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**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

**THESIS**

**WHAT ARE THE MAIN CAUSES OF PHILIPPINE  
RESPONSES TO CHINA COERCION IN THE  
SOUTH CHINA SEA?**

by

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June 2022

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CHINA COERCION IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the past decade, the Philippines has reacted differently over time to China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. This thesis aims to explain the most likely causes of Philippine behavior. Using five case studies from 2012–2021, this thesis examines how the following six factors influenced resistance or accommodating behavior in the two most recent presidential administrations: trust in the U.S.–Philippine alliance, policies to protect claims, strength of China's military capabilities, diplomatic interests, political interests, and economic interests. The thesis finds that resistance behavior is more likely to occur when there is high trust in the U.S.–Philippine alliance, a strong policy to protect claims, weak Chinese military capabilities, decreased diplomatic interests, decreased political interests, and decreased economic interests. Conversely, accommodating behavior is more likely to occur when there is low trust in the U.S.–Philippine alliance, a weak policy to protect claims, strong Chinese military capabilities, increased diplomatic interests, increased political interests, and increased economic interests. Taking these factors into account, the thesis recommends that the United States increases security and economic ties to enhance the Philippines' confidence to push back against an asymmetric threat while also reducing the likelihood of accommodating behavior by helping the Philippines to limit its economic dependencies on China.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BCM	Bilateral Consultative Mechanism
BUILD	Better Utilization of Investment Leading to Development Act
CMS	China Marine Surveillance
COC	code of conduct
DOC	China-ASEAN Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea
EDCA	Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement
GDP	gross domestic product
MDT	Mutual Defense Treaty
PAF	Philippine Air Force
PHILEXPORT	Philippine Exporters Confederation
PLAN	People's Liberation Army-Navy
SCS	South China Sea
USIDFC	United States International Development Finance Corporation
VFA	Visiting Forces Agreement

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# I. WHAT ARE THE MAIN CAUSES OF PHILIPPINE RESPONSES TO CHINA COERCION IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA?

## A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

The South China Sea (SCS) is the center of regional commerce and a significant transit hub for global trade. The area consists of 1.4 million square miles of water that provides sea access for bordering countries such as China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Taiwan, and the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the body of water links the region to the rest of the world via major transit routes such as the Malacca Strait to the west, Lombok Strait to the south, and Luzon Strait to the northeast. Based on its geographic location, the SCS transports an estimated \$3.37 trillion worth of trade each year.<sup>2</sup>

In an area vital for international commerce and resources, China's increased assertion to claim territory in the SCS has created concern for both regional countries and global affairs since China took military action to obtain the Paracel Islands from Vietnam in 1974.<sup>3</sup> Since then, countries have reacted differently to China's influence over time based on a variety of interests and policies. One important example is the Philippines as it has experienced noticeable shifts in how it has responded to China's coercion—from more pushback against China during President Aquino's term to a more accommodating stance toward China in the Duterte era. This research project will examine the security actions and responses taken by the Philippines during the two most recent presidential administrations—the Aquino administration from 2010 to 2016 and the Duterte administration from 2016 to the present day. Comparing significant case studies in each administration, this research will identify and assess the economic and security drivers

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene C. LaFond, "South China Sea," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/South-China-Sea>.

<sup>2</sup> "China's Maritime Disputes: A CFR Infoguide Presentation," Council on Foreign Relations, 2017, [https://www.cfr.org/chinas-maritime-disputes/#!/chinas-maritime-disputes?cid=otr-marketing\\_use-china\\_sea\\_InfoGuide#overview](https://www.cfr.org/chinas-maritime-disputes/#!/chinas-maritime-disputes?cid=otr-marketing_use-china_sea_InfoGuide#overview).

<sup>3</sup> John W. Lewis and Xue Litai, "China's Security Agenda Transcends the South China Sea," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 72, no. 4 (July 3, 2016): 214, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2016.1194056>.

behind Philippine efforts to protect maritime claims in the SCS, and how they figured into its responses to specific incidents in the SCS.

## **B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION**

It is important to understand Philippine actions as the country has been a major actor in the SCS disputes and has demonstrated varied responses to Chinese coercion in the last decade. Specifically, it has become a significant actor as it has openly confronted China both militarily and diplomatically in several incidents to resolve disputed claims. One incident involving military action was the Scarborough Shoal incident of 2012 when Philippine Navy vessels were deployed to confront a Chinese presence. An example of a diplomatic action occurred as recently as 2021 when the Philippines filed diplomatic protests after observing over 200 Chinese vessels in vicinity of Whitsun Reef. Having a better understanding of Philippine interests in the SCS will help the United States more accurately predict future behavior and illuminate areas in which the United States can further assist its ally against Chinese coercion.

## **C. LITERATURE REVIEW**

To understand Philippine responses to Chinese actions in the SCS, this literature review provides a summary of the security and economic drivers that scholars have described in Philippine policies. The literature review will also give a summary of what scholars have said about the changes in priorities between the two administrations.

### **1. Security Drivers of Philippine Policy**

The first driver that scholars have described is the threat from China. De Castro notes that China's expansionism in the SCS has been a chronic issue for the Philippines since the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> Zhao says that the Philippines grew fearful of losing more territory after

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<sup>4</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, "The Aquino Administration's 2011 Decision to Shift Philippine Defense Policy from Internal Security to Territorial Defense: The Impact of the South China Sea Dispute," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 24, no. 1 (March 2012): 67, [https://www.academia.edu/1469795/The\\_Aquino\\_Administrations\\_2011\\_Decision\\_to\\_Shift\\_to\\_Philippine\\_Defense\\_Policy\\_from\\_Internal\\_Security\\_to\\_Territorial\\_Defense\\_The\\_Impact\\_of\\_the\\_South\\_China\\_Sea\\_Dispute](https://www.academia.edu/1469795/The_Aquino_Administrations_2011_Decision_to_Shift_to_Philippine_Defense_Policy_from_Internal_Security_to_Territorial_Defense_The_Impact_of_the_South_China_Sea_Dispute).

China took control of Mischief Reef and other reefs in the late 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Shenon states that the Mischief Reef incident was the first time in decades that China challenged the territorial claims of a non-communist neighbor.<sup>6</sup> Commenting on China’s expanding maritime threat, Strangio notes that “between 2014 and 2018, China launched more submarines, warships, amphibious vessels, and auxiliaries than the number of ships currently serving in the navies of Germany, India, Spain, and the United Kingdom, combined.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, he says President Xi is more willing than his predecessors to deploy naval forces to achieve Chinese objectives in the SCS.

A second security driver is the alliance with the U.S. Carpio describes the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) and the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) as pacts to deter foreign aggression against the Philippines.<sup>8</sup> Schaus states that the MDT provides mutual support in case of foreign attacks and describes the VFA as an agreement that provides simplified access procedures for U.S. service members to operate in the Philippines.<sup>9</sup> Also noting the mutual benefits provided by the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), Green and Poling note that the agreement allows the United States to upgrade Philippine military bases in exchange for rotational access.<sup>10</sup> This agreement provides the United States with the ability to project its power in the SCS and also deter Chinese threats against Philippine interests. Further strengthening ties on March 1, 2019, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo affirmed that “any armed attack on Philippine forces, aircraft, or public

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<sup>5</sup> Zhao Hong, “The South China Sea Dispute and China-ASEAN Relations,” *Asian Affairs* 44, no. 1 (March 1, 2013): 27–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2012.760785>.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Shenon, “Manila Sees China Threat on Coral Reef,” *The New York Times*, February 19, 1995, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/02/19/world/manila-sees-china-threat-on-coral-reef.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Sebastian Strangio, *In the Dragon’s Shadow: Southeast Asia in the Chinese Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 178.

<sup>8</sup> Antonio T. Carpio, “The MDT and VFA as Deterrence,” INQUIRER.net, July 9, 2020, <https://opinion.inquirer.net/131573/the-mdt-and-vfa-as-deterrence>.

<sup>9</sup> John Schaus, “What Is the Philippines-United States Visiting Forces Agreement, and Why Does It Matter?,” Center For Strategic & International Studies, February 12, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-philippines-united-states-visiting-forces-agreement-and-why-does-it-matter>.

<sup>10</sup> Michael J. Green and Gregory B. Poling, “The U.S. Alliance with the Philippines,” Center For Strategic & International Studies, December 3, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-alliance-philippines>.

vessels in the South China Sea would trigger mutual defense obligations under Article 4 of our Mutual Defense Treaty.”<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Economic Drivers of Philippine Policy

There is a large body of literature that describes economic drivers. One economic driver is trade with China. Zhao comments that after signing a joint document in 2000 called the Framework of Bilateral Cooperation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, trade rose 244 percent between 2003 and 2011—making China the Philippines’ third-largest trading partner.<sup>12</sup> *Philippine Board of Investments* comments that bilateral trade grew to \$50 billion in 2019 and notes that trade increased at an average of 17 percent in the last five years.<sup>13</sup> The Philippine Statistics Authority also remarks that China is the Philippines’ largest source of imports and represents the third-largest market for Philippine exports as of January 2021.<sup>14</sup> Highlighting the strength of China’s trade ties, *South China Morning Post* comments that the Philippines is now the second-fastest growing economy in Asia.<sup>15</sup>

A second economic driver is the improvement of infrastructure due to Chinese investment. Pariona comments that the country’s economy has been constrained by underdeveloped infrastructure.<sup>16</sup> Hedrick-Wong states that Philippine public infrastructure

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<sup>11</sup> Michael R. Pompeo, “Remarks with Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin, Jr. at a Press Availability,” United States Department of State, March 1, 2019, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/remarks-with-philippine-foreign-secretary-teodoro-locsin-jr/>.

<sup>12</sup> Zhao Hong, “The South China Sea Dispute and China-ASEAN Relations,” 38.

<sup>13</sup> “Philippines-China Business Relations,” Republic of the Philippines Board of Investments, accessed August 11, 2021, <https://boi.gov.ph/cifit-2020-philippines-china-business-relations/>.

<sup>14</sup> “Highlights of the Philippine Export and Import Statistics January 2021 (Preliminary),” Republic of the Philippines Philippine Statistics Authority, March 12, 2021, <https://psa.gov.ph/content/highlights-philippine-export-and-import-statistics-january-2021-preliminary>.

<sup>15</sup> “How Trade Links Between Southeast Asia and China Have Thrived for More than 1,000 Years,” *South China Morning Post*, August 8, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/presented/news/asia/topics/china-and-southeast-asia/article/2158635/how-trade-links-between>.

<sup>16</sup> Amber Pariona, “The Economy of Philippines,” WorldAtlas, September 9, 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-economy-of-philippines.html>.



lags behind every Southeast Asian country except Vietnam.<sup>17</sup> *International Monetary Fund* notes that the Philippines recognizes the issue and has continually increased its spending on roads, bridges, and transportation hubs since 2011.<sup>18</sup> Illustrating China's role in infrastructural development, Estrada highlights the Philippines' participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and pursuit to become a member of the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).<sup>19</sup> Baviera and Arugay also note that the Philippines obtained \$24 billion in new financing, which included \$9 billion worth of loans and \$15 billion in investments from China within the first three months of Duterte's term.<sup>20</sup>

A third driver is the pursuit of natural gas resources. Chang comments that natural gas is the only reliable and cost-effective source of energy for the Philippines.<sup>21</sup> However, he notes that the Malampaya natural gas field, its main energy source, is expected to dry out by the mid-to-late 2020s—forcing the Philippines to pursue other sources in areas such as the South China Sea. Muscolino estimates that the SCS holds 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas within its waters.<sup>22</sup> *Crisis Group* reports that one area of interest for natural gas in the SCS is Reed Bank located within the Philippine EEZ.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Yuwa Hedrick-Wong, "Philippines' Richest 2019: Chinese Infrastructure Investments Could Inject Much-Needed Growth," *Forbes*, accessed August 25, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/yuwahedrickwong/2019/09/25/philippines-richest-2019-chinese-infrastructure-investments-could-inject-much-needed-growth/>.

<sup>18</sup> "The Philippines: A Good Time to Expand the Infrastructure Push," *International Monetary Fund*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/02/06/na020620the-philippines-a-good-time-to-expand-the-infrastructure-push>.

<sup>19</sup> Darlene V. Estrada, "The Belt and Road Initiative and Philippine Participation in the Maritime Silk Road," *Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies Commentaries* 4, no. 7 (April 2017), <https://www.fsi.gov.ph/the-belt-and-road-initiative-and-philippine-participation-in-the-maritime-silk-road/>.

<sup>20</sup> Aileen S. P. Baviera and Aries A. Arugay, "The Philippines' Shifting Engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative: The Politics of Duterte's Legitimation," *Asian Perspective* 45, no. 2 (2021): 278, <https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2021.0001>.

<sup>21</sup> Felix K. Chang, "Running Out of Gas: Philippine Energy Security and the South China Sea," September 6, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/09/running-out-of-gas-philippine-energy-security-and-the-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>22</sup> Micah S. Muscolino, "Past and Present Resource Disputes in the South China Sea: The Case of Reed Bank," *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 2, no. 2 (September 2013): 447–77, [https://www.academia.edu/4974041/Past\\_and\\_Present\\_Resource\\_Disputes\\_in\\_the\\_South\\_China\\_Sea\\_The\\_Case\\_of\\_Reed\\_Bank](https://www.academia.edu/4974041/Past_and_Present_Resource_Disputes_in_the_South_China_Sea_The_Case_of_Reed_Bank).

<sup>23</sup> AFP and Hoang Dinh, "Stirring up the South China Sea (IV): Oil in Troubled Waters," *Crisis Group*, January 27, 2016, <https://medium.com/@CrisisGroup/stirring-up-the-south-china-sea-iv-oil-in-troubled-waters-7d4b7286aac0>.

