

National Power in Response to Maritime Security Challenges: the Philippines and Malaysia in the South China Sea Dispute¹

พลังอำนาจแห่งชาติในสมรภูมิทะเลจีนใต้:
บทวิเคราะห์ยุทธศาสตร์ของฟิลิปปินส์และมาเลเซียต่อการท้าทายจากจีน

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ศึกษาการใช้พลังอำนาจแห่งชาติของฟิลิปปินส์และมาเลเซียในการรับมือกับความท้าทายด้านความมั่นคงทางทะเลจากการอ้างสิทธิ์ของจีนในทะเลจีนใต้ โดยวิเคราะห์กรณีพิพาทที่แนวปะการัง Second Thomas Shoal และ Luconia Shoals ผ่านกรอบแนวคิด DIME-L (Diplomacy, Information, Military, Economy, Law Enforcement) เพื่อเปรียบเทียบยุทธศาสตร์ของทั้งสองประเทศในการปกป้องผลประโยชน์แห่งชาติในเขตเศรษฐกิจจำเพาะ (EEZ)

ฟิลิปปินส์ดำเนินยุทธศาสตร์เชิงรุกโดยอาศัยกลไกทางกฎหมายระหว่างประเทศ การสร้างพันธมิตรกับมหาอำนาจ และการเผยแพร่ข้อมูลสู่สาธารณะ ขณะที่มาเลเซียเลือกใช้แนวทางสมดุลผ่านการทูตแบบสามมิติ (Triadic Maritime Diplomacy) เน้นการรักษาความสัมพันธ์ทางเศรษฐกิจกับจีนและการดำเนินการภายในภูมิภาคอาเซียน

ผลการศึกษาชี้ให้เห็นถึงความแตกต่างด้านการทูต การทหาร และการบังคับใช้กฎหมาย ซึ่งสะท้อนถึงลำดับความสำคัญของผลประโยชน์แห่งชาติที่แตกต่างกัน โดยฟิลิปปินส์เน้นการรักษาอธิปไตยและความมั่นคงทางทะเล ขณะที่มาเลเซียให้ความสำคัญกับความมั่นคงด้านพลังงานและเสถียรภาพทางเศรษฐกิจ

จากผลการศึกษานำไปสู่ข้อเสนอแนะ โดยให้ประเทศผู้มีส่วนได้ส่วนเสียในภูมิภาคพิจารณาการสร้างมาตรการสร้างความไว้วางใจ (CBMs) และการพัฒนาขีดความสามารถด้านการรับรู้สถานการณ์ทางทะเล (Maritime Domain Awareness) เพื่อเสริมสร้างความมั่นคงและลดความตึงเครียดในทะเลจีนใต้

¹ This article is based on selected parts of an independent study conducted at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, Japan in 2024, utilizing the most recent data no later than July 2024

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Introduction

The SCS stands as a flashpoint for geopolitical rivalry, economic interests, and maritime security, driven by China's expansive nine-dash line claim overlapping the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of several Southeast Asian nations. China's increasing presence—evidenced by artificial island construction, military presence, and coast guard expansion—has prompted varied responses from claimant states. The Philippines, frequently involved in maritime confrontations, has openly opposed China's actions and strengthened its alignment with the U.S. In contrast, Malaysia remains less vocal despite recurring Chinese incursions into its EEZ, reflecting a more favorable view of China (Nye & Welch, 2017; Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.; Ho & Huang, 2024). The incidents at Second Thomas Shoal (the Philippines) and Luconia Shoals (Malaysia) clearly illustrate the differing responses of the Philippines and Malaysia to China's actions in the SCS. This paper aims to explore each country's national power and interest protection in a maritime context, examining their contrasting responses from cases of the Second Thomas Shoal and Luconia Shoals incidents within the SCS disputes concerning China's maritime claims. Utilizing the DIME-FIL Model by the Air University Library, 2024³, this study conducts a comparative analysis to explain each nation's multifaceted responses, yielding similarities and dissimilarities. Due to limitations on data access concerning Finance (F) and Intelligence (I) aspects, this paper will primarily focus on the DIME-L Model⁴. Ultimately, the paper provides broader implications for each nation's strategic priorities, the regional peace and maritime security in Southeast Asia.

Philippines Case Study: Second Thomas Shoal (Ayungin Shoal)



Philippines' Legal Justification

The Second Thomas Shoal, an offshore maritime feature, is situated in the Spratly Islands, within 200 nautical miles (nm.) of Palawan Island in the Philippines' EEZ and approximately 600 nm. from Hainan Island. Manila has used the BRP Sierra Madre, located approximately 104 nm. from the archipelagic baselines of the Palawan Island within the Philippine EEZ, as a military outpost, along with daily patrols by military vessels. (U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, 2023).

³ DIME-FIL: Diplomacy, Information, Military, Economy, Finance, Intelligence, and Law Enforcement

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The Second Thomas Shoal and the BRP Sierra Madre can be analyzed under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in three points. First, according to the concept of low-tide elevations (LTEs) in Article 13, if an LTE is located within the breath of the country's territorial sea, that feature can be used as a baseline to determine the territorial sea. In the case that an LTE is located outside the territorial sea's breath, no country can claim the territorial sea of its own⁵. Second, the legal status of the Second Thomas Shoal, suggested by the study of Trang (2024), aligns with the concept of LTEs. Additionally, the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal ruled that the shoal is an LTE which is submerged at high tide and only visible at low tide. This means that the shoal is a part of the seabed, and no states can claim sovereignty. The Tribunal further provided that the shoal is situated within the Philippine EEZ; therefore, the Philippines has a legal basis to exercise its sovereign rights and jurisdiction over it, while China has no entitlement over any maritime zones around it.

