574915645804544-SZdR/?originalSubdomain=sm

China's willingness to brazenly violate international law, accepted norms, and its own signed agreements have caught adherents to an increasingly fragile rules-based order flat-footed. Reaction to its gray zone strategy has been haphazard, with most governments and international bodies responding reactively and impotently. China's militarily and economically vulnerable neighbors have largely treated incidents on a measured case-by-case basis, hoping to minimize the risk of escalation on one hand and damage to their national sovereignty on the other. While this seems like prudence, it plays directly into the hands of a highly sophisticated gray zone actor like China, which has exploited this reticence to patiently expand and consolidate its control over the strategically vital South China Sea.

China's most audacious current project is its Second Thomas Shoal blockade, by which it hopes to eventually achieve the *BRP Sierra Madre's* disintegration and the Philippines' abandonment of its outpost. Just 30 kilometers to the west of the rusty ship, Mischief Reef has become the lynchpin of this blockade strategy. By artificially building the reef into an artificial island and turning it into a huge military base—complete with a massive harbor, port, and airfield—China has been able to forward-stage the swarms of ships needed to isolate the *BRP Sierra Madre* and deny access to any vessel it deems a threat to either repair or replace it before its looming demise.

For years, the world's response to this outrage has not been outrage but rather a collective shrug. The election of President Rodrigo Duterte in 2016 played a role in that indifference, as he immediately declared his intent to ignore a simultaneously issued West Philippine Sea arbitration ruling, which undermined a unique opportunity for Manila to cement its hard-fought lawfare victory over China.¹⁷ The ensuing period was one of relative quiet as his administration largely acquiesced to the blockade, accommodating China's demand that the *BRP Sierra Madre* not be improved by relying on small wooden boats like *UM1*, *UM2*, and *M/L Kalayaan* to carry out its minimalist rotation and resupply missions.

Thus, the precedent was set that the Philippines would not contend strongly for its freedom of navigation or sovereign rights within its exclusive economic zone, but would acquiesce to China's demands that any protests should be sent privately through diplomatic channels. It would seem thereby to accept the inevitable fate of the *BRP Sierra Madre* to eventually succumb to time and the elements. All the while, China gradually tightened its blockade, largely free from the international

censure that should have accompanied such an imperialist policy.

Yet this period of public quiet masked a seething and growing disquiet within Philippine polity. Below the surface, much of the country's military, government, and civil society was restless and agitated over the administration's reluctance to take a stand for the nation's rights.¹⁸ The hard-fought arbitration ruling that should have given Manila leverage and served as the basis to delegitimize China's incursions sat in a desk drawer while publicly accessible information about West Philippine Sea confrontations seemed to dry up. Journalists were not allowed to accompany maritime patrols or even learn the most basic details about their conduct. Those who knew what was happening were not authorized to talk, and many who did not know suspected a whitewash.

Sea Change

Change did not come immediately upon President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr.'s inauguration in July 2022, as he at first seemed content to continue the Duterte approach. Through his administration's first seven months, official information on maritime encounters with China remained scant and vague. Then, in early 2023, a remarkable sequence of events unfolded that completely altered the strategic landscape.

A novel concept emerged from a relatively new and little-known corner of Stanford University in the United States. Project *Myoushu*, an all-volunteer effort operating under a methodology taught by Stanford's Gordian Knot Center for National Security Innovation, began using commercially available technology to regularly report on South China Sea incidents.¹⁹ Inspired by the success of the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative in illuminating China's artificial island-building campaign during the previous decade, Project *Myoushu* undertook to use open-source intelligence to fill the voids frequently left when a country's overly bureaucratic, cautious or politically constrained government agencies are slow to release important information into the public.^{20,21}

The group's first public dispatch, delivered in January 2023 to a conference organized by the Stratbase Albert Del Rosario Institute (ADRI) in Manila, highlighted a previously unreported December 2022 encounter between

Philippine Navy and CCG vessels near Scarborough Shoal.²² The incident itself was not especially noteworthy, but the media response was nevertheless dramatic. Information-starved Philippine journalists eagerly documented the incident, while official government sources, lacking any new guidance, demurred. The event could have ushered in yet more tension over the government’s lack of transparency, but other forces were already at work.