A fourth driver highlighted by scholars is fishing. Suh and Pomeroy note that the Philippines ranked eighth in global fish production and contributed to 1.5% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2015.<sup>24</sup> They further comment that the fishing industry provides employment to at least 1.6 million Filipinos and remains a key source of food security due to high levels of poverty in a growing population. However, Anticamara and Go note that the total catch volume of most Philippine fisheries has either stagnated or declined in the last three decades due to overexploitation.<sup>25</sup> Commenting on the need to expand fishing areas, Fabinyi remarks that the SCS is an “increasingly attractive marine resource frontier” to meet Philippine fishing needs.<sup>26</sup>

### 3. Policy Shifts between Administrations

Though the general economic and security drivers have remained the same for the Philippines’ activities in the South China Sea, different priorities have led to a shift from “balancing” under the Aquino administration to “light hedging” under Duterte.<sup>27</sup> De Castro explains that Chinese harassment of a Philippine natural gas exploration vessel within its EEZ in March 2011 and continuous insistence that regional countries recognize Chinese claims in the SCS were factors that led the Aquino administration toward a more, head-on approach against China that resulted in the strengthening of the U.S.-Philippine alliance.<sup>28</sup> Strangio also remarks that relations with China continued to plunge due to the

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<sup>24</sup> David Suh and Robert Pomeroy, “Projected Economic Impact of Climate Change on Marine Capture Fisheries in the Philippines,” *Frontiers in Marine Science* 7 (April 16, 2020): 1, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2020.00232>.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan A. Anticamara and Kevin T. B. Go, “Spatio-Temporal Declines in Philippine Fisheries and Its Implications to Coastal Municipal Fishers’ Catch and Income,” *Frontiers in Marine Science* 3, no. 21 (March 2, 2016): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2016.00021>.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Fabinyi, “Maritime Disputes and Seafood Regimes: A Broader Perspective on Fishing and the Philippines–China Relationship,” *Globalizations* 17, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 146–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2019.1644707>.

<sup>27</sup> Kuik Cheng-Chwee, “Hedging in Post-Pandemic Asia: What, How, and Why?,” *The Asan Forum*, June 15, 2021, <https://theasanforum.org/hedging-in-post-pandemic-asia-what-how-and-why/>.

<sup>28</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, “Examining the South China Sea Disputes: Papers from the Fifth Annual CSIS South China Sea Conference: A Report of the CSIS Sumitro Chair for Southeast Asia Studies” (Annual CSIS South China Sea conference, Lanham Boulder New York: Rowman & Littlefield, September 2015), [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/151110\\_Hiebert\\_ExaminingSouthChinaSea\\_Web.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/151110_Hiebert_ExaminingSouthChinaSea_Web.pdf).

standoff that occurred at Scarborough Shoal in 2012 and resulted in the Philippines filing a formal complaint to challenge China's claims in the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague.<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, Dobell explains that Duterte has taken an accommodating approach because he believes any military confrontation with China would be catastrophic.<sup>30</sup> Baviera says that Duterte also questions the U.S. security alliance because it failed to prevent China's construction of islands in Philippine waters.<sup>31</sup> Dolven et al. comment that China began extensive reclamation projects in areas such as Hughes Reef, Johnson South Reef, and Mischief Reef within the Philippine EEZ beginning in September 2013 that resulted in the construction of harbors, airstrips, and other facilities.<sup>32</sup> The Philippines reacted by protesting China's activities as they interfered with the pending arbitral tribunal case. However, Strangio notes that the U.S. declined to confront China directly in SCS disputes. This weakened Philippine confidence that the terms of the 1951 MDT applied to Philippine claims in the SCS.<sup>33</sup> Providing an economic explanation, Strangio also notes that Duterte perceived a losing situation in which the Philippines were unsuccessfully asserting its claims against China while, at the same time, risking its economic relationship with China in projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative. Baviera also notes that Duterte prioritizes economic interests over the protection of territorial claims by pursuing joint resource projects and bilateral agreements.<sup>34</sup>

#### **D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES**

Although there are multiple dimensions that can be measured in the SCS dispute, this study will solely focus on actions taken by the Philippines in the two most recent

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<sup>29</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, 253.

<sup>30</sup> Graeme Dobell, "Duterte Changes the South China Sea Tone," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, October 10, 2016, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/duterte-changes-south-china-sea-tone/>.

<sup>31</sup> Aileen Baviera, "President Duterte's Foreign Policy Challenges," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 38, no. 2 (2016): 202–8, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/628452>.

<sup>32</sup> Ben Dolven et al., "Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea: Implications and Policy Options" (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, June 18, 2015), 1.

<sup>33</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, 256.

<sup>34</sup> Baviera, "President Duterte's Foreign Policy Challenges."

presidential administrations to understand how the Philippines prioritized certain interests and to understand why particular responses were taken. By examining relevant case studies through qualitative means in each respective period, each hypothesis will be assessed to determine the best explanation of behavior. Based on an initial review of each administration and response drivers, the following six hypotheses have been identified.

H1: Increased trust in the U.S-Philippine alliance leads to more resistance behavior against Chinese coercion. If this hypothesis is true, empirical evidence should indicate that increased diplomatic statements favoring the alliance, the strengthening of defense agreements with the United States, or the restoration of previous defense agreements with the United States should lead to more resistance behavior by providing the Philippines with the confidence that it will receive support and backing to counter escalatory actions by China. Actions to push back against coercion could include: diplomatic challenges that denounce Chinese infringement; deployment of law enforcement vessels or military assets to assert jurisdiction; or the request of U.S. diplomatic or military support to deter coercion. On the other hand, decreased trust in the alliance, as illustrated by Philippine statements that denounce the alliance or through the weakening of defense ties, should result in accommodating behavior. Accommodating actions could include: negotiating beneficial terms for both countries in the use of the disputed location; avoiding the deployment of law enforcement or military assets to deter the action; or ignoring the threat completely.

H2: Stronger policies to protect Philippine claims leads to more resistance behavior against Chinese coercion. If this hypothesis is true, empirical evidence should indicate that presidential speeches and statements that assert Philippine sovereignty and jurisdiction of SCS claims should lead to more resistance behavior by providing the Philippines with guidance that dissuades accommodating behavior against Chinese coercion. Actions to push back against coercion could include: diplomatic challenges that denounce Chinese infringement; deployment of law enforcement vessels or military assets to assert jurisdiction; or the request of U.S. diplomatic or military support to deter coercion. On the other hand, weak policies that emphasize a willingness to compromise or negotiate territorial sovereignty, should result in more accommodating behavior. Accommodating

actions could include: negotiating beneficial terms for both countries in the use of the disputed location; avoiding the deployment of law enforcement or military assets to deter the action; or ignoring the threat completely.

H3: Weaker Chinese military capabilities lead to more resistance behavior against Chinese coercion. If this hypothesis is true, empirical evidence should indicate that weaknesses in maritime force projection capabilities, a lack of engagement in military exercises in the SCS, or maintaining the status quo of current maritime laws should lead to more resistance behavior by limiting the level of escalation that the Philippines would face in a territorial dispute. Actions to push back against coercion could include: diplomatic challenges that denounce Chinese infringement; deployment of law enforcement vessels or military assets to assert jurisdiction; or the request of U.S. diplomatic or military support to deter coercion. On the other hand, stronger Chinese military capabilities should result in more accommodating behavior. Accommodating actions could include: negotiating beneficial terms for both countries in the use of the disputed location; avoiding the deployment of law enforcement or military assets to deter the action; or ignoring the threat completely.

H4: Increased diplomatic interests with China lead to more accommodating behavior against Chinese coercion. If this hypothesis is true, empirical evidence should indicate that improved bilateral meetings and diplomatic agreements should lead to more accommodating behavior by providing alternate channels to manage and negotiate disputes peacefully. Accommodating actions could include: negotiating beneficial terms for both countries in the use of the disputed location; avoiding the deployment of law enforcement or military assets to deter the action; or ignoring the threat completely. On the other hand, weakened or broken diplomatic interests with China should result in more resistance behavior. Actions to push back against coercion could include: diplomatic challenges that denounce Chinese infringement; deployment of law enforcement vessels or military assets to assert jurisdiction; or the request of U.S. diplomatic or military support to deter coercion.

H5: Increased political interest in SCS claims lead to more resistance behavior against Chinese coercion. If this hypothesis is true, empirical evidence should indicate that increased support by the Philippine population to protect SCS claims should lead to more

resistance behavior by holding political leaders accountable for their actions ahead of an election. Actions to push back against coercion could include: diplomatic challenges that denounce Chinese infringement; deployment of law enforcement vessels or military assets to assert jurisdiction; or the request of U.S. diplomatic or military support to deter coercion. On the other hand, decreased political interests in SCS claims should lead to more accommodating behavior if other political agendas are prioritized. Accommodating actions could include: negotiating beneficial terms for both countries in the use of the disputed location; avoiding the deployment of law enforcement or military assets to deter the action; or ignoring the threat completely.

*H6: Increased economic interests with China will lead to more accommodating behavior against Chinese coercion.* If this hypothesis is true, empirical evidence should indicate that an increase in the participation of Chinese investment projects or an increase in the economic consequences faced by the Philippines during a dispute should lead to more accommodating behavior by prioritizing economic needs with China over SCS interests. Accommodating actions could include: negotiating beneficial terms for both countries in the use of the disputed location; avoiding the deployment of law enforcement or military assets to deter the action; or ignoring the threat completely. On the other hand, decreased economic interests should lead the Philippines to push back against Chinese coercion. Actions to push back against coercion could include: diplomatic challenges that denounce Chinese infringement; deployment of law enforcement vessels or military assets to assert jurisdiction; or the request of U.S. diplomatic or military support to deter coercion.

## **E. RESEARCH DESIGN**

The purpose of this research is to determine the security and economic drivers behind Philippine conduct in the SCS dispute and assess how they have influenced Philippine actions in four specific incidents. Using two case studies each from the Aquino and Duterte presidential administrations, this research will analyze incidents to understand how the Philippines prioritized its interests and explain why certain actions were taken at the time of the incident. The research objective is to determine how security and economic drivers have influenced Philippine decision-making in its responses to SCS disputes within

the past two presidential administrations. First, the research will identify which of the two drivers was predominant in each incident. Once identified, further analysis will be conducted to determine how the Philippines reacted—either by pushing back against China or by pursuing an accommodating approach instead. The combination of drivers and reactions results in four combinations that will be used as the hypotheses for the study.

## **1. Research Method**

This study will test the four hypotheses against two case studies in the Aquino administration and three case studies in the Duterte administration. The selected case studies in the Aquino administration will consist of the Scarborough Shoal incident in 2012 and the Second Thomas Shoal Incident that occurred in 2014. For the Duterte administration, the study will focus on the 2018–2021 Thitu Island incident, 2021 Whitsun Reef incident, and the Second Thomas Shoal incident that also occurred in 2021. The two sets of case studies were selected because they demonstrate unique incidents between the Philippines and China with significant repercussions that can be studied independently with minimal interference or overlap from similar cases. Additionally, each of the incidents were highly publicized with a variety of sources in which to obtain data. For each case study, the thesis will describe Philippine responses to Chinese actions to understand what occurred during the incident. The Philippine response will then be characterized as either an action that pushes back against Chinese coercion or an action that accommodates the challenge. Afterward, the study will identify the reasons why the Philippines responded in that particular way. It will then compare those reasons to the hypothesized drivers to determine which hypothesis most strongly supports the evidence of each case study. Finally, conclusions will be drawn from the findings to determine if behavioral patterns and trends exist that may provide insight in how the Philippines may respond to SCS incidents in the future.

## **2. Sources and Application**

There is a multitude of sources available to support this research project. Green, Hicks, Cooper, and Schaus' work in *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence* provides a strong baseline for the Scarborough Shoal

and Second Thomas Shoal incidents that occurred in the Aquino Administration.<sup>35</sup> Additional historical data about the Aquino administration is available in scholarly journals such as *Asian Studies Review*, *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum*, and *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* that describe both economic and security policies during his tenure. There is also an abundance of U.S. and non-U.S. think tanks such as the Institute for National Strategic Studies, China Maritime Studies Institute, Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies, and Philippine Institute for Development Studies that provide country-specific policy briefs and case study analyses. In addition to journals and think tank reports, this thesis will draw on diplomatic information from organizations such as the United Nations that provide digital libraries of international treaties and official correspondence related to Philippine actions, as well as organizations like USAID and The World Bank that provides economic, trade, and investment data for both administrations. Furthermore, the Philippines also publishes state documents such as the National Defense Strategy that provide insight into the objectives and security drivers of each presidential administration.

## **F. THESIS OVERVIEW AND CHAPTER OUTLINE**

This thesis is organized into six chapters. Chapter II presents both the 2012 Scarborough Shoal and 2014 Second Thomas Shoal incidents that occurred during the Aquino administration to assess the applicability of each of the six hypotheses proposed. The following three chapters present case studies during the Duterte administration in the following order: the 2018–2021 Thitu Island incident in Chapter III; the 2021 Whitsun Reef incident in Chapter IV; the 2021 Second Thomas Shoal incident in Chapter V. Using similar methods of analysis as the Aquino administration, the chapter will evaluate the six hypotheses to determine to which best explains Philippine behavior in each incident within the Duterte administration. Finally, in Chapter VI, the conclusion of the thesis will provide an assessment of how well the six hypotheses explain the observed behavior in the five case studies. After assessing behavior based on security, economic, and other drivers

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<sup>35</sup> Michael J. Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2017), [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170505\\_GreenM\\_CounteringCoercionAsia\\_Web.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170505_GreenM_CounteringCoercionAsia_Web.pdf).



between the two administrations, the thesis will identify the combination of factors that is more likely to lead the Philippines to push back or accommodate Chinese actions in the SCS. Additionally, the concluding chapter will discuss the implications of these factors for future SCS conflicts and provide the United States with policy recommendations to strengthen the Philippines' ability to resist Chinese coercion.