Lastly, the status of the military outpost BRP Sierra Madre aligns with Article 56(1)(b) of UNCLOS, which stipulates that coastal State in the EEZ can exercise jurisdiction over, inter alia, the establishment and use of artificial islands, installations, and structures⁶. Moreover, the coastal State shall have the exclusive right and jurisdiction over the above-mentioned artificial islands under Article 60⁷. Therefore, besides the sovereign rights over its EEZ, the Philippines has the exclusive right and jurisdiction over the construction and operation of the military outpost.

⁵ DIME-FIL: Diplomacy, Information, Military, Economy, Finance, Intelligence, and Law Enforcement

⁶ UNCLOS, Article 13, page 19

⁷ UNCLOS, Article 56(1)(b), page 43-44

China's Maritime Presence

After China's 1995 naval installation on Mischief Reef, in close range of Second Thomas Shoal, the Philippines stationed a naval ship onshore called the BRP Sierra Madre at Second Thomas Shoal in 1999 to secure a permanent presence. Since 2013, China has maintained its China Coast Guard (CCG) patrol around the shoal and has repeatedly employed its maritime operations against the Philippine resupply missions. In 2014, China imposed a blockade on the BRP Sierra Madre for three weeks, compelling the Philippines to alternatively drop supplies by air. Additionally, there are seven major incidents in the shoal from 16 November 2021 to 10 December 2023, including China's use of water cannon, CCG ship uncovering naval gun while blockading PCG, CCG lases PCG bridge, collisions between Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and Chinese Maritime Militia (CMM) vessels, CCG and supply ships. Since 2022, CCG and CMM vessels have regularly attempted to block the Philippines' resupply missions. From 2021-2023, the average number of Chinese vessels during resupply missions at Second Thomas Shoal has been significantly increased, particularly the surging number in 2023 at 13.9 (from 1.0 in 2021 and 4.4 in 2022) (CSIS, 2024a).

The Philippines has faced recurring challenges from Chinese maritime operations in its EEZs. In 2022, CCG vessels reported pressured the Philippine vessel not to access to Second Thomas Shoal. China's law enforcement vessels were found to closely approach and obstruct PCG and Philippine government vessels as well as Filipino marine activities such as energy exploration. For example, China deployed CCG and CMM vessels to interfere the Philippine research activity operated by the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources. This created a high risk of collision at sea (CSIS, 2022).

China's maritime actions have intensified, including the reported increased use of water cannons in recent encounters. The first use was in November 2021 against the Philippine supply ship, followed by three times in 2023. There was the report of Filipino sailors injured (Hurst, 2024). Concerning environmental impact regarding maritime activities around the shoal, both sides have reported coral reef damage caused by ships and fishing vessels operating in certain atolls.



In 2024, China’s Ministry of Natural Resources challenged the Philippines’ right over the shoal, accusing the Philippines of damaging the reef with a warship that China considers illegally grounded (Orr, 2024). In the same year, reportedly, Chinese forces seized Filipino rubber boats delivering supplies to the military outpost, the BRP Sierra Madre, causing injuring Filipino sailors (Gomez, 2024).

Philippines’ Response

Diplomacy: The Philippine government has complied with the Administrative Order No.29 determining its sovereignty and jurisdiction over its maritime territories called “West Philippines Sea (WPS)” in 2012 (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2016)⁸. Amidst the ongoing WPS tensions, the Philippines and China established the China-Philippines Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on the SCS. At their ninth meeting on July 2, 2024, they addressed the situation of disputed territories, sovereign rights and jurisdiction, improving maritime communication, fostering coast guard dialogue, maintaining the regional peace and security, and collaborative marine activities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2024). Furthermore, the use of diplomatic protest note is one way the Philippines uses to express displeasure at being attacked by China’s water cannons (Petty, 2024).

Beyond bilateral negotiations, the Philippines has sought cooperation with other powers. At the 8th Year of the Arbitral Victory event in Manila on July 12, 2024, multiple parties labeled China’s actions as “dangerous,” reaffirmed final and binding nature of the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal ruling, and pledged support for enhancing the Philippines’ maritime security capabilities in the WPS. Notably, Canada’s involvement highlights the Philippines’ strategy of engaging external partners on regional issues concerning China’s growing presence (Rocamora, 2024).

⁸ The issuance of the Administrative Order No.29 outlines the term of the West Philippine Sea. The Order in Section 1 designates the maritime zones on the west of the Philippine archipelago, including the Luzon Sea and its surrounding waters, as the WPS, covers the Kalayaan Island Group and Bajo De Masinloc, commonly referred to as Scarborough Shoal.



The Philippines also pursues a trilateral commitment with the U.S. and Japan outlined in a joint vision statement titled “Three Indo-Pacific maritime democracies,” encompassing comprehensive areas of cooperation in peace and security. It specifically mentions freedom of navigation (FON) and overflight, respect for EEZ sovereign rights under UNCLOS, concerns about China’s active role in the SCS (including the disruption of supply lines to the Second Thomas Shoal), and calls for adherence to the arbitral ruling (The White House, 2024).