This is because President Marcos was at the same time making significant changes to his national security team, bringing in retired General Eduardo Año as his National Security Advisor and elevating retired General Carlito Galvez to Secretary of National Defense.²³ The new appointments foreshadowed a dramatic shift in the government’s approach to maritime transparency and security policy, and a reset in its relationship with Philippine civil society.

On February 6th, 2023, Project *Myoushu* issued a series of social media posts speculating about the harassment of a PCG ship, the *BRP Malapascua*, in the

Figure 9 . Project Myoushu’s Ray Powell Suggesting Harassment of BRP Malapascua (February 6, 2023)



Source: X, <https://x.com/GordianKnotRay/status/1622666599080808448?s=20>

vicinity of Sabina Shoal. The group based its assessment on a nearby China Coast Guard ship “going dark” and what the group judged to be unusual activity by the *BRP Malapascua*.²⁴ As evidence, it was rather thin, but the story was picked up by a few media outlets as journalists again sent inquiries to government officials seeking confirmation of the account.

Manila was primed for a change in its accommodationist policy, and after a full week of internal deliberations, the Marcos administration boldly chose to embrace transparency.

On February 13th, the PCG released photos and video of the CCG ship *Haijing 5205* pointing a “military-grade laser” at the *BRP Malapascua*.^{25 26} Its accompanying statement asserted that “[t]he deliberate blocking of the Philippine government ships to deliver food and supplies to our military personnel on board the *BRP Sierra Madre* is a blatant disregard for, and a clear violation of Philippine sovereign rights in this part of the West Philippine Sea.”²⁷

Figure 10 . China Coast Guard Haijing 5205 Deploys a Laser Against the Philippine Coast Guard Ship BRP Malapascua (February 6, 2023)



Source: Philippine Coast Guard, Inquirer Facebook Page,
https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=574914381486188&set=ecnf.100069028928005&paipv=0&eav=AfauhkGcR2L4iQ-HUGY6snHmlkswACTd-uPwx3qM2K0nTERnL0oZxkBpGNqAQy20dA&_rdr

The incident received worldwide attention, and support for Manila's position—together with opprobrium for China's actions—poured in from several foreign capitals. The Philippines' longtime treaty ally, the United States, was especially forthright:

*“The United States stands with our Philippine allies in upholding the rules-based international maritime order and reaffirms an armed attack on Philippine armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft, including those of the Coast Guard in the South China Sea, would invoke U.S. mutual defense commitments under Article IV of the 1951 U.S. Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty.”*²⁸

This invocation of the Mutual Defense Treaty received special notice in the Philippines, as questions had long circulated about whether America viewed the West Philippine Sea as integral to its treaty obligations or its coast guard vessels as included therein. Such concerns had bounced around Manila since 2012 when the United States was perceived to have prioritized stable relations with Beijing over its ally and passively permitted China's takeover of Scarborough Shoal. This incident was to fuel persistent doubts about American commitment throughout the ensuing decade—doubts the United States had previously seemed unwilling to take on directly.²⁹

That changed on February 13th, and Manila took notice.

Assertive Transparency as State Policy

This diplomatic coup, taken together with strong contemporary expressions of support from Tokyo, Canberra, Berlin, and Ottawa, appeared to validate Manila's decision and shatter the long-standing information dam.³⁰ The Philippine government was not merely pressured into being more forthcoming but purposefully decided on a daring new course.

Within ten days of releasing the photos of the laser incident, the PCG was fully empowered to pursue a strategy of publicly and assertively seeking out and exposing Chinese maritime aggression for the world to see, and it undertook its new mandate with keen enthusiasm. It quickly dispatched its ships and aircraft—

many with Philippine journalists embarked—to seek out the CCG and PAFMM vessel swarms it had long been tracking, with the specific intent of sharing the extent of China's perfidy with the Philippine public and the world.^{31 32}

Of course, the Marcos administration is hardly the first government to release visual evidence of malign activity. Simple transparency is not what made the Philippines' tactic revolutionary. Rather, Manila moved from a disjointed series of reactive bureaucratic government responses and transformed them into a highly focused and proactive information operations campaign—one which has, at least for the moment, routed China's sophisticated narrative warfare machine on the international stage.