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## **II. PHILIPPINE BEHAVIOR IN THE AQUINO ADMINISTRATION (2010–2016)**

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the causes of Philippine behavior to resist in two incidents that occurred in the South China Sea during the Aquino administration. Presenting evidence from the Scarborough Shoal incident of 2012 and Second Thomas Shoal incident of 2014, the chapter demonstrates that, from a big picture perspective, when the U.S. alliance is strong and Chinese military capabilities are relatively weak, Philippine leadership is more likely to resist Chinese coercion in South China Sea disputes. Because China has stronger military capabilities than the Philippines, a strong U.S. alliance provides the Philippines with the confidence that it will receive support and backing to counter escalatory actions by China. Similarly, weaker Chinese military capabilities are significant as Beijing's escalatory actions would be limited in a territorial dispute. These two drivers, combined with a foreign policy that prioritized the protection of territorial claims, create favorable conditions for the Philippines to resist Chinese coercion. This chapter will assess how these broad drivers, among others, influenced Philippine behavior during two specific incidents within the Aquino administration.

In the Scarborough Shoal incident of 2012, four factors influenced Philippine behavior: first, a Philippine policy to protect territorial claims; second, the U.S.-Philippine alliance; third, China's military capabilities; fourth, Philippine economic interests. First, the Philippine policy to protect territorial claims and resources influenced initial resistance behavior such as the deployment of the Philippines' largest war ship and law enforcement vessels to interdict illegal fishing activity. Additionally, this policy also influenced a variety of diplomatic statements and protests in the form of a white paper, as well as the announcement to pursue international arbitration. Second, the strong U.S.-Philippine alliance led the Philippines to resist in the form of calling for U.S. assistance that resulted in the U.S. publicly affirming the MDT as well as providing aid in the form of back-channel negotiations. Third, China's weaker military capabilities in areas such as air strike operations also influenced the Philippines to resist. Finally, Philippine economic interests influenced accommodating behavior in the form of pursuing joint exploration projects after

China quarantined Philippine fruit. The section concludes by determining that Philippine behavior during the Scarborough Shoal incident of 2012 is best classified as resistance.

In the Second Thomas Shoal incident of 2014, four factors influenced Philippine behavior: first, a Philippine policy to protect territorial claims; second, trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance; third, China's military capabilities; fourth, diplomatic interests. The Philippine policy to protect territorial claims influenced resistance behavior such as maintaining the continuous deployment and resupply of marines on the shoal. Additionally, diplomatic statements and protests that challenged Chinese coercion such as the public announcement of *Sierra Madre's* purpose to serve as a permanent structure were also influenced by the policy. Second, the strong U.S.-Philippine alliance led the Philippines call for U.S. assistance that resulted in the U.S. denouncing Chinese actions, an affirmation of *Sierra Madre's* status as a permanent outpost, and surveillance aircraft support. Third, the weak military capabilities of China in areas such as air strike capabilities continued to influence the Philippines to resist. Finally, diplomatic interests such as the 2013 consultations regarding a code of conduct (COC) in the South China influenced the Philippines to exhibit accommodating behavior. These accommodating actions were illustrated in the reluctance to deploy additional military or law enforcement assets when Chinese vessels were first observed near the shoal several months prior to the incident. The section concludes by determining that the Second Thomas Shoal incident illustrates an overall classification of resistance.

Taking a step back from the detailed evidence provided by each incident, the chapter illustrates three common factors that led to resistance behavior. First, the Aquino administration exhibited a strong policy to protect territorial claims. This factor elicited several common resistance responses such as diplomatic protests and statements that denounced coercion, as well as the use of military assets to protect respective claims. Second, the strong alliance between the Philippines and the U.S. also influenced resistance behavior. In both cases, the U.S. issued public statements that denounced Chinese coercion and favored the Philippine position. Third, Chinese military capabilities, such as air strike operations, were still relatively weak at the time of each incident. Although both incidents illustrate common drivers that influenced resistance behavior, the chapter also illustrates

that other drivers can lead to accommodating behavior. In the Scarborough Shoal incident, the Philippines demonstrated accommodating behavior by pursuing joint exploration projects when economic interests were impacted after China initiated a quarantine on bananas. In the Second Thomas Shoal incident, diplomatic interests associated with ASEAN COC consultations influenced the Philippines to maintain a non-confrontational approach toward increased Chinese presence several months prior to the incident. While different drivers of accommodating behavior were observed in both incidents, they did not change the Philippines' overall response of resistance against Chinese coercion in either case. Taking the three common drivers of resistance into account, the hypothesis that the Philippines is more likely to resist when the U.S. alliance is strong and Chinese capabilities are low remain valid in both case studies within the Aquino administration.

This chapter is divided into two main sections based on each case study: first, the Scarborough Shoal incident of 2012; second, the Second Thomas Shoal incident of 2014. Within each section, there are three subsections. The first subsection provides a historical overview of the respective area and a brief description of the events leading up to the incident that includes China's initial actions as well as the Philippine response immediately afterward. The second subsection consists of the underlying drivers and the responses that were influenced by them. Third, a behavioral assessment will be conducted to determine the best response classification of the incident. After presenting both cases studies, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the common factors that contributed to the Philippines' response in order to assess the validity of the hypotheses.

## **A. SCARBOROUGH SHOAL INCIDENT (2012)**

### **1. Overview and Description**

Located 186 kilometers away from Subic Bay and within the Philippine EEZ, Scarborough Shoal was originally named after a British East India Company ship that ran aground in 1784.<sup>36</sup> However, history of the disputed shoal and its rich fishing grounds goes

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<sup>36</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, 256.

back to at least the thirteenth century when China claims it made the first discovery.<sup>37</sup> The Philippines, on the other hand, asserts jurisdiction based on agreements that were made when Spain ceded the country and its territories to the U.S. in 1898, and back to Philippine control when the U.S. recognized its independence in 1946. Though there were minimal efforts by both countries to assert claims to the area in the 1960s and 1970s, tensions noticeably increased in May 1997 when a Chinese radio expedition planted Chinese flags and markers around the shoal. The Philippine Navy responded by driving the expedition away, destroying the markers, and arresting Chinese fishermen in the area. Since that incident, the Philippines became more active in the enforcement of its claims by patrolling the area and regularly arresting Chinese fishermen operating near the shoal.

Though there were other flareups in the 2000s, the next major incident occurred on April 8, 2012, when a Philippine Air Force (PAF) reconnaissance aircraft observed eight Chinese fishing vessels operating nearby.<sup>38</sup> On April 10, a Philippine frigate arrived in the area where it proceeded to intercept the fishing vessels and arrest the fishermen.<sup>39</sup> After boarding the vessels, Philippine sailors discovered illegal catches of clam, sharks, and coral that were protected under its anti-poaching laws. After the Philippine sailors disembarked, the Chinese fishermen sent a distress signal to obtain assistance from China. In response, two Chinese Marine Surveillance (CMS) ships arrived and blocked the Philippine ship from conducting further boarding and arrests. These actions marked the beginning of a two-month standoff as both sides emphasized their sovereignty and demanded that the other leave the area. The incident eventually ended after the Philippines withdrew its vessels on June 15.

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<sup>37</sup> Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 96–97.

<sup>38</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, “Facing Up to China’s Realpolitik Approach in the South China Sea Dispute: The Case of the 2012 Scarborough Shoal Stand-off and Its Aftermath,” *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 3, no. 2 (2016): 169, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/48601794>.

<sup>39</sup> Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 99–100.

## 2. Drivers of Response

### a. Policy to Protect Territorial Claims

One factor that influenced the Philippines' behavior during this incident was the Aquino administration's policy to protect Philippine territorial claims. In the State of the Nation Address on July 25, 2011, eight months prior to the incident, President Aquino emphasized his policy by saying "we do not wish to increase tensions with anyone, but we must let the world know that we are ready to protect what is ours."<sup>40</sup> In the same speech, he also mentions the possibility of submitting its case against China to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. During the incident itself, on April 11, 2012, President Aquino stated that "what is important is we take care of our sovereignty. We cannot give [Scarborough Shoal] away and we cannot depend on others but ourselves."<sup>41</sup> Both statements emphasize the Philippines' policy to protect Philippine claims against Chinese coercion prior to, and during, the Scarborough Shoal incident.

Reflecting this policy, the underlying cause of the incident was the infringement of Philippine fishing laws and sovereignty by China. In the past, the Philippines protected its claims by arresting Chinese fishermen and charging them with illegal fishing, illegal entry, and other violations associated with the International Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.<sup>42</sup> After the eight Chinese fishing vessels were observed on April 8, President Aquino increased military monitoring activities to enforce Philippine fishery and maritime environment protection laws. Noting the mission of the ship sent to intervene, De Castro comments that it "was tasked with protecting marine environment and resources and asserting the sovereignty of the Philippines as a coastal

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<sup>40</sup> Benigno S. Aquino III, "Benigno S. Aquino III, Second State of the Nation Address, July 25, 2011 (English Translation)," *Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines*, July 25, 2011, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2011/07/25/benigno-s-aquino-iii-second-state-of-the-nation-address-july-25-2011-en/>.

<sup>41</sup> Rigoberto D. Tiglao, "Aquino, the First President to Lose Philippine Territory," *The Manila Times*, May 31, 2015, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2015/05/31/opinion/columnists/topanalysis/aquino-the-first-president-to-lose-philippine-territory/188031>.

<sup>42</sup> De Castro, "Facing Up to China's Realpolitik Approach in the South China Sea Dispute," 169.

state.”<sup>43</sup> After boarding the fishing vessels, Philippine sailors seized illegally collected coral, live sharks, and giant clams.

Influenced by a policy to protect territorial claims and maritime resources, the first indication of resistance was the deployment of military and law enforcement assets to the incident site. Two days after Chinese fishing vessels were observed, the Philippines initially deployed its largest navy ship, the BRP *Gregorio del Pilar*, to intercept the Chinese fishermen on April 10.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, Philippine sailors were armed as they boarded the fishing vessels to conduct inspections and arrest the fishermen. However, after China responded to the ship’s arrival by sending two China Marine Surveillance vessels, Philippine President Aquino met with Defense Secretary Gazmin and Lieutenant General Alcantara to discuss the use of the Philippine Coast Guard instead. After the conference, President Aquino made the decision to replace the BRP *Gregorio del Pilar* with a coast guard vessel to parallel the “white to white, gray to gray” guidance that he implemented in September 2011 through Executive Order No. 57.<sup>45</sup> This move was made to reflect the Chinese response of deploying unarmed vessels to Scarborough Shoal. On April 12, the Philippine Coast Guard search and rescue vessel BRP *Pampanga* replaced the BRP *Gregorio del Pilar*.<sup>46</sup>

A second indication of resistance was the Philippines’ initiation of diplomatic protests. On April 18, the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs published a position paper that rejected China’s claims of sovereignty and emphasized its own maritime jurisdiction based on the shoal’s location within the Philippine EEZ.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, on April 19, the Philippines declared its intent to pursue international arbitration despite China’s insistence that the matter be resolved bilaterally. As Emmers notes, “Beijing views

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<sup>43</sup> De Castro, 169.

<sup>44</sup> Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 100–101.

<sup>45</sup> Green et al., 101.

<sup>46</sup> Green et al., 102.

<sup>47</sup> Republic of the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs, “Philippine Position on Bajo de Masinloc (Scarborough Shoal) and the Waters within Its Vicinity,” *Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines*, April 18, 2012, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2012/04/18/philippine-position-on-bajo-de-masinloc-and-the-waters-within-its-vicinity/>.



any attempt at internationalizing and legalizing the South China Sea disputes as a threat to its own national interests in the region.”<sup>48</sup> Rather, China prefers to engage in exclusive dialogue with ASEAN and negotiate directly with claimant parties on issues regarding the South China Sea.<sup>49</sup>

**b. U.S. Alliance**

Another factor that influenced the Philippine decision to resist was the strength of the U.S.-Philippine alliance leading up to the incident. In late 2011, the U.S. announced a pivot (later re-named rebalance) to increase diplomatic, economic, and military presence in Asia to assure its partners that it would serve as a counterbalance to China.<sup>50</sup> One example of this shift was the signing of the Manila Declaration with the Philippines in November 2011 to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the MDT.<sup>51</sup> The declaration also reaffirmed their relationship to continue “bilateral cooperation in addressing broader regional and global challenges, including maritime security and threats to security.”<sup>52</sup> With strong U.S. ties, Fravel and Miura remark that the Philippines were emboldened to take a stronger stance against China during the Scarborough Shoal incident.<sup>53</sup>

One indication of resistance that was influenced by Philippine leaders’ trust in the alliance was their call for U.S. assistance to de-escalate the incident on April 26.<sup>54</sup> Four days later, on April 30, U.S. Secretary of Defense Panetta and Secretary of State Clinton met with Philippine counterparts to discuss the dispute. Though it maintained a position of

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<sup>48</sup> Ralf Emmers, “ASEAN’s Search for Neutrality in the South China Sea,” *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 2, no. 1 (May 2014): 69, <http://dx.doi.org/10.18588/201405.000019>.

<sup>49</sup> Emmers, 70.

<sup>50</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon’s Shadow*, 31.

<sup>51</sup> U.S. Department of State Office of the Spokesperson, “Signing of the Manila Declaration on Board the USS Fitzgerald in Manila Bay, Manila, Philippines,” U.S. Department of State, November 16, 2011, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/11/177226.htm>.

<sup>52</sup> “Signing of Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement,” U.S. Embassy in the Philippines, April 28, 2014, <https://ph.usembassy.gov/signing-enhanced-defense-cooperation-agreement/>.

<sup>53</sup> M. Taylor Fravel and Kacie Miura, “Stormy Seas: The South China Sea in U.S.-China Relations,” in *After Engagement: Dilemmas in U.S.-China Security Relations*, ed. Jacques deLisle and Avery Goldstein (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021), 163.