Information: The Philippine Navy, responsible for safeguarding and operating the BRP Sierra Madre, voiced its concerns, highlighting both readiness of military personnel and the intention to involve allied countries and partners in response to China’s actions (Nepomuceno, 2024). In an effort to counter perceived Chinese propaganda, the Philippine Defense Minister advised the public not to be frightened (Lema, 2024).

In addition to formal diplomatic protests, the Philippines believes disseminating statements is crucial for informing citizens and the international community about China’s actions in the WPS, particularly concerning the Second Thomas Shoal. For instance, President Marcos Jr.’s 2024 statement stressed the need for Indo-Pacific peace and stability, criticized China’s aggressive behaviors, and defended the WPS as a Philippine national interest (Office of the President of the Philippines, 2024).

Military: Several events indicate strengthening security ties between the Philippines and the U.S. related to the response to China’s maritime presence. These include the bilateral defense guidelines emphasizing alliance cooperation and a shared Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision under the 1951 U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023), and a two-plus-two foreign and defense ministerial meeting in Manila discussing the confidential information exchange agreement⁹ (Mukai, 2024). These security ties extend to allies like the U.S., Australia, Japan, Canada, demonstrated through annual exercises between within the Philippines’ EEZ in the SCS (Royandoyan & Shiga, 2024; Davies, 2024). These exercises reaffirm freedom of navigation and overflight and a promising support on maritime security capacities, including monitoring situation in the territorial claims.

Referred to as the General Security of Military Information Agreement

Basis for the Philippines' Response

Legal approach: The Philippines pursues a legal approach to its maritime claims by filing a case against China in 2013 at the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) (PCA, n.d.), following China's de facto control of Scarborough Shoal in 2012. Citing UNCLOS arbitration provisions, the Philippines challenged China's actions in the SCS. In 2016, the PCA ruled in favor of the Philippines, invalidating China's expansive maritime claims. China, rejected the ruling as "null and void," invoking UNCLOS Article 298, to argue that such disputes require mutual agreement, not arbitration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2016).

WPS strategy: The Philippines defined the country's maritime boundaries through the issuance of the Administrative Order No.29 outlined the term of West Philippines Sea (WPS), designating the maritime zones on the west of the Philippine archipelago (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2016). The WPS strategy under the Macos Jr.'s administration comprised of two dimensions: a people-centric approach (i.e. enhancing national agencies in protecting Filipinos' rights, inviting national and foreign journalists to observe China's actions in disputed areas)¹⁰, and a defense-oriented position¹¹ (Gill, 2024).



¹⁰ A people-centric approach focuses on legal frameworks and international law in enhancing national agencies to secure resources and protect Filipinos' rights in disputed areas, promoting transparency by inviting national and foreign journalists to observe China's actions, and involving fishermen in defending their rights in the WPS, and taking proactive government efforts to uphold sovereign rights under UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Ruling.

¹¹ A defense-oriented position provides a two-pronged approach: 1) external balancing with allies and like-minded countries through joint exercises, infrastructure projects, and economic cooperation, and 2) internal balancing focusing on enhancing national capacity (particularly maritime military modernization) and diversifying trade partners to reduce dependence on Chinese imports.

Malaysian Case Study: Luconia Shoals (Beting Patinni Ali)

Malaysia's Legal Justification

Located in the SCS, the Luconia Shoals lie roughly 100 kilometers off the nearest baseline at Tanjung Baram, coast of Sarawak or about 84 nm. off the Borneo coast (Brown, 2016). The Shoals consist of two main parts: the North and South Luconia Shoals. The North Luconia Shoals, located over 200nm. North of its counterpart, are a collection of largely submerged coral reef platforms in the southernmost part of the Spratly Islands. A notable feature here is Seahorse Breakers, which emerges during the low tide (National University of Singapore, n.d.). The South Luconia Shoals, also in the southern Spratly, consist of scattered and disconnected deep reef platforms and submerged atoll rings, including features like Luconia Breaker, Harald Reef, and Stigant Reef (National University of Singapore, n.d.-b).

Malaysia asserts sovereign rights over the Luconia Shoals since 1963, fall within its 200-nm. EEZ, with Sarawak considering them part of its territorial waters. Malaysia's declaration of the Luconia Shoals Marine National Park aims to prevent claims and preserve Sarawak's heritage within its EEZ and territorial waters on the Sunda continental shelf (DayakDaily, 2018).

Under UNCLOS, Malaysia possesses sovereign rights within its EEZ over the Luconia Shoals for exploration and exploitation, as well as conservation and management of its natural resources. This includes other related economic activities such as energy production. Malaysia also can exercise jurisdiction for establishing installations and structures, conducting marine scientific research, and protecting and preserving marine environment¹². Consequently, other States, including China, are required to adhere to the laws and regulations established by the Coastal State (Malaysia)¹³.

China's Maritime Presence

Reports indicates that CCG vessels have engaged in activities perceived as disruptive to Malaysian offshore energy operations near Sarawak, within Malaysia's EEZ, particularly around new oil and gas exploration sites, followed by the presence of Chinese military aircraft conducting patrols in the area. The tensions occurred near the Kasawari (since 2011) and NC3 (since 2016) gas fields in block SK316, which both of them provide liquefied natural gas (LNG) production facilities at Bintulu, Sarawak, located around 100 miles to the south (CSIS, 2021).