The speed, decisiveness, and effectiveness with which the Philippines turned into assertive transparency were remarkable. The government's initial choice to publicize February's laser incident was a reaction to a single incident. Its decision to follow that up by empowering its maritime security forces to systematically seek out, document, and publicize Chinese vessel swarms, restrictions on Filipinos' lawful fishing activity, and environmental damage to marine ecosystems has transformed it into a startlingly successful assertive transparency campaign.³³

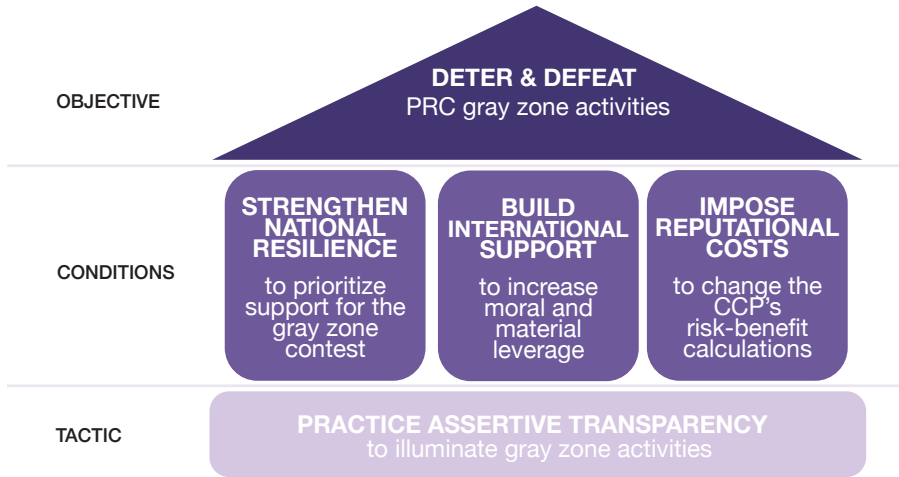
Soon after the government began releasing its own evidence, it instituted a policy of systematically embedding reporters on its missions, which helped both expand and legitimize its program. Using embedded media leveraged the power of a free press and an open society—those very features of a democratic system are generally treated as weaknesses in a propaganda fight. So ubiquitous is Manila's embedding program now that Beijing is compelled to consider that any Philippine ship or aircraft it harasses will likely have media on board.³⁴

The brilliance of the Philippines' campaign is that it is essentially a jiu-jitsu move that has turned the strengths of Beijing's gray zone strategy back against it. Like a mafia boss, a gray zone operator thrives by working in dark spaces away from the public eye, where it can exert pressure on government officials to quietly succumb to its will. Manila recognized the inherent weakness in this approach—its sensitivity to public exposure—and seized the opportunity to send in the floodlights.

Still, what does transparency produce besides a sense of *schadenfreude* and an increased risk of instability and escalation? The objective of any such campaign must ultimately be not to simply embarrass the gray zone aggressor but to compete with, deter, and defeat its gray zone activities. Manila's assertive transparency campaign does so by setting three necessary conditions for long-term success:

strengthening national resilience, building international support, and imposing reputational costs on the gray zone actor.

Figure 11 . The Assertive Transparency Model



Source: Col. Raymond Powell, US Air Force (Ret.)

Strengthening National Resilience

Especially in a democracy, strengthening national resilience against a comprehensive gray zone strategy is imperative, and it begins with marshalling civic support for government action. Under normal circumstances, the public is naturally inclined to prioritize “kitchen-table” issues over national defense and is receptive to arguments that complying with an aggressor’s demands for the sake of stable relations is the most prudent move. This is especially true when the adversary operates in the shadows and where the issues at stake seem vague and esoteric, such as who enjoys sovereign rights over unseen maritime expanses and coral reefs.

Assertive transparency enables ordinary citizens to viscerally experience the full measure of gray zone aggression, which gives the government increased political latitude to take the hard steps required to push back. These steps may include accepting more risk of conflict or economic retaliation, the threats of which are well-recognized weapons in Beijing’s coercion arsenal.^{36 37} Absent such a

convincing rationale, the government could find itself under domestic criticism for failing to manage its relationship with a wealthy and powerful neighbor. When domestic media is filled with compelling images of maritime bullying, however, the government finds itself with a strong mandate to accept that risk in order to defend the nation's honor and its sovereign interests.