<sup>54</sup> Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 109–10.

neutrality and promoted a diplomatic resolution, the U.S. publicly reiterated its obligations under the MDT. However, after a meeting between President Aquino and President Obama on June 6, the U.S. made promises to increase bilateral exercises and training programs to help the Philippines build their national defense, as well as other commitments including the delivery of a second U.S. Coast Guard cutter to the country.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, the U.S. also participated in back-channel negotiations with China in early June to broker an agreement for both countries to mutually withdraw from Scarborough Shoal. Based on email correspondence of one of Secretary Clinton’s top advisors, China made commitments to de-escalate the Scarborough dispute if the U.S. placed pressure on the Philippines to do so as well. Highlighting the role of U.S. diplomatic assistance in the Scarborough Shoal incident, President Aquino thanked the U.S. on June 8, 2012, for “all the expressions of support and even the help that has led to the resolution of certain issues within our part of the world.”<sup>56</sup>

*c. China’s Military Capabilities*

A third factor that influenced the Philippines’ overall response to resist was China’s maritime force projection capabilities, which limited its ability to escalate the dispute. In particular, Biddle and Oelrich discuss air strikes as one strategy to intimidate rivals into ceding disputed claims.<sup>57</sup> To improve air superiority and air-to-ground operations, China commissioned its first aircraft carrier, *Liaoning*, in 2012.<sup>58</sup> Haste and Romaniuk comment that, “in the short run, the primary mission of a Chinese aircraft carrier will be to secure its maritime claims in the SCS.”<sup>59</sup> When fully operational, Chinese carriers will be

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<sup>55</sup> Green et al., 117–18.

<sup>56</sup> Green et al., 118.

<sup>57</sup> Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, “Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia,” *International Security* 41, no. 1 (Summer 2016): 15–16, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00249](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00249).

<sup>58</sup> Joshua Haste and Scott N. Romaniuk, “Between Competition and War: Complex Security Overlay and the South China Sea,” in *Security, Strategy and Military Dynamics in the South China Sea: Cross-National Perspectives*, ed. Gordon Houlden, Scott N. Romaniuk, and Nong Hong (United Kingdom: Bristol University Press, 2021), 17.

<sup>59</sup> Haste and Romaniuk, 17.

able to carry 24 to 32 fighter aircraft and allow them to operate at farther ranges.<sup>60</sup> One type of fighter aircraft is the J-15, which can strike ground targets up to 550 nautical miles away from a carrier group with the support of airborne early warning aircraft. However, these capabilities were not available during the Scarborough Shoal incident as the carrier was not commissioned until September 2012.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, the carrier was not fully operational as a prototype J-15 aircraft conducted its first landing on the carrier two months later. The lack of Chinese air strike capabilities at the time of the incident is one example of weak military capabilities that influenced the Philippines to resist against coercion.

*d. Economic Interests*

Another factor that influenced Philippine behavior involved economic interests and bilateral trade between the two countries during the incident. On May 3, China began to quarantine Philippine fruit imports allegedly due to contamination by pests.<sup>62</sup> However, security experts suspect that the quarantine was used as a tool for economic coercion.<sup>63</sup> In particular, the quarantine negatively affected the Philippine banana industry as 70% of its exports went to China and employed 200,000 workers.<sup>64</sup> Philippine interest groups, businessmen, and legislators recognized the negative impact on Philippine trade and urged the government to find a quick resolution. Remarking on the economic consequences, the president of the Philippine Exporters Confederation (PHILEXPORT) Sergio Ortiz stated, “we (the Philippines) have more to lose than them (China).”<sup>65</sup> The ban lasted for approximately one month and resulted in an estimated loss of 23 million U.S. dollars after 1,500 containers were blocked from entering Chinese ports.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> “By Air, Land, and Sea: China’s Maritime Power Projection Network,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, September 15, 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/power-projection-network/>.

<sup>61</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, “(2013) Chapter Six: Asia,” *The Military Balance* 113, no. 1 (2013): 252, <https://doi.org/10.1080/04597222.2013.757002>.

<sup>62</sup> Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 111.

<sup>63</sup> Green et al., 111.

<sup>64</sup> De Castro, “Facing Up to China’s Realpolitik Approach in the South China Sea Dispute,” 171.

<sup>65</sup> De Castro, 171.

<sup>66</sup> Ketian Zhang, “Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing’s Use of Coercion in the South China Sea,” *International Security* 44, no. 1 (Summer 2019): 146, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00354](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00354).

Influenced by the negative impacts of the quarantine, the Philippines demonstrated at least one instance of accommodation in its willingness to pursue joint projects with China. On May 8, five days after the quarantine began, the Philippines announced a “new diplomatic initiative” that offered China an opportunity to join the Philippines in exploration projects at locations such as Reed Bank for natural gas resources.<sup>67</sup> The Philippines sent formal invitations to the China National Offshore Oil Corporation as well as the Federation of Filipino-Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry to invest in the projects. Although abstaining from such proposals in the past, President Aquino supported the initiative as part of diplomatic negotiations during the incident.

### **3. Behavior Assessment**

The Scarborough Shoal incident demonstrates strong evidence of resistance when the Philippines initially faced Chinese coercion, but also illustrates accommodating behavior when economic interests such as bilateral trade were negatively affected. However, the response classification of resistance is more appropriate in this case as demonstrated by the Philippines’ initial military response of sending a navy ship to counter the challenge. Even when the navy ship was replaced with a coast guard law enforcement vessel, the Philippines continued to challenge China’s physical presence at the incident site. Additionally, the Philippines’ diplomatic protests, call for U.S. diplomatic assistance, and announcement to submit the case for international arbitration were actions taken to challenge Chinese coercion. The sum of these actions was influenced by a strong Philippine policy to protect Philippine claims, a strong U.S. alliance, and relatively weak Chinese military capabilities to project escalatory force at the time of the incident. Although the Philippines demonstrated resistance behavior at the beginning of the incident, the Philippines exhibited an accommodating response to pursue joint exploration projects when economic interests were negatively affected after China initiated a fruit quarantine. While this behavior indicates accommodating behavior, this action occurred after the initial responses of resistance were made by the Philippines. Therefore, the overall classification of resistance in the Scarborough Shoal incident of 2012 is most appropriate.

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<sup>67</sup> Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 112.

## **B. SECOND THOMAS SHOAL INCIDENT (2014)**

### **1. Overview and Description**

Second Thomas Shoal, also known as Ayungin Shoal, is located within the Spratly Islands 105 miles northwest of the Philippines' Palawan province.<sup>68</sup> Occupied by Japan during World War II, Second Thomas Shoal and other formations within the Spratly Island chain were renounced by Japan after the 1951 San Francisco Peace Conference. However, because the treaty did not declare a successor to the area, several countries made claims by occupying outposts on nearby features in the following decades. Though UNCLOS defines the shoal as a “low-tide elevation” with no maritime rights associated with it, the Philippines claims jurisdiction as part of its EEZ.<sup>69</sup> The Philippines views the location as a strategic military location near Chinese-occupied Mischief Reef and a critical access point to Reed Bank which is assessed to have natural gas deposits.<sup>70</sup> China, on the other hand, asserts that it has held sovereignty of the shoal for two millennia as part of its claim to the Spratly Islands and nearby waters.

Though outpost construction in the Spratly Islands has been conducted by multiple countries for several decades, the Second Thomas Shoal dispute began to escalate in 1998 when Philippine surveillance aircraft observed Chinese military structures being built on nearby Mischief Reef.<sup>71</sup> In response, the Philippines deliberately grounded two vessels on May 9, 1999—the BRP *Sierra Madre* on Second Thomas Shoal and the BRP *Lanao del Norte* on Scarborough Shoal. After China demanded that the two vessels be removed, the Philippines partially complied by removing the vessel from Scarborough Shoal—but kept *Sierra Madre* in place at Second Thomas Shoal. In 2002, the China-ASEAN Declaration on the Conduct (DOC) of Parties in the South China Sea was created in which parties agreed not to occupy new features in the SCS. As part of this agreement, the Philippines

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<sup>68</sup> Green et al., 170.

<sup>69</sup> Green et al., 170.

<sup>70</sup> Green et al., 170.

<sup>71</sup> Green et al., 170–71.

pledged in September 2003 that it would not construct any permanent structures on Second Thomas Shoal.

Moving ahead to 2013, the Philippines observed Chinese vessels patrolling the area on May 8.<sup>72</sup> The Philippines increased its patrols and identified 30 civilian fishing vessels, two China Marine Surveillance patrol ships, and one PLA Navy vessel. However, the Philippines continued to monitor the developing situation by air only. Two days later, on May 10, the Philippines filed a diplomatic protest against China's infringement of the Philippine EEZ. On May 21, an official briefing was given on the situation that emphasized its message of Philippine sovereignty. On May 23, China responded publicly to the Philippine protest by proclaiming its own sovereignty of the Spratly Islands and nearby waters. On May 28, the Philippines reported that most of the Chinese vessels left the area, with only two China Maritime Surveillance vessels remaining. After meeting with Chinese ambassador Ma Keqing on May 29, Philippine Secretary Gazmin stated that China would continue to monitor the shoal as China was concerned about a Philippine supply ship transporting construction materials to build structures on the shoal. Though Secretary Gazmin insisted that the vessel was a routine mission to resupply the *Sierra Madre*, this concern would mark the beginning of China's near-continuous presence of Second Thomas Shoal and define the underlying cause of the incident that would occur in March 2014.

On March 9, 2014, two Philippine supply vessels were harassed by two China Coast Guard cutters to prevent them from delivering alleged construction materials to Second Thomas Shoal.<sup>73</sup> Conducting maneuvers to "block and prevent" the Philippine vessels from reaching their destination while using sirens and megaphones to assert jurisdiction, the Chinese cutters forced the Philippine vessels to turn around.<sup>74</sup> The next day, on March 10, the Philippine military responded by conducting an airdrop of supplies to *Sierra Madre*.<sup>75</sup> These initial actions marked the beginning of the dispute which led to another

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<sup>72</sup> Green et al., 173–77.

<sup>73</sup> Green et al., 183.

<sup>74</sup> Green et al., 185.

<sup>75</sup> Green et al., 186.

resupply mission on March 29. Though Chinese Coast Guard remained afterward for “routine monitoring,” the incident effectively ended after the successful delivery.<sup>76</sup>

## **2. Drivers of Response**

### ***a. Policy to Protect Territorial Claims***

One factor that influenced Philippine behavior during the Second Thomas Shoal incident of 2014 was the Aquino administration’s policy to protect territorial claims. On May 21, 2013, when Chinese vessels were first observed operating near Second Thomas Shoal, President Aquino asserted his position by saying, “our message to the whole world is clear: what belongs to the Philippines belongs to the Philippines.”<sup>77</sup> Reaffirming his stance on March 31, 2014, after the successful resupply mission, President Aquino stated, “I subscribed to this oath when I assumed office. I have to defend national territory and our sovereignty.”<sup>78</sup> Both statements emphasize his policy to protect Philippine claims in the South China Sea before and after the incident occurred.

The first indication of resistance that was influenced by the administration’s policy to protect claims is the deployment of military assets at Second Thomas Shoal. Since *Sierra Madre’s* grounding on the shoal in 1999, there has been a continuous presence of marines onboard to defend its claim.<sup>79</sup> With seven to 12 personnel serving three to six-month rotations onboard *Sierra Madre*, the shoal is protected by marines armed with rifles and two 40-millimeter cannons. Additionally, as part of the March 29 resupply mission, the Philippines delivered new marines using a civilian vessel operated by four Navy officers and 20 enlisted crewmen in civilian clothes.<sup>80</sup> Philippine military aircraft were also observed flying overhead to monitor the situation.

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<sup>76</sup> Green et al., 196.

<sup>77</sup> Jim Gomez, “Philippines Protests Chinese Warship’s Presence,” Yahoo News, May 21, 2013, <https://news.yahoo.com/philippines-protests-chinese-warships-presence-142952686.html>.

<sup>78</sup> Joel M. Sy Egco, “I Have to Defend National Territory,” The Manila Times, March 31, 2014, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2014/03/31/latest-stories/breakingnews/i-have-to-defend-national-territory/86551>.

<sup>79</sup> Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 171.

<sup>80</sup> Green et al., 189–91.

A second indication of resistance that reflects a policy to protect Philippine claims was the variety of diplomatic protests and statements that denounced Chinese coercion. Well before the events of March 2014, the Philippines filed its first diplomatic protest on May 10, 2013, to assert its sovereignty and oppose China's "provocative and illegal presence" near Second Thomas Shoal.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, following the harassment that occurred on March 9, 2014, the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs issued two official statements on March 11 that condemned Chinese interference against the routine supply missions and announced its intent to protest the incident.<sup>82</sup> Additionally, on March 14, the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs released another statement that publicly acknowledged for the first time that the purpose of grounding *Sierra Madre* was to "serve as a permanent Philippine Government installation" to counter China's occupation of Mischief Reef in 1995.<sup>83</sup> On March 30, 2014, the Philippines also submitted a Memorial to the Arbitral Tribunal as part of the case it initiated against China in January 2013.<sup>84</sup>

***b. U.S. Alliance***

A second factor that influenced Philippine behavior during the incident was the strong alliance with the U.S. During a June 18, 2013, meeting with Philippine defense officials, U.S. Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus reiterated U.S. commitment by saying "as we rebalance to the Pacific, our alliance with the Philippines has never been more important than it is today" and that he looks "forward to exploring opportunities to work with the Philippine armed forces to build greater maritime capacity and increase security and

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<sup>81</sup> Green et al., 175.

<sup>82</sup> Green et al., 184–85.

<sup>83</sup> Republic of the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs, "DFA Statement on China's Allegation that the PH Agreed to Pull out of Ayungin Shoal," *Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines*, March 14, 2014, <https://mirror.officialgazette.gov.ph/2014/03/14/dfa-statement-on-chinas-allegation-that-the-ph-agreed-to-pull-out-of-ayungin-shoal/>.