¹² Article 58(1)(a)(b) of UNCLOS. Page 43-44

¹³ Article 58(3), page 44

Malaysia is increasingly concerned by China's maritime presence regarding the Kasawari Gas Development Project, adjacent to the disputed Luconia Shoals, discovered by Petronas, Malaysian multinational oil and gas company, and currently has undergone extensive development (Putra, 2023; Malik, n.d.). China's claim at the southernmost part of the nine-dash line, including James Shoal, led China to deploy its vessels off the coast of Sarawak. As a result, China has been consistently claiming on the Luconia Shoals and seizing it in 2013, followed by anchoring its ships consistently between 2013 – 2015. In 2013, there were incursions around James Shoals, South Luconia Shoals, and North Luconia Shoals, which all located within Malaysia's EEZ, confirmed the increasing patrols year-on-year by both the Malaysia Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) and the Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) (Noor, 2021). China's actions played through its non-military assets: CCG, civilian, and CMM vessels to operate in the vicinity of the contested area, as well as harassing Malaysian gas drilling operations.

In 2016, reports indicate a significant Chinese presence in the Luconia Shoals involving 100 – 140 Chinese registered boats and vessels, mirroring instances of CCG vessels anchoring within Malaysia's EEZ, specifically 84 nm. off the coast of Sarawak (Parameswaran, 2016). In 2022, China maintained a consistent presence in the disputed Luconia Shoals with CCG patrol days steadily increasing throughout the year (Putra, 2024).

China maintains an active presence in the area. CSIS (2024) Automatic Identification System (AIS) data underscores China's maritime activities, revealing a continuing trend of increased CCG patrols near Malaysian oil and gas operations in the Luconia Shoals (2022:316; 2023: 338). This was further demonstrated in 2023 when China reportedly asserted jurisdiction over Luconia Shoals by sending its hydrographic research vessel, Haiyang Dizhi 8, accompanied by three CMM ships, to conduct an extensive survey of Malaysia's continental shelf for months (Powell, 2023).

Malaysia' Response

Diplomacy: Malaysia formally expressed its displeasure with China's trespassing in its waters by issuing five diplomatic protest notes, addressing 89 incursions near Luconia Shoals in 2020 by the CCG and PLAN asserting China's SCS claims. These protest notes were backed by 29 RMN reports detailing similar Chinese vessel incidents from 2018-2019 (Saravanamuttu, 2021).



With the policy-oriented approach, Malaysia employs “Triadic Maritime Diplomacy¹⁴” to address China’s growing presence in its jurisdictional waters, aiming to manage tensions related to intrusions and the impact to the Kasawari gas field while balancing national interests with its economic ties with China (Putra 2024). This framework prioritizes multifaceted maritime affairs, integrating both commercial and military aspect within its territorial waters, specifically in SCS disputes. Malaysia practices this diplomatic framework through “gunboat diplomacy,” using naval deployments as coercive signaling of its commitment to territorial integrity and claims in the SCS.

Despite territorial disputes and the China-U.S. rivalry, Malaysia prioritizes ASEAN unity over reliance on external powers like the U.S. for resolving tensions with China. This includes utilizing regional mechanisms such as the DOC which establishes guidelines for maritime cooperation in respect of DOC, international, and the future Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC) to promote a peaceful approach.

Malaysia’s ASEAN-centric approach stems from two factors: other ASEAN members’ involvement in SCS disputes besides China (e.g., the confrontation between a Vietnamese vessel and a Malaysian patrol vessel, causing death of a Vietnamese fisherman) and the Luconia Shoals’ oil and gas wealth within its EEZ.

Malaysia’s approach is influenced by two factors. First, it recognizes that other ASEAN members besides China are involved in the disputed territories, such as the confrontation between a Vietnamese vessel and a Malaysian patrol vessel, causing death of a Vietnamese fisherman. Second, Luconia Shoals, rich in oil and gas deposits, lie within Malaysia’s claimed EEZ. This strategic location places Malaysia at a crossroads, balancing economic interests with SCS geopolitics, leading Malaysia to prioritize ASEAN to avoid escalating tensions with China and entanglement in the China-U.S. rivalry (Saravanamuttu, 2021).

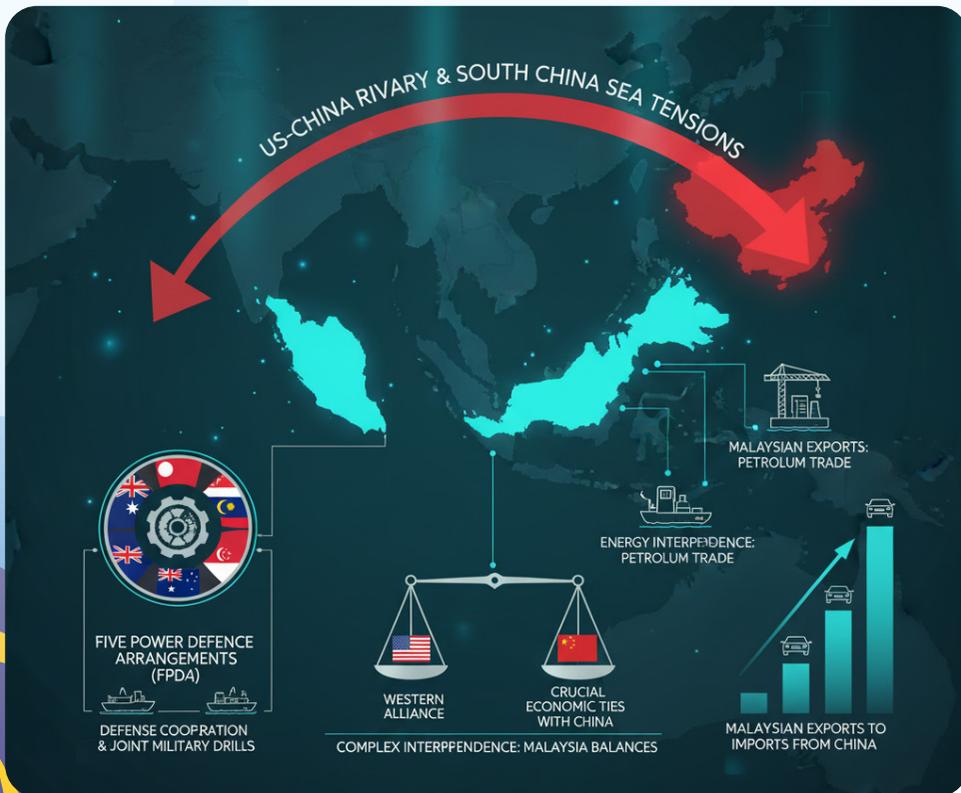
Information: Due to limited sources available, it appears that Malaysia has not publicly sought external assistance or engaged in extensive strategic communication in response to China’s intensified actions, based on the assumption of this analysis.