Investing in maritime capacity is central to building resilience against a maritime threat, and the Philippines' new abundance of visual evidence has generated the kind of strategic clarity and political support needed to make these investments. Within the past two months, the administration has announced its intention to build 40 new 15-meter patrol vessels and to acquire five additional 97-meter coast guard vessels from Japan.^{36 37} The government is also considering an Indian offer to sell it seven Advanced Light Helicopters for the coast guard.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the Philippine legislature is considering large increases in funding for the military and coast guard, and for the development of Pag-Asa Airport on Thitu Island, the Philippines' largest West Philippine Sea outpost. House Speaker Ferdinand Martin Romualdez explained, "This allocation demonstrates our dedication to maintaining a strong and credible defense posture, one that sends a clear message that we will not compromise when it comes to safeguarding our national interests."⁴¹

Building resilience also involves insulating the public and the government against China's insidious disinformation machinery. Willing and paid propagandists have long dotted the landscape of Philippine civil society, exerting pressure on business interests, academia, politicians, and the public to accommodate Beijing's demands and parrot its narrative. Manila's transparency campaign has pushed these figures into the public eye and exposed both the weaknesses and the cynicism of their arguments.⁴² It has also given the government the opportunity to consider measures to curtail their activities or at least to require them to be transparent about any funding they may receive from Chinese government entities or their interlocutors.

Building International Support

Where the first condition looks to build a domestic base of support, the second turns to foreign partners. For a smaller state, robust international support is

an essential condition for deterring a more powerful adversary. By itself, the Philippines has insufficient leverage to force China to change its strategy or negotiate on less coercive terms. To the extent that Beijing sees the Philippines as a node in a larger security network and able to draw upon foreign assistance, however, the balance shifts in Manila's direction.

The Philippines' assertive transparency campaign has already achieved significant gains on this front. This has included ample moral support from across Asian, North American, and European capitals. Its American ally has since February 2023 repeatedly reaffirmed its Mutual Defense Treaty obligations, and even United States President Joe Biden has recently clarified both their geographical reach into the West Philippine Sea and their comprehensive application to all manner of Philippine public vessels.⁴³

Not only has the Philippines' campaign solidified commitments with the United States, but it also reenergized its security partnership with Japan, as recently announced by its Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. "In the South China Sea, trilateral cooperation to protect the freedom of the sea is underway," Kishida told the Philippine legislature. "Through these efforts, let us protect the maritime order, which is governed by laws and rules, not by force." During the same visit, Kishida and Marcos agreed to begin negotiations on a reciprocal access agreement to facilitate mutual troop rotations between the two nations.⁴⁴

France has likewise entered into negotiations with the Philippines for a visiting forces agreement, intended to "create interoperability or a strategic closeness between both armed forces," according to French Minister of the Armed Forces Sebastien Lecornu. The two countries also agreed to increase intelligence and information sharing.⁴⁵

Even the famously non-aligned Indian government recently eased off the sidelines to express its support for "adherence to international law," specifically the landmark Arbitral Tribunal decision that awarded Manila such a sweeping legal victory over Beijing in 2016. Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar signed a joint statement with the Philippines' Secretary for Foreign Affairs Enrique Manalo in June 2023 that "underlined that both countries have a shared interest in a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region. They underlined the need for peaceful settlement of disputes and for adherence to international law, especially the UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Award on the South China Sea in this regard."⁴⁶

Just as importantly, Manila's campaign has begun to yield commitments of material assistance, beginning with separate offers by the United States, Japan, and Australia to conduct joint patrols in disputed waters with the Philippine Navy to demonstrate their common commitment to West Philippine Sea security.⁴⁷ Recent Philippine exercises have also drawn stronger foreign military involvement, with its October 2023 Exercise *Sama Sama* drawing participation from Australia, Canada, France, Japan, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.⁴⁸

Moreover, there have been several foreign government pledges to increase military and civilian maritime security equipment in the months since the campaign began. The aforementioned purchase of coast guard vessels from Japan was made possible by grants and favorable loan terms from Tokyo, and those offers were accompanied by USD4 million in funding to acquire additional coastal radars.⁴⁹

Canada recently began providing state-of-the-art satellite feeds to enable the Philippines to monitor "dark" vessels operating illegally within its exclusive economic zone, while also sending a resident defense attaché to Manila for the first time. Canada's Ambassador to the Philippines explained the need for these steps by referring directly to the gray zone activity that Manila's assertive transparency campaign has been exposing: "We've seen a rise in behavior in the West Philippine Sea and the South China Sea that we have determined to be worrisome."⁵⁰

Imposing Reputational Costs

Assertive transparency's offensive element is its means of compelling a gray-zone actor to recalculate the benefits of its aggression against the price it pays on the international stage. China has long sought to cast itself as a benevolent big brother to its Asian neighbors with whom it pursues "win-win" relationships, while outside powers bring instability and unhealthy great-power competition into what would otherwise be a peaceful region. Manila's pictures tell a far different story, exposing Beijing's empty rhetoric and disingenuous overtures in vivid color.