<sup>84</sup> Albert F. del Rosario, "Statement of Secretary Albert F. Del Rosario on the Submission of the Philippines' Memorial to the Arbitral Tribunal," Republic of the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs, March 30, 2014, <https://dfa.gov.ph/index.php/2013-06-27-21-50-36/dfa-releases/2460-statement-of-secretary-albert-f-del-rosario-on-the-submission-of-the-philippines-memorial-to-the-arbitral-tribunal>.



stability in the region.”<sup>85</sup> During the Second Thomas Shoal incident itself, the commander of U.S. Seventh Fleet Vice Admiral Robert Thomas emphasized support for the Philippines on March 18, 2014 by saying, “Seventh Fleet is going to support this alliance, period.”<sup>86</sup> On March 31, after the resupply mission was completed, the U.S. State Department affirmed its position as a “treaty ally” of the Philippines and called for China to “refrain from further provocative behavior by allowing the Philippines to continue to maintain its presence.”<sup>87</sup> Further strengthening the alliance one month after the Second Thomas Shoal incident, the Philippines and U.S. signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) on April 28, 2014 to increase training opportunities and allow an enhanced rotational presence of U.S. forces in the Philippines.<sup>88</sup> Commenting on the agreement, U.S. Ambassador Philip Goldberg stated, “the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, serves as recognition that there is even more we can do together to support the alliance and promote peace and security in the region.”<sup>89</sup>

With the strengthened alliance, the Philippines were supportive of additional assistance provided by the U.S. to resist Chinese coercion. In June 2013, U.S. and Philippine officials first met in Manila to discuss issues relating to China’s initial presence at Second Thomas Shoal.<sup>90</sup> On March 12, 2014, three days after the first harassment incident, the U.S. State Department denounced China’s behavior as a “provocative move that raises tensions” and stated that “there should be no interference with the efforts of claimants to maintain the status quo.”<sup>91</sup> A more significant statement was made by the U.S. deputy chief of mission in Manila who recognized for the first time that *Sierra Madre* was a permanent Philippine outpost that existed prior to the 2002 Declaration on the

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<sup>85</sup> Frances Mangosing, “US Secretary of the Navy Meets with PH Defense, Military Officials,” *Inquirer.net*, June 18, 2013, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/77895/us-secretary-of-the-navy-meets-with-ph-defense-military-officials>.

<sup>86</sup> Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 188.

<sup>87</sup> Green et al., 194.

<sup>88</sup> U.S. Embassy in the Philippines, “Signing of Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement.”

<sup>89</sup> U.S. Embassy in the Philippines.

<sup>90</sup> Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 178.

<sup>91</sup> Green et al., 186.

Conduct of Parties.<sup>92</sup> In addition to diplomatic support, the U.S. also provided military assistance in the form of a P-8 Poseidon surveillance aircraft and a navy ship positioned nearby during the March 29 resupply mission.<sup>93</sup>

*c. China's Military Capabilities*

A third factor that influenced the Philippines' overall response to resist was China's military capabilities at the time of the incident. As mentioned previously, Biddle and Oelrich discuss air strikes as one strategy that China could pursue to obtain disputed claims from rivals.<sup>94</sup> Though China's military modernization continued, air strike capabilities were still limited in 2014. While China's air force was conducting more exercises over dispersed areas to include overwater operations, it was still developing procedures for aerial refueling and airborne command-and-control.<sup>95</sup> Additionally, the aircraft carrier *Liaoning* embarked on its third set of sea trials in August 2013 which included more J-15 landings and longer duration tests. However, *Military Balance* notes *Liaoning* had "yet to demonstrate the capabilities that would enable carrier battle group operations."<sup>96</sup> Describing the capabilities needed to reach the Spratly Island chain (where Second Thomas Shoal is located), Beckley states that aircraft would have to travel almost 700 miles away from the nearest Chinese airbase on Hainan to achieve air superiority.<sup>97</sup> Even though China has a limited number of combat aircraft that can transit that distance, the aircraft would only be able to spend a few minutes overhead before returning to refuel. Due to military

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<sup>92</sup> Green et al., 187.

<sup>93</sup> Bonnie S. Glaser, "U.S. Strategy Seeks to Calm the Roiled Waters of the South China Sea," in *Perspectives on the South China Sea: Diplomatic, Legal, and Security Dimensions of the Dispute* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2014), 57, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/perspectives-south-china-sea>.

<sup>94</sup> Biddle and Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific," 15–16.

<sup>95</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, "(2014) Chapter Six: Asia," *The Military Balance* 114, no. 1 (2014): 208, <https://doi.org/10.1080/04597222.2014.871879>.

<sup>96</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, 231.

<sup>97</sup> Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion," *International Security* 42, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 105, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00294](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00294).

weaknesses in areas such as air strike capabilities at the time of the incident, China's limited ability to escalate the dispute influenced the Philippines to resist.

*d. Diplomatic Interests*

Though there were several factors that led the Philippines to resist during the incident of March 2014, one factor that influenced the Philippines to accommodate China's presence in the months leading up to the incident were diplomatic consultations that occurred between ASEAN and China. Since 2002, when the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea was signed, ASEAN has continued to pursue a binding COC in the South China Sea with China.<sup>98</sup> Yang notes that "the COC process is part of the efforts of the parties involved to establish a rules-based order in the SCS."<sup>99</sup> On April 2, 2013, China announced its intent to begin discussions with ASEAN regarding a COC later that year.<sup>100</sup> On April 11, Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert Rosario reaffirmed support for the COC during the 46<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Ministerial Meeting. In September 2013, ASEAN and China began the first round of formal consultations on the COC.<sup>101</sup>

One indication of accommodation that was influenced by the COC consultations was the reluctance to deploy additional military or law enforcement assets to counter Chinese coercion when they were first observed in the area. Though the Philippine military was put on alert and increased patrols to verify the identification of Chinese vessels on May 8, 2013, President Aquino limited the role of military assets to air monitoring only and had no further intentions to send additional ships to the shoal despite growing concerns.<sup>102</sup> Explaining the decision, Deputy presidential spokesperson Abigail Valte stated that the decision was a "deliberate" decision as part of the Philippines' "peaceful

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<sup>98</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, "ASEAN, China and the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea," *SAIS Review* 33, no. 2 (Summer-Fall 2013): 76, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26995402>.

<sup>99</sup> Li Yang, "China's Security Interests and Strategies in the South China Sea: Cross-National Perspectives," in *Security, Strategy, and Military Dynamics in the South China Sea*, ed. Gordon Houlden, Scott N. Romaniuk, and Nong Hong (United Kingdom: Bristol University Press, 2021), 74.

<sup>100</sup> Thayer, "ASEAN, China and the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea," 80.

<sup>101</sup> Thayer, 82.

<sup>102</sup> Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 176.

path” to resolve the dispute through a “rules-based approach” to avoid escalation with China.<sup>103</sup> However, on July 11, 2013, Lieutenant General Rustico Guerrero of Western Command noted that Chinese patrol vessels were becoming more “dynamic,” but affirmed that the two countries were only engaged in mutual “monitoring” as opposed to a “standoff.”<sup>104</sup> The following month, in August, China became more assertive around the shoal and General Bautista provided an update by stating that there were now two to five PLA Navy, China Coast Guard, and civilian fishing vessels operating within two to five miles from the shoal. Despite growing concerns, the Philippines maintained a non-confrontational posture until March 9, 2014, when China harassed two supply vessels.

### **3. Behavior Assessment**

The Second Thomas Shoal incident shows an overall response of resistance through its deployment and continuous presence of military personnel onboard the *Sierra Madre* to defend Philippine claims, issuance of diplomatic statements against Chinese actions, and call for U.S. diplomatic support when the incident occurred. These responses were influenced by a strong Philippine policy to protect territorial claims, strong U.S. alliance, and relatively weak Chinese military capabilities that would limit escalation in territorial disputes. Although the Philippines exhibited resistance behavior during the incident itself, the Philippines demonstrated accommodating behavior in the months leading up to the incident by not deploying additional military or law enforcement assets to the area when a growing Chinese presence was first observed in the area. This accommodating response of non-confrontation was influenced by diplomatic pressure created by the COC consultations that were being held between ASEAN and China during the same period. Although the Philippines exhibited elements of accommodation prior to the incident by ignoring an increased Chinese presence beginning in May 2013, these accommodating actions did not actually occur during the March 2014 harassment incident of Philippine supply vessels. Taking into account the single aspect of accommodating behavior that was observed, resistance is still the most appropriate classification to describe the behavior that the

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<sup>103</sup> Green et al., 176.

<sup>104</sup> Green et al., 180.

Philippines exhibited during the Second Thomas Shoal incident of 2014 because the accommodating behavior occurred several months prior to the actual event.

### C. CONCLUSION

Analyzing the Scarborough Shoal incident of 2012 and Second Thomas Shoal incident of 2014, both incidents demonstrated an overall response of resistance against Chinese coercion. However, each incident displayed some aspects of accommodation. In both incidents, three similar factors were identified that influenced resistant behavior: first, strong policies to protect territorial claims; second, strong U.S. alliance; third, weak Chinese military capabilities. On the other hand, one dissimilar factor was observed in each respective case that influenced accommodating behaviors: economic interests in the Scarborough Shoal incident and diplomatic interests in the Second Thomas Shoal incident.

In the Scarborough Shoal incident, a strong policy to protect territorial claims led the Philippines to resist by deploying a navy ship and law enforcement vessels to the incident site. This policy influenced the Philippines to resist by making diplomatic statements to denounce Chinese coercion and announcing its intent to pursue international arbitration. Second, the strong alliance with the U.S. led the Philippines to resist by calling for diplomatic support. In response, the U.S. reaffirmed the MDT and facilitated back-channel negotiations to resolve the dispute. Third, weak Chinese military capabilities in air strike operations at the time of the incident influenced the Philippines to resist. However, economic interests persuaded the Philippines to accommodate by pursuing joint exploration projects after China quarantined Philippine fruit.

In the Second Thomas Shoal incident, strong policies to protect territorial claims led the Philippines to maintain a continuous military presence on the shoal. Additionally, the policy influenced the Philippines to issue diplomatic statements that challenged Chinese coercion. Some of these statements included the announcement that *Sierra Madre* was a permanent settlement as well as the Philippines' submitting a Memorial to the arbitral. Second, the strong U.S. alliance led the Philippines to resist by calling for diplomatic support. The U.S. provided public statements that denounced Chinese actions, affirmed *Sierra Madre's* status as a permanent outpost, and provided air surveillance

support. Third, the weak military capabilities of China at the time also influenced the Philippines to resist as China did not have optimal air strike capabilities. Though the three factors led to an overall response of resistance, a fourth factor of diplomatic interests led to an accommodating response prior to the incident. With the COC consultations occurring between ASEAN and China in 2013, the Philippines avoided the deployment of additional military or law enforcement assets when Chinese vessels were first observed near the shoal in order to maintain a rules-based order.

Presenting evidence from the Scarborough Shoal incident of 2012 and Second Thomas Shoal incident of 2014, the incidents share three common factors that led to resistance behavior. First, the Aquino administration's strong policy to protect Philippine territorial claims. This policy influenced several common responses to resist such as diplomatic protests and statements that denounced coercion, as well as the use of military assets to protect the respective claims. Second, the strong U.S.-Philippine alliance also influenced resistance behavior as the Philippines called for U.S. assistance in both cases. The U.S. had a common response in both incidents by issuing public statements that denounced Chinese coercion and favored the Philippine positions. Third, Chinese military capabilities in areas such as air strike operations at the time of both incidents were still relatively weak. In summary, the incidents occurred during a period when the Aquino administration stressed a policy to protect territorial claims, the Philippines had an increasingly strong alliance with the U.S., and when China had weaker military capabilities to assert its position in the SCS. Comparing the drivers, the hypothesis that the Philippines is more likely to resist when the U.S. alliance is strong and Chinese capabilities are low remain valid in both case studies within the Aquino administration.

### **III. PHILIPPINE BEHAVIOR IN THE DUTERTE ADMINISTRATION (2016–PRESENT): THITU ISLAND INCIDENT (2018–2020)**

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the causes of Philippine behavior in the 2018–2020 Thitu Island incident that occurred in the South China Sea (SCS) during the Duterte administration. This chapter demonstrates that, from a big picture perspective, when a weak U.S. alliance is strengthened against strong Chinese military capabilities, Philippine leadership is more likely to resist Chinese coercion in South China Sea disputes. Because China has stronger military capabilities than the Philippines, high trust in the U.S. alliance provides the Philippines with the confidence that it will receive support and backing to counter escalatory actions by China. However, due to China's strong military capabilities, the Philippines are also more likely limit resistance behavior. The dynamic relationship between the strength of China's military and the U.S.-Philippine alliance, combined with a foreign policy that prioritizes the protection of territorial claims as well as changing political interests, influence the level of resistance that the Philippines will exhibit. On the other hand, other factors such as economic and diplomatic interests influence accommodating behavior. This chapter assesses how these broad drivers influenced Philippine behavior during this particular incident during the Duterte administration.