Military: Malaysia’s Defense White Paper (DWP) outlines an “activist-neutrality” strategy to strengthen its non-aligned position while maintaining regional and international partnerships, and balancing relations with major powers such as Australia, the UK, and the U.S. (amidst the AUKUS alliance). Despite the SCS issue, Malaysia remains committed to its neutral foreign policy, with the DWP identifying U.S.-China rivalry and SCS intrusions as major security concerns (Kwek, 2021; Putra, 2024).

¹⁴ “Triadic Maritime Diplomacy” merges elements of three forms of maritime diplomacy: coercive (using force or threats to compel adversaries), persuasive (showcasing a state’s maritime power and capability), and cooperative (employing maritime assets for peaceful management of international relations)

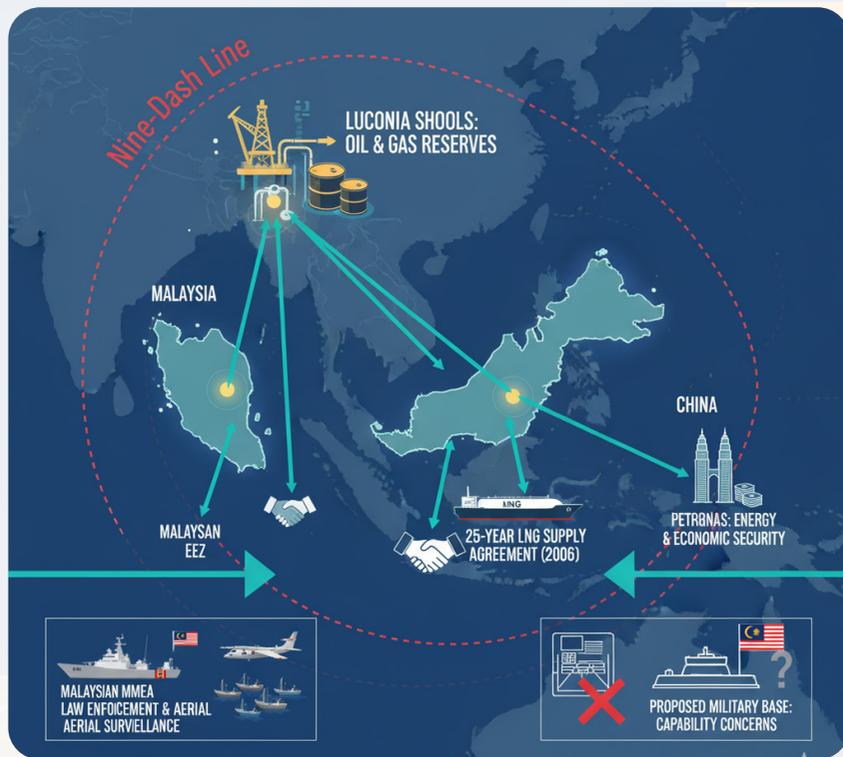
Malaysia is also committed to the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), a security mechanism established in 1971 that includes Australia, the UK, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Singapore. Initially, conceived to address concerns related to the Soviet Union, the FPDA's operational scope has since expanded to encompass joint military exercises. The intensification of the U.S.-China rivalry, coupled with China's territorial claims in the SCS and its growing military power might raise concerns in China regarding Malaysia's relationship with its Western partners, potentially pressuring Malaysia to reassess its trade and defense relations (Yaacob, 2021).

Economy: The robust China-Malaysia trade relationship underscores their energy and economic interdependence. The data from Zheng (2022) suggests that Malaysia's BRI project distribution is primarily metals, followed by construction, environment protection, and transportation. OEC data indicates Malaysia's exports to China significantly increased from \$2.42 billion in 2017 to \$31.5 billion in 2022, with petroleum gas (\$4.56 billion) being a top export. Imports from China's figures have similarly risen from \$1.68 billion in 2017 to \$41.6 billion in 2022, a trend continuing into 2024 with a petroleum gas as a key export and refined petroleum as a major import (Center for Collective Learning, n.d.).