Informed by the Philippines' evidence, the intergovernmental G7 grouping of the world's leading free economies has become more pointed in its criticism of China's maritime aggression:

“There is no legal basis for China’s expansive maritime claims in the South China Sea, and we oppose China’s militarization activities in the region. We emphasize the universal and unified character of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and reaffirm UNCLOS’s important role in setting out the legal framework that governs all activities in the oceans and the seas. We reiterate that the award rendered by the Arbitral Tribunal on July 12, 2016, is a significant milestone, which is legally binding upon the parties to those proceedings, and a useful basis for peacefully resolving disputes between the parties.”⁵¹

China’s interminable and chronically unproductive South China Sea Code of Conduct (CoC) negotiations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) provide a clear example of how the mounting evidence provided by Manila may serve to undermine China’s position on the international stage. Beijing has consistently upheld its commitment to concluding a CoC, proclaiming that, “China and ASEAN countries are fully implementing the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DoC) in an effective way, and actively advancing consultations on a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.”⁵²

Yet, in signing its agreement to the 2002 DoC, Beijing has already committed itself to abide by well-established international laws and norms. These are reflected in points 3, 4, and 5 of the DoC:

3. The Parties reaffirm their respect for and commitment to the freedom of navigation in and overflight above the South China Sea as provided for by the universally recognized principles of international law, including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea;

4. The Parties concerned undertake to resolve their territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means, without resorting to the threat or use of force, through friendly consultations and negotiations by sovereign states directly concerned, in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law, including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea;

5. The Parties undertake to exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes and affect peace and stability including, among others, refraining from action of inhabiting on the presently uninhabited islands, reefs, shoals, cays, and other features and to handle their differences in a constructive manner.⁵³

These obligations are set in stark relief against the incontrovertible photographic evidence of the routine and increasingly pronounced threat and use of force in the context of China's *BRP Sierra Madre* blockade, in which it has employed its recently militarized Mischief Reef base to project its military and paramilitary vessels deep into the Philippines' UNCLOS-earned exclusive economic zone. Manila has also spotlighted how CCG and PAFMM ships have restricted the Philippines' freedom of navigation around both Second Thomas and Scarborough Shoals by visibly forceful means that appear to be the opposite of "self-restraint."

Through its transparency campaign, Manila has provided clear evidence of Beijing's failure to live up to its DoC commitments, and thus exposed it as an unserious, bad-faith CoC negotiator.⁵⁴

Assertive Transparency: Isolated Tactic or Trend-Setter?

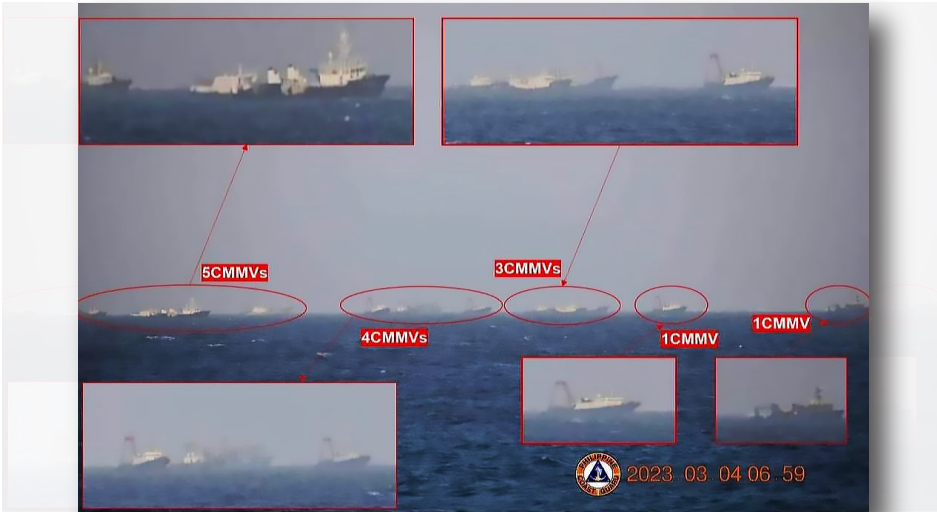
Although assertive transparency is already moving the needle on the conditions necessary to deter and defeat gray zone aggression, as a single nation's isolated tactic, it is far from certain it can succeed in the face of China's very robust, mature, and comprehensive maritime gray zone strategy. Even so, Beijing has already shown some signs that the negative attention is making its bite felt.