In the 2018–2020 Thitu Island incident, six factors influenced Philippine behavior. The Philippines exhibited ambivalent behavior due to an even split between three factors that promoted resistance and three factors that favored accommodation. While the Philippines' policy to protect territorial claims, increased trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance, and domestic political interests were three factors that prompted the Philippines to push back against Chinese coercion, other factors such as China's strong military capabilities, economic interests, and bilateral diplomatic interests influenced the Philippines to engage in accommodating behavior. First, a policy to protect territorial claims and resources influenced initial resistance behavior, which included the continuous rotation of military personnel on the feature, the deployment of a navy frigate to monitor

the developing situation, and continued efforts to upgrade infrastructure on the feature despite China's efforts to deter the Philippines from doing so. Second, increased trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance later influenced the Philippines to resist in the form of diplomatic protests and statements after the United States clarified defense commitments in March 2019—three months after the incident began. Third, political interests in the form of changing public opinion against Chinese actions in the SCS influenced the Philippines to resist by continuing infrastructure upgrades and issuing diplomatic statements that denounced coercion prior to the 2019 midterm elections. Fourth, China's stronger military capabilities in areas such as air strike capabilities, facilitated by China's militarization of SCS features between 2013 and 2017, influenced the Philippines to accommodate by avoiding the deployment of additional military assets to challenge the growing Chinese threat. Fifth, Philippine economic interests in Chinese investment projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) influenced accommodating behavior, which was demonstrated by the Philippines' initial restraint to publicize the incident. Finally, diplomatic interests in the bilateral consultative mechanism (BCM) were also an underlying factor that influenced the Philippines to minimize publicity of the incident. While the case study shows an even split among factors, the chapter determines that overall Philippine behavior during this incident is best classified as accommodation due to the heavy influence of two factors—the low level of trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance and the strength of China's military capabilities.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section provides a historical overview of the area and a brief description of the events leading up to the incident that includes China's initial actions, as well as the Philippine response immediately afterward. The second section consists of the underlying drivers and the responses that were influenced by them. In the third section, the chapter conducts a behavioral assessment to determine the best response classification of the incident and concludes by assessing the validity of the hypotheses.



## A. OVERVIEW AND DESCRIPTION

Thitu Island, also known as Pag-Asa, is the largest of nine features controlled by the Philippines in the Spratly Islands.<sup>105</sup> Situated 527 kilometers from the nearest major Philippine island of Puerto Princesa, the Philippines' interest in Thitu Island goes back to 1956 when Filipino explorer Tomas Cloma claimed 33 maritime features in an effort to create an independent micro-nation with its own flag. However, his endeavor began to crumble when the Philippines took increased interest of the area after oil exploration began in 1970 off the coast of Palawan. In October 1974, Cloma was arrested and sold his maritime "rights" to the Philippine government for a single peso.<sup>106</sup> Four years later, President Ferdinand Marcos issued Presidential Decree 1596 in June 1978 to officially incorporate the islands as a municipality of Palawan. Under this municipality, Thitu Island is home to a population of 120 Filipino civilians as well as a small military garrison and an airfield. Because Thitu Island is located on Palawan's extended continental shelf, the Philippines asserts its claim based on the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Article 77 of Part VI provides a coastal state with exclusive exploration and exploitation rights of natural resources within its continental shelf.<sup>107</sup> China, on the other hand, asserts that it has sovereignty over the entire Spratly Island chain based on "historic rights"—despite the Permanent Court of Arbitration invalidating its claim in July 2016.<sup>108</sup>

Similar to Second Thomas Shoal, which was discussed in Chapter II, outpost construction has been conducted by multiple countries for several decades to assert claims in the Spratly Islands. Specifically, airfield construction is one aspect of these developments and underlies the events leading up to the Thitu Island incident. Building a 1,300-meter runway on Thitu Island in the 1970s, the Philippines became the first claimant

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<sup>105</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, 259–61.

<sup>106</sup> Strangio, 261.

<sup>107</sup> Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea, "United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982," *Oceans and Law of the Sea*, 2001, [https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention\\_agreements/texts/unclos/UNCLOS-TOC.htm](https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/UNCLOS-TOC.htm).

<sup>108</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, 261.

to establish an airfield in the Spratly Islands.<sup>109</sup> However, the airfield has decayed and lagged in development since its original construction. The runway remained unpaved, and its length was shortened after the western end suffered from a collapse.<sup>110</sup> With only 850 meters of usable runway, the grassy airfield makes it difficult for large military aircraft to operate.<sup>111</sup> Though the Philippines recognized the need to repair the airfield and other infrastructure, major repairs were suspended for several years and put on hold during the Aquino administration to avoid upsetting SCS claimants. However, in light of the favorable arbitral ruling of 2016, the Philippines made the decision to proceed with upgrade plans. Announcing its intent to upgrade infrastructure on Thitu Island in April 2017, the Philippines committed 1.6 billion pesos, or \$32 million, for improvements.<sup>112</sup>

Moving ahead to the 2018–2020 Thitu Island case study, China deployed numerous militia vessels in reaction to Philippine upgrade activities in December 2018.<sup>113</sup> Specifically, the Philippines began construction on a beaching ramp to facilitate the delivery of materials and equipment for infrastructure improvements including the runway.<sup>114</sup> In reaction, China deployed several PLAN and CCG ships, as well as dozens of fishing vessels, from nearby Subi Reef. The number of vessels drastically increased from at least 24 just prior to construction activities on December 3, to 95 by December 20. In its initial response to China’s actions, the Philippine military deployed a navy ship to monitor

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<sup>109</sup> “Airpower in the South China Sea,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, July 29, 2015, <https://amti.csis.org/airstrips-scs/>.

<sup>110</sup> “Philippines Launches Spratly Runway Repairs,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, May 25, 2018, <https://amti.csis.org/philippines-launches-spratly-repairs/>.

<sup>111</sup> Frances Mangosing, “Pag-Asa Gets Upgrade amid China Objection,” *Inquirer.net*, June 13, 2020, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/188510/pag-asa-gets-upgrade-amid-china-objection>.

<sup>112</sup> Ronn Bautista, “In Shadow of China’s Reef City, Philippines Seeks Upgrade for Its Island Patriots,” *Reuters*, April 21, 2017, sec. Aerospace and Defense, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-philippines-idUSKBN17N1ZH>.

<sup>113</sup> “The Long Patrol: Staredown at Thitu Island Enters Its Sixteenth Month,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, March 5, 2020, <https://amti.csis.org/the-long-patrol-staredown-at-thitu-island-enters-its-sixteenth-month/>.

<sup>114</sup> “Under Pressure: Philippine Construction Provokes a Paramilitary Response,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, February 6, 2019, <https://amti.csis.org/under-pressure-philippine-construction-paramilitary-response/>.

the situation and continued reclamation work.<sup>115</sup> Approximately one month later, in January 2019, the number of Chinese vessels dropped after their actions appeared to have failed to deter the Philippines from conducting construction activities.<sup>116</sup> On February 4, 2019, Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana announced that the beaching ramp would be completed in early 2019.<sup>117</sup> After the announcement, another spike in the number of Chinese vessels occurred in February.<sup>118</sup> Responding to China's sustained presence again, the Philippines initiated diplomatic protests and statements against Chinese coercion beginning in April 2019.<sup>119</sup> These events would mark the beginning of the incident as China maintained a near-constant and fluctuating presence around Thitu Island while the Philippines conducted upgrades.<sup>120</sup> Over 450 days later, the incident ended in March 2020 after a majority of Chinese vessels withdrew from the area with only six remaining. The Philippines eventually completed and inaugurated the beaching ramp on June 9, 2020.<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, in May 2021, the Philippines announced that Thitu Island would be transformed into a logistics hub to improve law enforcement capabilities and strengthen its presence in the area.<sup>122</sup>

## **B. DRIVERS OF RESPONSE**

### **1. Policy to Protect Territorial Claims**

One factor that influenced the Philippines' behavior to resist during this incident was the Duterte administration's policy to protect Philippine territorial claims. In his third State of the Nation Address on July 23, 2018, five months prior to the incident, President

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<sup>115</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

<sup>116</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

<sup>117</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

<sup>118</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "The Long Patrol."

<sup>119</sup> Brad Lendon, "Philippines Protests Hundreds of Chinese Ships around Disputed Island," CNN, April 1, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/01/asia/philippines-china-ships-spratly-island-intl/index.html>.

<sup>120</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "The Long Patrol."

<sup>121</sup> Frances Mangosing, "Holding Ground, Building Hope on Pag-Asa Island," *Inquirer.net*, June 12, 2020, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/188410/holding-ground-building-hope-on-pag-asa-island>.

<sup>122</sup> Paul John Cana, "Military Planning to Expand Spratlys Island Base in Move vs. China," *Esquire*, May 16, 2021, <https://www.esquiremag.ph/politics/news/pagasa-island-logistics-base-a00289-20210516>.

Duterte emphasized this policy while simultaneously highlighting better relations with China.<sup>123</sup> During his speech, he stated that “our improved relationship with China, however, does not mean that we will waver in our commitment to defend our interests in the West Philippine Sea.”<sup>124</sup> During the incident itself, President Duterte affirmed this position and directly referenced Thitu Island in a speech presented on April 4, 2019.<sup>125</sup> In his speech, President Duterte cautioned China to “layoff the Pag-asa” and asserted that soldiers would “prepare for suicide missions.”<sup>126</sup> Both statements emphasize the Philippines’ policy to protect Philippine interests and claims against Chinese coercion prior to, and during, the Thitu Island incident.

The first indication of resistance that was influenced by the administration’s policy to protect claims was the presence of military assets to Thitu Island. In addition to its civilian population, Thitu Island supports approximately 50 Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) personnel.<sup>127</sup> Maintaining a continuous military presence, the Philippine Air Force and Navy rotate troops every three to six months.<sup>128</sup> Additionally, when the incident began in December, the Philippine Navy deployed a frigate to monitor the developing situation.<sup>129</sup> On December 20, the day in which the number of observed Chinese vessels peaked, the BRP *Ramon Alcaraz* was observed near Thitu Island approximately seven nautical miles from a PLAN Jianghu V-class frigate.

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<sup>123</sup> Rodrigo Roa Duterte, “Rodrigo Roa Duterte, Third State of the Nation Address, July 23, 2018,” *Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines*, July 23, 2018, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2018/07/23/rodrigo-roa-duterte-third-state-of-the-nation-address-july-23-2018/>.

<sup>124</sup> Duterte.

<sup>125</sup> Rodrigo Roa Duterte, “Speech of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte during the Partido Demokratiko Pilipino-Lakas Ng Bayan (PDP-Laban) Campaign Rally in Puerto Princesa,” Republic of the Philippines Presidential Communications Operations Office, April 4, 2019, <https://mirror.pcoo.gov.ph/presidential-speech/speech-of-president-rodrigo-roa-duterte-during-the-partido-demokratiko-pilipino-lakas-ng-bayan-pdp-laban-campaign-rally-in-puerto-princesa/>.

<sup>126</sup> Duterte.

<sup>127</sup> Carl Thayer, “What If China Did Invade Pag-Asa Island?,” *The Diplomat*, January 16, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/01/what-if-china-did-invade-pag-asa-island/>.

<sup>128</sup> Mangosing, “Holding Ground, Building Hope on Pag-Asa Island.”

<sup>129</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, “Under Pressure.”

A second indication of resistance that was influenced by the Philippines' policy to protect claims was its continued endeavor to upgrade infrastructure and announcement of further plans to expand Thitu Island into a logistics hub. Despite China using a "cabbage strategy" of anchoring numerous fishing boats as close as two nautical miles from the island while positioning naval and coast guard vessels slightly farther away, satellite imagery from December 13 and 14, 2018 shows a Philippine barge depositing and grading sand as part of construction efforts for the beaching ramp.<sup>130</sup> The following month, in January 2019, reclamation activities became "more ambitious" as excavators deposited approximately eight acres of sand.<sup>131</sup> Commenting on the Philippines' persistence in completing the work, AMTI notes that "Manila appears intent on upgrading its facilities in the Spratlys" and also comments that China's "initial large deployment failed to convince Manila to halt construction."<sup>132</sup> Emphasizing this view in May 2021 after announcing the Philippines' intent to expand the island further into a logistics and resupply base, Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana stated that "while we acknowledge that China's military capability is more advanced than ours, this does not deter us from defending our national interest, and our dignity as a people, with all that we have."<sup>133</sup>

## **2. U.S. Alliance**

Another factor that influenced Philippine behavior was the U.S.-Philippine alliance immediately leading up to, and during, the incident. Since his election, President Duterte questioned the ambiguous policy of the 1951 MDT and criticized limited U.S. actions in past disputes such as the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident.<sup>134</sup> This distrust was an underlying reason for his announcement in 2016 of a "separation" from the United

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<sup>130</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

<sup>131</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

<sup>132</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

<sup>133</sup> The Maritime Executive, "To Counter China, Philippines Plans Bigger Base in Spratly Islands," The Maritime Executive, accessed January 9, 2022, <https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/to-counter-china-philippines-plans-bigger-base-in-spratly-islands>.

<sup>134</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, 255–56.

States.<sup>135</sup> Reflecting this concern during a press briefing in December 2018, the same month in which the Thitu incident began, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana stated that “it is time to sit down with our U.S. counterparts and revisit the terms of our alliance. We are partners. We have deep historical ties. We must clearly define our roles and responsibilities when the need arises to be joined in arms.”<sup>136</sup>

Although President Duterte was vocal in his distrust of the United States, there was strong institutionalized support within the Philippine government that remained in favor of the continued alliance with the U.S.<sup>137</sup> Winger notes that “this embedded support within the AFP, the Department of National Defense, the Department of Foreign Affairs and even the Malacanang Palace itself that would demonstrate striking resilience despite the presidential onslaught.”<sup>138</sup> Emphasizing the point, Strangio also notes that, “whatever its reservations about the lack of clarity in the U.S. alliance, they still saw Washington as their nation’s surest strategic insurance policy in an age of rising power.”<sup>139</sup> The annual Balikatan bilateral exercise is one example that illustrates continued military partnerships. During the May 2018 exercise held seven months prior to the incident, live-fire drills, close air support operations, amphibious raids, and other types of tactical training were conducted.<sup>140</sup> As De Castro notes, “these exercises activities were designed to strengthen the Philippine-U.S. security alliance and ensure a more effective combined response in future combat operation.”<sup>141</sup>

The return of the Balangiga Bells to the Philippines from the United States in December 2018 also illustrates that favorable diplomatic relations were maintained in the

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<sup>135</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, “From Appeasement to Soft Balancing: The Duterte Administration’s Shifting Policy on the South China Sea Imbroglio,” *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, September 10, 2020, 12–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00927678.2020.1818910>.