Both countries have bilateral energy agreement, making the Luconia Shoals crucial for Malaysia's energy and economic security, particularly Sarawak, where the Luconia Shoals are situated, rich in oil and natural gas, significantly impacts Malaysian government's income. Petronas¹⁵, establish in 1974 holds the rights to explore and develop oil and gas in Malaysia's territorial waters and its extended EEZ (Sahathevan, 2024). Moreover, the Luconia Shoals are thought to contain potential of hydrocarbon reserves. Despite some Malaysian extraction sites being within China's nine-dash line, disrupting these assets might not align with China's interests due to a signed 25-year LNG supply agreement in 2006 between the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) and Petronas ("Malaysia to Supply LNG to Chinese for 25 Years - Business - International Herald Tribune," 2006; NBR, n.d.).

Law enforcement: In response to China's actions at Luconia Shoals, the Malaysian government deployed MMEA resources, including RMN assets and Bombardier aircraft for aerial surveillance, which located a group of Chinese fishermen (Parameswaran, 2016). In November 2023, Malaysia's Defense Minister approved a proposal made by Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim, Member of Parliament for Arau, to construct a military base on the Shoals. However, the Minister expressed concerns about Malaysia's military capability to effectively control the reef (Defence Security Asia, 2023).

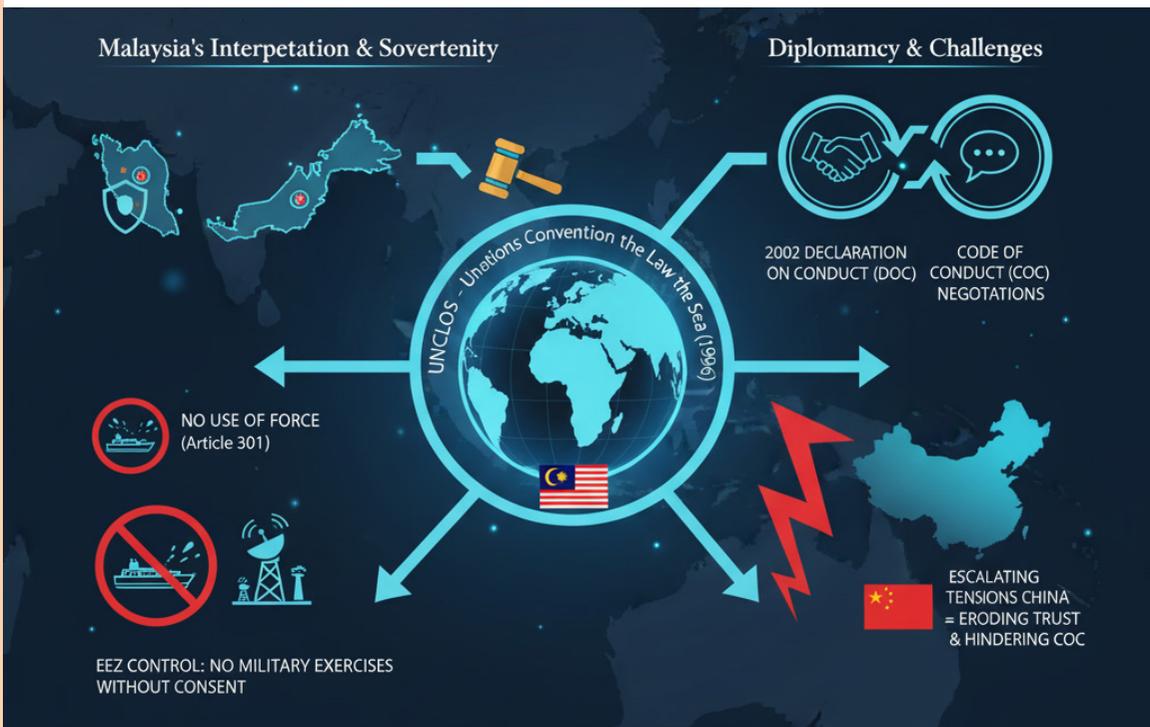


¹⁵ the national oil company established by the Malaysian federal government

Basis for Malaysia's Response

Malaysia's declaration of UNCLOS: The Malaysian government ratified the UNCLOS in 1996, attaching its own interpretations on several points relevant to Malaysia's territorial claims in the SCS. These points include the country's assertion that ratification does not require Malaysia to recognize maritime claims made by other countries, its emphasis on Article 301 regarding the prohibition of any threat or the use of force, which applies to its maritime zones, and strengthening its position in upholding sovereignty and jurisdiction as a coastal State under international law. Furthermore, in light of military exercises in the EEZ, the Convention is interpreted as denying other states the right to conduct military exercises, especially those involving weapons, within its EEZ without consent. This is because of Malaysia's perception of the need to safeguard and control its maritime resources within the zone (Asia Maritime Index, n.d.).

Malaysia's position on the SCS disputes: Malaysia's position, reaffirmed in a 2023 statement by its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, emphasizing the protection of sovereignty, sovereign rights, and national interests through peaceful and diplomatic means, in line with international law and UNCLOS. It supports the 2002 DOC and ongoing discussions regarding the Code of Conduct in the SCS (COC) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2023). However, escalating tensions from China in the SCS is likely to weaken the trust and goodwill of the 2002 DOC, hindering progress toward an effective COC (Noor, 2021).