In March 2023, China sent a swarm of over 40 militia vessels to intimidate the defenders of the Philippines' largest South China Sea outpost at Thitu Island. This occurred just a month after the PCG's initial release of photos related to the laser incident at Second Thomas Shoal and may have been intended as a way to nip this problem in the bud and discourage the Marcos administration from making more trouble for Beijing. If so, it backfired badly, as far from being dissuaded, Manila immediately dispatched its photographers into the fray.⁵⁵

China has further demonstrated its sensitivity to this new tactic by imitation. It has begun sending its own photographers into expected confrontations to better arm its spokespersons and proxies while also lead-turning anticipated Philippine press releases with its own preemptive counter-narratives.⁵⁶

These attempts can take on an almost comic quality, as Beijing will sometimes release visual evidence intended to refute Manila's simply by excluding the events in question. For example, the video released by the China Coast Guard following

Figure 12 . Militia Vessel Swarm at Thitu Island
(March 2023)



Source: Philippine Coast Guard, Manila Bulletin, <https://mb.com.ph/2023/03/05/44-chinese-vessels-swarm-pag-asa-island-pcg/>

Figure 13 . A Thread of SeaLight's Posts on X Documenting the
Dispersal of the Thitu Island Vessel Swarm
(March 2023)



Source: X, <https://x.com/GordianKnotRay/status/1634504092868567040?s=20>

the August 5th water cannoning of the *UM2* resupply boat included only the time prior to when the water hit the boat. Chinese media outlets bizarrely pointed to this as proof that the boat was never struck.

Figure 14 . CCG 5201 Deploys a Water Cannon Against Philippine Resupply Boat UM2 near Second Thomas Shoal (August 2023)



Source: Armed Forces of the Philippines, One News, <https://www.onenews.ph/articles/water-cannon-chinese-coast-guard-stops-philippines-from-resupplying-troops-on-brp-sierra-madre>

Figure 15 . Screen Shot from CCG Video of the Same Event in the Moments Before the Resupply Boat was Struck



Source: CGTN TV, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nh-Bj79jVMI>

While its impacts have been impressive, Philippine leaders cannot assume that assertive transparency alone will produce sufficient deterrent value to win the West Philippine Sea contest against a ruthless and powerful adversary like Xi Jinping's China. Like any tactic, transparency is best employed as part of a more comprehensive national strategy. As the calendar turns to 2024, it will be important for Manila to build out a realistic vision of how it wants this informational tool to work alongside its diplomatic, military, economic, and other elements of national power to help it achieve core strategic objectives.

Just as crucial is the question of whether the Philippines' early success in applying assertive transparency will inspire other countries to follow suit. For now, China likely maintains the hope that this single, small, upstart country can eventually be brought to heel by some well-practiced combination of veiled threats, economic retaliation, and elite capture techniques. Beijing is accustomed to outlasting unruly and rebellious governments within its chosen sphere of influence, as it did when the potentially devastating 2016 arbitration ruling was quickly asphyxiated by that summer's dramatic political change in Manila.

It need not be so. Other nations should even now be carefully studying the Philippine approach for adaptation and adoption into their own counter-gray zone strategies. If it is applied more broadly and comprehensively, China and other malign actors will be faced with the reality that the gray zone battlefield has turned less favorable and that their prospect of exposure must change their risk-benefit calculation. It is that kind of broad-based adoption that has the potential to deter and defeat gray zone actors at scale.