<sup>136</sup> De Castro, 12–13.

<sup>137</sup> Gregory Winger, “Alliance Embeddedness: Rodrigo Duterte and the Resilience of the US–Philippine Alliance,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 17, no. 3 (April 4, 2021): 8–9, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orab013>.

<sup>138</sup> Winger, 9.

<sup>139</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon’s Shadow*, 265.

<sup>140</sup> De Castro, “From Appeasement to Soft Balancing,” 12.

<sup>141</sup> De Castro, 12.

same month that the incident began. During the Philippine-American War, in September 1901, Filipino guerilla forces used three church bells in the small town of Balangiga to signal an attack on American troops occupying the area.<sup>142</sup> After an estimated 44–48 American soldiers were killed and dozens more injured, the 11<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment launched a retaliatory campaign in which they seized the bells as “war trophies” that were later displayed as U.S. war memorials.<sup>143</sup> However, the Philippines viewed the bells as symbols of national pride and has since requested their return.<sup>144</sup> On December 11, 2018, after more than a century, the bells were finally returned to Philippine soil. In a statement released by the U.S. Embassy in the Philippines, U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines Sung Kim stated that “their return underscores the enduring friendship, partnership, and alliance between our countries.”<sup>145</sup>

Further reinforcing Philippine ties, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo addressed President Duterte’s concerns in a statement released on March 1, 2019, three months after the incident began.<sup>146</sup> In his statement, he assured the Philippines that “any armed attack on Philippine forces, aircraft, or public vessels in the South China Sea will trigger mutual defense obligations under Article 4 of our Mutual Defense Treaty.”<sup>147</sup> Verbalizing increased confidence in the alliance during a press conference on the same day, Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin remarked that, “we are very assured. We are very confident that the United States has, in the words of Secretary Pompeo and the words of President Trump to our president, we have your back.”<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Barbara Salazar Torreon and Scott D. Szymendera, “The Return of the Bells of Balangiga to the Republic of the Philippines, in Context,” In Focus (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, December 11, 2018), 1, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10990/4>.

<sup>143</sup> Torreon and Szymendera, 1.

<sup>144</sup> The Associated Press, “U.S. Returns Church Bells Seized from Philippines as War Trophies,” NBC News, December 11, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/bells-balangiga-are-returned-philippines-after-more-century-n946346>.

<sup>145</sup> The Associated Press.

<sup>146</sup> Pompeo, “Remarks with Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin, Jr. at a Press Availability.”

<sup>147</sup> Pompeo.

<sup>148</sup> Pompeo.

One indication of resistance influenced by the newly strengthened allied relationship was the issuance of diplomatic protests and statements that denounced Chinese coercion. On April 1, 2019, one month after Secretary Pompeo's statement, Presidential Spokesperson Salvador Panelo announced that the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) filed a diplomatic protest against China and stated that "anything that concerns the security of the Philippines will always be a concern."<sup>149</sup> On April 9, 2019, Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin remarked that he had "no fear of war" because "one attack on a public vessel triggers World War 3 with the USofA which is impervious to attack from Asia."<sup>150</sup> Making further remarks on April 10, Panelo stated that "while we remain friendly with respect to trade relations, we will always assert sovereignty when it is being impaired or assaulted."<sup>151</sup> More recently, after filing its 100<sup>th</sup> diplomatic protest on May 28, 2021, the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs decried China's "incessant deployment, prolonged presence, and illegal activities," and asserted that Thitu Island is an "integral part of the Philippines over which it has sovereignty and jurisdiction."<sup>152</sup>

### **3. Political Interests**

Another factor that influenced and contributed to the resistance behavior described in previous paragraphs was political pressure to take a stronger stance against China after the incident began. Initially, President Duterte's friendlier policy toward China was supported by a majority of the public. In a 2017 survey, almost seven out of ten Filipinos

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<sup>149</sup> Jim Gomez, "Philippines Protests 'Swarming' of Chinese Boats near Island," ABC News, April 1, 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/philippines-protests-swarming-chinese-boats-island-62085698>.

<sup>150</sup> CNN Philippines Staff, "DFA Chief Not Afraid of War, Says China Took What Is Ours," CNN Philippines, April 10, 2019, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2019/4/10/dfa-locsin-china-west-philippine-sea.html>.

<sup>151</sup> Nestor Corrales, "Palace to Chinese Vessels near PH-Occupied Kota Island: Go Away," Inquirer.net, April 10, 2019, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/174314/palace-to-chinese-vessels-near-ph-occupied-kota-island-go-away>.

<sup>152</sup> Tina G. Santos, "PH Has Lodged 100 Protests vs China," INQUIRER.net, May 31, 2021, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/196635/ph-has-lodged-100-protests-vs-china>.



avored stronger economic relations with China.<sup>153</sup> However, Heydarian notes that public policy was beginning to change as Duterte’s policy “seems to have only whet Beijing’s territorial appetite and maritime expansion” and comments that the president “was under increasing pressure to take a tougher stance in the South China Sea.”<sup>154</sup> Referencing a survey conducted by Social Weather Stations in November 2018, one month prior to the incident, Tran remarks that 84 percent of respondents said that “the government’s inaction with regard to China’s infrastructure and military presence in the claimed territories was not right.”<sup>155</sup> Additionally, polls conducted by Social Weather Stations during the May 2019 mid-term elections reinforced changing political by showing that 87 percent of respondents believed that the Philippines should assert its legal right to disputed islands.<sup>156</sup>

#### 4. China’s Military Capabilities

A third factor that influenced the Philippine behavior was China’s military capabilities at the time of the incident. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Biddle and Oelrich discuss air strikes as one strategy that China could pursue in order to obtain disputed claims from rivals.<sup>157</sup> After completing significant reclamation work in the Spratly Islands in 2016, China improved air strike capabilities by building runways on Fiery Cross Reef, Mischief Reef, and Subi Reef.<sup>158</sup> Of particular concern to the Philippines, Subi Reef is located only 14 miles away from Thitu Island and consists of a 3,000-meter runway capable of handling large bomber aircraft as well as hangars for jet aircraft.<sup>159</sup> Operating from one of these outposts, a J-15 fighter aircraft with the support of a KJ-500 airborne early warning and control (AEW&C) aircraft could strike up to 550

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<sup>153</sup> Richard Javad Heydarian, “Duterte’s Scarborough Shoal Moment,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, April 18, 2019, <https://amti.csis.org/dutertes-scarborough-shoal-moment/>.

<sup>154</sup> Heydarian.

<sup>155</sup> Bich T. Tran, “Presidential Turnover and Discontinuity in the Philippines’ China Policy,” *Asian Perspective* 43, no. 4 (Fall 2019): 637, <https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2019.0026>.

<sup>156</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon’s Shadow*, 267.

<sup>157</sup> Biddle and Oelrich, “Future Warfare in the Western Pacific,” 15–16.

<sup>158</sup> “A Constructive Year for Chinese Base Building,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, December 14, 2017, <https://amti.csis.org/constructive-year-chinese-building/>.

<sup>159</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon’s Shadow*, 259–60.

nautical miles without naval support.<sup>160</sup> Additionally, China has increased the use of its maritime militia in the last decade to coerce claimants and assert control of its neighbors EEZs.<sup>161</sup> Heydarian describes the maritime militia as “paramilitary forces which blatantly displays its ‘grey zone’ capacity to swarm, surround and suffocate Philippine supply lines in the area.”<sup>162</sup>

One indication of accommodation that was influenced by China’s strong military was the reluctance to deploy additional military or law enforcement assets beyond the single naval vessel that was observed “monitoring” the situation.<sup>163</sup> Commenting on China’s strong military capabilities during the incident, President Duterte noted that the Philippines’ defense capabilities were severely outmatched.<sup>164</sup> Remarking on the Philippines’ inability to challenge China by force on April 4, 2019, President Duterte asked rhetorically, “we drive them away by force, can we do that? Unless we want to commit suicide.”<sup>165</sup> Explaining further, President Duterte stated that “if we go to war, the first step of China will be to launch its missiles. In seven minutes it will arrive in Manila” and further added that “we would never win and I would suffer beyond imagination.”<sup>166</sup> Recognizing this limitation against China’s strong military, he stated that the Philippines had no choice except to find a “compromise” with China.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, “By Air, Land, And Sea.”

<sup>161</sup> Gregory B. Poling, Tabitha Grace Mallory, and Harrison Prétat, “Pulling Back the Curtain on China’s Maritime Militia” (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, November 2021), 13, <https://amti.csis.org/pulling-back-the-curtain-on-chinas-maritime-militia/>.

<sup>162</sup> Heydarian, “Duterte’s Scarborough Shoal Moment.”

<sup>163</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, “Under Pressure.”

<sup>164</sup> Shane Frances C. Montecillo, “Duterte: Philippine Military Defense No Match vs China,” *Inquirer.net*, April 5, 2019, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/174149/duterte-philippine-military-defense-no-match-vs-china>.

<sup>165</sup> Montecillo.

<sup>166</sup> Montecillo.

<sup>167</sup> Montecillo.

## 5. Economic Interests

Another factor that influenced Philippine behavior involved economic interests between the two countries. In late 2016, shortly after coming into office, the Duterte administration observed how China built and financed infrastructure projects in poor regions of Southeast Asia.<sup>168</sup> Seeking support for his own “Build Build Build” infrastructure program that was estimated to cost \$160-180 billion, President Duterte went to China three months into his presidency and secured \$24 billion in financing, loans, and investments.<sup>169</sup> Additionally, in May 2017, Duterte and his cabinet visited Beijing to participate in the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. Moving forward to November 2018, one month prior to the incident, President Xi Jinping illustrated this favorable relationship as he became the first Chinese leader in 13 years to visit Manila.<sup>170</sup> During the visit, both leaders signed 29 economic agreements that covered projects such as industrial development as well as joint oil and gas exploration in the SCS. Also, just prior to the incident, Manila signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on joint exploration for oil and gas in October 2018.<sup>171</sup> Commenting on the overall period from mid-2016 to mid-2019, Baviera and Arugay note that “there was marked improvement in overall bilateral relations, during which the flow of Chinese trade, investments, and tourists grew.”<sup>172</sup> Foreshadowing the negative implications of these economic ties, however, De Castro remarks that President Duterte softened his stance in the SCS because he was

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<sup>168</sup> De Castro, “From Appeasement to Soft Balancing,” 5–7.

<sup>169</sup> Baviera and Arugay, “The Philippines’ Shifting Engagement with China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” 278.

<sup>170</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon’s Shadow*, 265.

<sup>171</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, “The South China Sea in 2020: What to Watch,” *The Diplomat* (Tokyo, United States: Tribune Content Agency LLC, April 16, 2020), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2390188910/abstract/E7677648643541FCPQ/1>.

<sup>172</sup> Baviera and Arugay, “The Philippines’ Shifting Engagement with China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” 278.

“fearful that strained relations with China would deprive the country of Chinese economic largess.”<sup>173</sup>

One indication of accommodation that was influenced by economic interests was the initial restraint of the Duterte administration to publicize the incident. Strangio notes that, since taking office, the Duterte administration placed tighter controls on information regarding SCS incidents and became “very careful in terms of messaging.”<sup>174</sup> When a local Palawan newspaper reported in February 2019 that Philippine fishing vessels were allegedly being blocked, the head of the Philippine armed forces’ Western Command Vice Admiral Rene Medina denied it.<sup>175</sup> Although the incident began in December 2018, the AFP did not publicly acknowledge that it was monitoring Chinese vessels until April 2019.<sup>176</sup> A few weeks afterward, President Duterte went back to China for the second Belt and Road Forum—where he obtained more infrastructure funding commitments.<sup>177</sup> Explaining these “zigzagging” actions, Strangio remarks that the Duterte administration seeks to “preserve sovereignty over the Philippines’ island possessions, while cultivating China for badly needed infrastructure funding.”<sup>178</sup>

## 6. Diplomatic Interests

Another factor that influenced accommodating behavior in the Philippines prior to the December 2018 Thitu Island incident was a shift in diplomatic relations facilitated by the BCM. A product of the favorable relationship with China, the BCM provides the two countries with a platform exchange views directly with each other on SCS issues and

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<sup>173</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, “The Limits of Intergovernmentalism: The Philippines’ Changing Strategy in the South China Sea Dispute and Its Impact on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN),” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 39, no. 3 (December 1, 2020): 346, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103420935562>.

<sup>174</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon’s Shadow*, 263.

<sup>175</sup> Strangio, 263.

<sup>176</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, “The Long Patrol.”

<sup>177</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon’s Shadow*, 264.

<sup>178</sup> Strangio, 264.

confines their differences to the bilateral level.<sup>179</sup> Opposing multilateralism or internationalization of issues, China views the BCM as the most practical way of handling disputes directly with regional claimants without interference from extra-regional claimants such as the United States. In the two BCM meetings held prior to the incident, the first in May 2017 and the second in February 2018, the countries agreed on the BCM's terms and conditions which later progressed into "intensive discussions" on joint initiatives and other areas of cooperation.<sup>180</sup> Because the BCM emphasizes bilateral discussion, one indication of accommodation influenced by this form of diplomacy during the incident itself was the initial reluctance of the Philippines to publicize the dispute or condemn Chinese coercion. On a broader level, participation in the BCM highlights a forum for accommodation which illustrates how the Philippines is pursuing ways to work with, rather than against, China.