Light hedging approach: Scholars describe Malaysia’s response to China’s actions as a “light hedging” approach—prioritizing diplomatic over confrontation due to its limited capacity to counter China directly. Malaysia also engages bilaterally with China and multilaterally with ASEAN to protect its maritime interests (Krishnan, 2022). Lai and Kuik (2020) add that this approach allows smaller states to manage risks amid great power rivalry by balancing deference and defiance, maintaining neutrality and building alternative partnerships to avoid conflict while preserving national interests.

Comparative Analysis

China’s maritime presence has significantly influenced both the Philippines and Malaysia as claimant countries. Using the DIME-L Model, key similarities and dissimilarities emerge from case studies of Second Thomas Shoal and Luconia Shoals, supported by the basis of their responses in prior sections as follows:



Similarities

Diplomacy: Both the Philippines and Malaysia asserted their territorial claims within the nine-dash line by sending diplomatic protest notes to China.

Economy: Given reliance on trading partnerships with China, both countries tend to maintain economic ties. Though differences exist as discussed in the dissimilarities section.

Law enforcement: Both countries prioritized improving their law enforcement agencies' monitoring capacities to safeguard their territorial claims and national interests within their EEZs.

Dissimilarities

The Dissimilarities of the Philippines' and Malaysia' Responses Towards China's Maritime Presence through the DIME-L Model

DIME-L Model	Philippines (Second Thomas Shoal)	Malaysia (Luconia Shoals)
Diplomacy	<p><i>Legal and decisive approach</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Philippines primarily uses international legal mechanisms and seeks multilateral cooperation to counter the SCS issue, while also maintaining a bilateral negotiation mechanism with China. - The WPS strategy signifies its commitment to protecting territorial integrity amid the SCS tensions. 	<p><i>Balancing approach</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Malaysia upholds its position aligned with its own formal declaration upon ratifying UNCLOS to assert its maritime rights, and the importance of the peaceful use of the sea by rejecting activities involving the use or threat of force, such as military operations. - The Triadic Maritime Diplomacy represents a careful strategy that emphasizes the protection of national interests, while balancing national sovereignty with diplomatic and economic engagement with China amid ongoing dispute.
	<p><i>Philippines' International support</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The event, such as the Arbitral Victory, signifies the involvement of external partners in regional issues to support the Philippines. - The Philippines overtly seeks external engagement, particularly in maritime security capacity building, given China's growing presence in the region. 	<p><i>Malaysia's regional diplomatic approach</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Malaysia views ASEAN as the legitimate mechanism for resolving regional issues under the DOC and future COC, emphasizing that maritime territorial disputes involve not only China but also other countries in the region. This approach reflects Malaysia's commitment to protecting its national interests while maintaining a position of non-alignment.

DIME-L Model	Philippines (Second Thomas Shoal)	Malaysia (Luconia Shoals)
Information	<p><i>Public message strategy</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conveying public messages by officials is considered one of the Philippines' strategies to raise public awareness about the situation in its claimed areas and to inform external partners and news community. 	<p><i>Quiet approach</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Malaysia remains reserved in expressing its concerns. Based on the findings, Malaysia may tend to avoid public confrontation, consistent with its balancing strategy in managing relations with China.
Military	<p><i>Military alignment</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Philippines overtly strengthens its military cooperation with its allies, allowing them to conduct activities, such as annual exercises and joint monitoring within its EEZ to secure claimed areas and ensure UNCLOS-consistent FON and overflight. <p><i>Maritime defense with allied support</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Philippines' maritime security capacity building, supported by allies, reflects strategic alignment and international solidarity amid SCS tensions. 	<p><i>Military non-alignment</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Malaysia adopts a defense posture centered on balancing relations with multiple external powers by not appearing to solely depend on a single ally, expressing concerns about U.S.-China rivalry impacting its EEZ, and showing cautions towards multilateral agreement, such as FPDA that involves non-Asian powers, especially U.S. ally Australia. <p><i>Asserting defense control over its EEZ</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Malaysia emphasizes UNCLOS-based sovereign rights to safeguard its EEZ, maintaining a non-aligned posture to avoid entanglement in major power rivalries. Its planned military base on Luconia Shoals underscores efforts to enhance national control and self-reliance in defending maritime interests.
Economy	<p><i>Diversification strategy</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Philippines seeks to diversify its economic partnerships, implying the backdrop of declining exports to China. 	<p><i>Economic pragmatism</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Malaysia retains strong economic ties with China, as recent tensions at sea has not impacted its economy, while prioritizing national maritime interest protection (i.e. oil and gas industries), which significantly contribute to national economic stance.
Law enforcement	<p><i>Philippines' allied maritime operations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Philippines seeks to defend its territorial claims and assets in the WPS through official orders by protecting its resupply operations, supported by U.S. joint patrols and monitoring. 	<p><i>Malaysia's autonomous maritime approach</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Malaysia relies on its own military capabilities, deploying civilian and naval forces for monitoring, and plans for military base construction to bolster maritime security.

These similarities and dissimilarities reveal how each country's national power instruments are shaped by their priorities, perceptions towards China, and national strategies. The Philippines, heavily reliant on other powers, seems less concerned about its relations with China and adopts a proactive strategy. Conversely, Malaysia's strategy is more cautious and less confrontational.

Implications

Challenges in resolving the SCS Disputes Settlement and Maintaining Regional Peace and Security

Despite the Philippines' proactive strategy and Malaysia's balancing approach to managing tensions, China's active role in the SCS means that their differing responses are insufficient to resolve the SCS dispute. Instead, this suggests that claimant states should focus on managing and containing tensions, prioritizing the protection of their national interests and citizens from China's actions.