Moreover, assertive transparency may be replicable not only across national boundaries but also across gray zone domains. For example, the occasional practice of embarking videographers and journalists aboard surveillance flights into contested airspace is maturing and expanding to the point that perpetrators of dangerous aerial maneuvers must increasingly expect their antics to be shared and condemned internationally.⁵⁷

Even this does not begin to touch on the number of different applications, however. To comprehensively engage the world's most sophisticated and committed gray zone actors, national governments and transnational organizations should adopt strategies to incorporate assertive transparency into non-military domains. These can include disparate areas such as illicit finance, counter-narcotics trafficking, economic coercion, environmental degradation, and illegal fishing.

Such a process whereby assertive transparency is broadly adopted globally would exponentially raise the costs for China and other state actors who seek to enjoy both the fruits of their malign activities as well as the veneer of respectability afforded responsible nations.

Ultimately, assertive transparency represents a potentially revolutionary innovation in counter-gray zone operations worthy of study and emulation among the free-and-open community of nations. It has already proven itself to be a great equalizer in the West Philippine Sea contest and could turn out to be the Philippines' indispensable contribution to an increasingly contentious and dangerous global gray zone fight.

Epilogue: A Resilient Nation's Lonely Fight

Just after midnight on December 10th—one day after the latest Second Thomas Shoal resupply drama and two days after BFAR's Scarborough Shoal confrontation—an extraordinary convoy made its way out to sea from the popular tourist destination of El Nido at the northern tip of Palawan Island. The so-called “Christmas Convoy,” organized by a civil society coalition of West Philippine Sea advocates calling itself “*Atin Ito!*” (*Tagalog* for “It's Ours!”), was en route to deliver holiday cheer to Filipino troops stationed at remote West Philippine Sea outposts. Nothing quite like it had been seen before.

Atin Ito's original stated intent—to bring supplies directly through the Chinese blockade to the *BRP Sierra Madre*—was quickly squelched by government officials, who recognized the clear peril in the plan. At the same time, these same officials also recognized the importance of the enterprising and patriotic spirit shown by the volunteers, and they offered to escort the convoy safely past Second Thomas Shoal and then on to its less sensitive outpost locations. Thus, one of the PCG's two largest ships, the 97-meter *BRP Melchora Aquino*, came to lead the convoy out of El Nido on December 10th.

Alas, even this was to prove a bridge too far, coming so close after the weekend's high drama at Scarborough and Second Thomas Shoals.

Despite adapting its route to postpone any Second Thomas Shoal approaches to give the situation time to settle down, the convoy soon found itself shadowed by four different Chinese vessels—two naval, one coast guard, and one unidentified

“cargo” ship. Having watched the dangerous maneuvers and water cannons being broadcast nationwide over the past two days, both the PCG’s officers and the civilian volunteers were already on high alert. Therefore, when CCG 5305 abruptly cut across *BRP Melchora Aquino*’s stern and through the convoy, the organizers made the hard call that discretion was the better part of valor. The convoy turned back toward home.⁵⁸

*Figure 16 . CCG 5305 Shadows Christmas Convoy Flagship TS Kapitan Oca as it turns Back Toward Home
(December 10, 2023)*



Source: Richard A. Reyes, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*,
<https://globalnation.inquirer.net/224079/skip-to-main-content/skip-to-toolbar-about-wordpress-my-sites-global-news-00-comments-in-moderation-new-view-post-seeneeds-improvement-howdy-alexander-magno-log-out-screen-options/help-edit-post-add-ne>

The fate of the Christmas Convoy demonstrates that for all of its considerable benefits, assertive transparency will not by itself deliver the Philippines a quick or easy victory in its long West Philippine Sea struggle. While it was a strengthened national resilience that generated the convoy in the first place, it has not yet generated the maritime security capacity to protect it—a much longer project requiring much more time, capital investments, and political will. While China has suffered great reputational costs, it has not yet been sufficiently deterred to abandon an entrenched gray zone strategy that has been decades in the making.

Most of all, while the Philippines’ policy has been strikingly successful in generating strong international support for its position, it is going to need far more than admiration from its partners and allies. It will need further commitments of both moral and material support before China is forced to take it seriously as a geopolitical and maritime power. Finally, it will need like-minded

nations, transnational bodies, and non-governmental groups to learn the lessons it is teaching and develop their own assertive transparency campaigns if the tide against gray zone aggression is to be conclusively turned.

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