From a diplomatic perspective, legal frameworks have faced limitations on China's activities in the SCS. The Philippines' adherence to the legally binding 2016 Arbitral Tribunal ruling has not altered China's position, as China continues to reject the award and maintains its presence in contested areas, prompting the Philippines to seek international support to secure its maritime territories. Meanwhile, Malaysia emphasizes regional commitments through the non-legal binding DOC, agreed by China and ASEAN that establishes guidelines for maritime cooperation in respect of international law, aimed at fostering peaceful dispute management. Malaysia also supports the future legally binding COC, which shares similar goals. Both frameworks involve China and ASEAN member states, including claimants and non-claimants.

Diplomatic, military, and law enforcement differences between the Philippines and Malaysia shape their approaches to engaging external partners for maritime security in response to China's growing regional presence. These contrasting strategies demonstrate the limited effectiveness of regional and legal mechanisms, prolong dispute resolution, and create space for external powers to play a role in the region. This divergence challenges ASEAN's unity and ability to protect both claimant and non-claimant interests, potentially allowing external actors to dominate negotiations.

The Role of National Interests in Shaping National Strategies

Distinct national interests play crucial roles in shaping their postures through the lens of DIME-L, and relationships with China and external powers. The Philippines' core interest can be seen as maintaining territorial integrity, evident in its geographically expansive claims and the WPS strategy, leading it to pursue international partnerships for maritime security capabilities, believing collaboration with powerful nations deters adversaries. Thus, its national power relies on robust maritime security to safeguard sovereignty and manage resources.

Conversely, Malaysia's core of national power is closely linked to its valuable underwater energy resources, which are crucial for its economic strength. Prioritizing their protection is key to sustaining its economic balance. Positioned in a resource-rich region, Malaysia places strong emphasis on energy security, which plays a key role in reinforcing its economic strengths. Therefore, a balancing approach highlights its intent to safeguard economic stability while navigating its complex relationship with China.

Challenges in Maritime Security Capacity Building

Countries relying on the SCS as a critical sea lines of communication (SLOCs) must prioritize navigation safety given the escalation of China's expansive claims in various parts of the SCS. Securing the SLOCs is crucial for global trade, as territorial disputes can significantly impact both navigation and broader economic stability. This situation compels countries in the region to enhance their maritime security capacities by investing in military and law enforcement resources, as well as their operational capabilities, to safeguard their waters and ensure safe navigation in amid rising tensions.

Policy Recommendations for the Wider Region

Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs): Efforts to Maintain Regional Peace and Security

Building mutual trust is essential for stabilizing situations in the SCS. Given the complex geopolitics—including political maneuvering and deterrence measures—reducing stresses and preventing conflict escalation is crucial. However, such efforts require commitment from all parties. For example, despite multifaceted efforts from the Philippines and Malaysia, China has consistently pursued its nine-dash line claim, illustrating the challenges in reaching consensus. In light of this conundrum, CBMs should be considered to manage ongoing frictions through high-level regional engagement. While full resolution is unlikely, effective management is possible.

In addition, all relevant states, whether claimants or not, should engage in multilateral dialogues on maritime security issues, addressing comprehensive maritime security concerns beyond the SCS dispute, such as environmental protection, maritime scientific research (MSR), safety of navigation, and combating transnational crimes at sea, among others. Such cooperation may help mitigate the broader impacts of the SCS situation and contribute to regional stability.

Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA): A Key for Strengthening Maritime Security Operations

In light of heightened security concerns and geographical competition, investing in maritime security capacity building beyond international and regional mechanisms is vital to protect waters, maritime resources, national interests, as well as securing SLOCs. Enhancing capabilities such as MDA could be an effective measure that should be recognized as a national priority. MDA is a key concept in understanding occurrences in the maritime domain. It is an effective approach that involves potential threat identification, data collection and analysis, and information sharing on maritime activities to support precise decision-making, contingency preparedness, and maritime operations, enabling effective responses to emerging situations in waters.

Additionally, maritime transparency should be promoted among national maritime stakeholders and regional community in order to enhance situational monitoring, accurate information sharing, and cross-checking of data on maritime activities from multiple sources to reduce potential threats effectively.

Conclusion

The escalating claims of nations in the SCS give rise to multifaceted strategies for managing tensions through the lens of national power, aligned with the protection of national maritime interests. As demonstrated by case studies, the Philippines has adopted a proactive, alliance-based approach in response to direct coercion, while Malaysia has opted for a more cautious and diplomatic strategy focused on economic stability and regional engagement. These varied responses to China's maritime presence underscore the complex balance nations must strike between asserting sovereignty and protecting national interests. The differing strategies reflect varying perceptions of national power, the critical importance of maritime assets, and each country's unique strategic priorities in addressing China's activities in the region. This requires situation necessitates adjustments in national policies and strategies—both at the policy and operational level—to stabilize regional peace and security while enabling individual nations to protect their national interests effectively.

Moving forward, understanding these nuanced approaches is vital for maintaining maritime security and regional stability. Future research should include a comprehensive examination of CCG law and its regional impacts, explore Vietnam's case study on its response to China's maritime presence, and conduct technical risk assessments for potential confrontations. Moreover, factors such as political motivation and foreign policy beyond DIME-L aspects, are crucial drivers of varied responses to China. It is also essential to study regional mechanisms and the effectiveness of cooperation related to maritime security.

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