### **C. BEHAVIOR ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSION**

The Philippine response to the 2018–2020 Thitu Island incident included a mix of both resistance and accommodation. Three factors that influenced resistance included a policy to protect territorial claims, the level of trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance, and political interests leading up to the 2019 mid-term elections. On the other hand, three factors that influenced accommodation included China's strong military capabilities, economic interests in projects such as the BRI, and diplomatic interests in the BCM. Initial indications of resistance can be seen in the deployment and continuous presence of military personnel on the feature, the deployment of a navy frigate to the area, and the continuation of reclamation activities despite China's coercion attempts. These initial actions of resistance can be attributed to the Philippines' policy to protect its sovereignty and territorial claims. Additionally, the Philippines later resisted by issuing diplomatic protests and statements to denounce Chinese coercion. These forms of resistance, beginning in April 2019, were influenced by a strengthened U.S.-Philippine alliance in March 2019

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<sup>179</sup> Lye Liang Fook, "The China-Philippine Bilateral Consultative Mechanism on the South China Sea: Prospects and Challenges," *ISEAS Perspective* 2018, no. 14 (March 7, 2018): 2–4, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2018\\_14@50.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2018_14@50.pdf).

<sup>180</sup> Lye Liang Fook, 3.

when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo clarified defense commitment concerns. These forms of resistance also coincided with political interests caused by changing public opinion ahead of the May 2019 mid-term elections.

Although the Philippines showed forms of resistance, the Philippines also exhibited accommodating behavior that was influenced by China's strong military capabilities, economic interests, and diplomatic interests. One indication of accommodation was the reluctance of the Philippines to deploy additional military or law enforcement assets to challenge the increasing number of Chinese vessels in the area when the incident began. This behavior was influenced by the administration's fear of conflict due to China's stronger military capabilities. A second indication of accommodation was the administration's initial reluctance to publicize incident. This behavior was influenced by economic interests such as BRI as well as other underlying diplomatic interests such as the BCM which promoted a bilateral channel to manage the dispute.

While an equal number of factors influenced both types of responses, the overall classification of the incident is best classified as accommodation due to the heavy influence of two particular factors. First, China's strong military capabilities influenced President Duterte to publicly state that the Philippines must "compromise" with China, which was reflected in the reluctance to deploy additional military or law enforcement vessels to challenge the large presence of Chinese vessels.<sup>181</sup> Second, the role of the U.S.-Philippine alliance was highly influential as President Duterte's distrust of defense commitments at the beginning of the incident influenced the Philippines to restrain itself from issuing diplomatic protests and statements. Only after the United States clarified defense commitments in March 2019 did the Philippines implement these forms of resistance. These two factors strongly influenced accommodating behavior and limited the level of resistance the Philippines was willing to exert against Chinese coercion.

Summarizing the drivers highlighted in the hypotheses, the incident occurred during a period when the Duterte administration implemented a policy to protect territorial claims, China had stronger military capabilities to assert its position in the SCS, and when

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<sup>181</sup> Montecillo, "Duterte."

trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance grew stronger after the United States clarified defense commitments. Assessing the influence of each of these drivers, the Philippines showed a minimal level of resistance as part of its policy to protect claims, but ultimately accommodated China's presence due to stronger military capabilities that exceeded the level of confidence in the U.S.-Philippine alliance when the incident began. However, after confidence in the alliance grew, the Philippines demonstrated increased resistance against Chinese coercion. Assessing the overall classification of accommodation with the hypothesis, this case study demonstrates that the Philippines increased resistance when trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance was strengthened but still demonstrated aspects of accommodation when faced with strong Chinese military capabilities and other supplementary factors.

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#### **IV. PHILIPPINE BEHAVIOR IN THE DUTERTE ADMINISTRATION (2016–PRESENT): WHITSUN REEF INCIDENT (2021)**

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the causes of Philippine behavior in the 2021 Whitsun Reef incident that occurred in the South China Sea (SCS) during the Duterte administration. This chapter demonstrates that, from a big picture perspective, when the U.S. alliance is weak and Chinese military capabilities are strong, Philippine leadership is more likely to accommodate Chinese coercion in South China Sea disputes. Because China has stronger military capabilities than the Philippines, a weak U.S. alliance does not provide the Philippines with the confidence that it will receive support and backing to counter escalatory actions by China. Similarly, strong Chinese military capabilities will also likely limit the level of resistance that the Philippines does demonstrate. These relationship between these two drivers, combined with economic and diplomatic interests, create conditions for the Philippines to accommodate Chinese actions. On the other hand, other factors such as a policy to protect Philippine claims influence resistance behavior. This chapter will assess how these broad drivers influenced Philippine behavior during this particular incident during the Duterte administration.

In the 2021 Whitsun Reef incident, five factors influenced Philippine behavior. First, the Philippine policy to protect territorial claims influenced initial resistance behavior, which included the issuance of diplomatic protests and statements to denounce Chinese coercion, as well as the deployment of law enforcement vessels, navy vessels, and air force jet aircraft to patrol the area. Second, the president's distrust of the U.S.-Philippine alliance influenced both resistance and accommodating behavior as illustrated by the Philippines initially holding discussions with American officials to obtain diplomatic guidance and indirect military support from U.S. Navy vessels—but later publicly rejecting further assistance to remove Chinese vessels. Third, China's stronger and more assertive military capabilities observed in SCS ballistic missile tests, as well as the implementation of a new law that allowed the Chinese Coast Guard to fire on vessels, influenced the Philippines to concede fishing interests and the presence of Chinese vessels. Fourth,

diplomatic interests in the bilateral consultative mechanism (BCM) influenced the Philippines to accommodate later in the incident when President Duterte restricted his cabinet from publicly criticizing Chinese actions four days prior to the meeting. Fifth, economic interests such as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments continued to influence the Philippines to maintain favorable relations with China. While the case study shows that accommodating factors outnumber resistance factors, the chapter also shows the heavy influence of two accommodating factors—the level of trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance and the strength of China’s military capabilities. Taking these drivers into consideration, this section concludes that Philippine behavior during the 2021 Whitsun Reef incident is best classified as accommodation.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section provides a historical overview of the area and a brief description of the events leading up to the incident that includes China’s initial actions, as well as the Philippine response immediately afterward. The second section consists of the underlying drivers and the responses that were influenced by them. In the third section, the chapter conducts a behavioral assessment to determine the best response classification of the incident and concludes by assessing the validity of the hypotheses.

## **A. OVERVIEW AND DESCRIPTION**

Whitsun Reef, also known as Julian Felipe Reef by the Philippines, is located approximately 175 nautical miles west from Palawan in the northeast portion of Union Banks within the Spratly Islands.<sup>182</sup> Though the Philippines does not physically occupy the submerged atoll or other features in the immediate area, Whitsun Reef lays within the country’s EEZ and has served as traditional fishing grounds for generations.<sup>183</sup> With Whitsun Reef located within the Philippine EEZ, the country holds rights to resources

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<sup>182</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, “Duterte Rejects U.S. Assistance during Whitsun Reef Stand-Off,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, May 19, 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/duterte-rejects-u-s-assistance-during-whitsun-reef-stand-off/>.

<sup>183</sup> Lucio Blanco Pitlo III, “The Philippines and China Spar Anew,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, April 6, 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/the-philippines-and-china-spar-anew/>.

under international law and the 2016 Hague tribunal ruling.<sup>184</sup> However, as mentioned previously in other incidents, China lays claim to Whitsun Reef and other features within its nine-dash line which covers a majority of the SCS.<sup>185</sup> Vietnam is also a claimant to Union Banks and occupies several features in the area.

In addition to fishing resources, Whitsun Reef provides strategic value for claimants due to its location in the Spratly Islands.<sup>186</sup> The feature is important, as it has gradually “become” a new island for claimants to potentially occupy.<sup>187</sup> Though classified as a low-tide elevation in the mid-1990s, Whitsun Reef is now the site of a sand dune 100 meters long that continues to grow. These changes have been attributed to naturally shifting sediment caused by wind and waves over the last few decades. While previously only visible during low tide, the feature is now visible at high tide.<sup>188</sup> Describing the pursuit to occupy the feature, Vuving notes that claimants play “quiet cat-and-mouse games” in which one country attempts to gain a foothold while preventing others from doing the same.<sup>189</sup>

Assessing the 2021 Whitsun Reef incident, the case study begins in March 2021 when over 200 Chinese vessels were observed near the reef within the Philippine EEZ.<sup>190</sup> Though Chinese vessels maintained a steady militia presence since February 2020, the

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<sup>184</sup> CNN Philippines Staff, “Roque: Julian Felipe Reef Not within EEZ,” CNN Philippines, May 11, 2021, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/5/11/Roque--Julian-Felipe-Reef--never--in-PH-possession.html>.

<sup>185</sup> Nandni Mahajan, “Explained: Why Chinese Vessels in Whitsun Reef Has Philippines Scrambling ‘Sovereignty Patrols,’” *The Indian Express*, March 31, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/china-philippines-south-china-sea-dispute-explained-7252250/>.

<sup>186</sup> Alexander L. Vuving, “South China Sea: Who Occupies What in the Spratlys?,” *The Diplomat*, May 6, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/south-china-sea-who-claims-what-in-the-spratlys/>.

<sup>187</sup> Vuving.

<sup>188</sup> Christian Le Miere, “China’s Maritime Militia Underlines Its Control over South China Sea,” *South China Morning Post*, April 3, 2021, sec. Comment, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3127978/chinas-use-maritime-militia-demonstrates-its-control-over-south>.

<sup>189</sup> Vuving, “South China Sea.”

<sup>190</sup> Samir Puri and Greg Austin, “What the Whitsun Reef Incident Tells Us about China’s Future Operations at Sea,” International Institute for Strategic Studies, April 9, 2021, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/04/whitsun-reef-incident-china>.

number of vessels reported in March 2021 was larger than what had been observed in the past.<sup>191</sup> Noting the significance, Puri and Austin comment that the incident “is unprecedented in scale and notable for its duration: the largest number of Chinese fishing vessels gathered at any time at one Spratly reef, and staying there for several weeks.”<sup>192</sup> In its initial response, Philippine Coast Guard patrols sighted and reported the presence of the vessels as early as March 7.<sup>193</sup> The National Task Force on the West Philippine Sea (NTF-WPS) released photos and video of the Chinese vessels captured by the coast guard patrols in early March.<sup>194</sup> Additionally, Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana released a statement on March 20 in which he emphasized the Philippines’ readiness to defend its sovereignty and marine resources.<sup>195</sup> Furthermore, on March 21, Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro Locsin initiated a diplomatic protest against China regarding the presence of maritime militia vessels.

In a counter-response, China released a statement on March 22 in which it denied the presence of maritime militia vessels near the reef.<sup>196</sup> Explaining the large presence of vessels, China’s Foreign Ministry claimed that they were simply fishing boats taking shelter from a storm—despite photographs showing the boats operating in calm waters with little or no fishing equipment.<sup>197</sup> Regardless of intentions, the initial actions by China and the immediate Philippine response marked the beginning of the 2021 Whitsun Reef

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<sup>191</sup> “Caught on Camera: Two Dozen Militia Boats at Whitsun Reef Identified,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, April 21, 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/caught-on-camera-two-dozen-militia-boats-at-whitsun-reef-identified/>.

<sup>192</sup> Puri and Austin, “What the Whitsun Reef Incident Tells Us about China’s Future Operations at Sea.”

<sup>193</sup> De Castro, “Duterte Rejects U.S. Assistance during Whitsun Reef Stand-Off.”

<sup>194</sup> Poling, Mallory, and Prétat, “Pulling Back the Curtain on China’s Maritime Militia,” 44.

<sup>195</sup> De Castro, “Duterte Rejects U.S. Assistance during Whitsun Reef Stand-Off.”

<sup>196</sup> Christia Marie Ramos, “No Presence of Chinese Maritime Militia in WPS Reef,” *Inquirer.net*, March 22, 2021, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/194433/no-presence-of-chinese-maritime-militia-in-wps-reef-china-embassy>.

<sup>197</sup> Steven Stashwick, “Chinese Militia Vessels Departing Contested South China Sea Reef,” *The Diplomat*, April 15, 2021, <http://www.proquest.com/docview/2512684332?pq-origsite=primo>.

incident. The dispute would effectively end one month later after most of the Chinese vessels departed the area and moved to nearby Hughes Reef in April.<sup>198</sup>

## **B. DRIVERS OF RESPONSE**

### **1. Policy to Protect Territorial Claims**

One factor that influenced the Philippines' behavior during this incident was the Duterte administration's policy to protect Philippine territorial claims. In the State of the Nation Address on July 27, 2020, eight months prior to the incident, President Duterte stated that "we worked without fail to protect our rights in the South China Sea, neither beholden nor a pawn to anyone."<sup>199</sup> He points out that the Philippines expanded Philippine diplomacy, built productive ties, and redefined relationships with partners by "placing the country in a far better position to advance our interests."<sup>200</sup> Two months later, on September 22, 2020, he emphasized this policy when he affirmed the 2016 arbitral ruling in a speech delivered to the United Nations General Assembly.<sup>201</sup> Previously downplaying the Philippine victory since 2016, President Duterte changed his tone by saying "the award is now part of international law, beyond compromise and beyond the reach of passing governments to dilute, diminish, or abandon."<sup>202</sup> Illustrating this policy to protect claims during the incident itself, President Duterte stood firm during a meeting with Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines Huang Xilian in March 2021 by saying "we will protect our territory and we consider Julian Felipe Reef as part of our territory," and added that "we

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<sup>198</sup> Poling, Mallory, and Pr  tat, "Pulling Back the Curtain on China's Maritime Militia," 9.

<sup>199</sup> Rodrigo Roa Duterte, "Rodrigo Roa Duterte, Fifth State of the Nation Address, July 27, 2020," *Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines*, July 27, 2020, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2020/07/27/rodrigo-roa-duterte-fifth-state-of-the-nation-address-july-27-2020/>.

<sup>200</sup> Duterte.

<sup>201</sup> Sebastian Strangio, "In UN Speech, Duterte Stiffens Philippines' Stance on the South China Sea," *The Diplomat* (Tokyo, United States: Tribune Content Agency LLC, September 23, 2020), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2444765968/abstract/84241FB7929048E4PQ/1>.

<sup>202</sup> Rodrigo Roa Duterte, "Statement of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte during the General Debate of the 75th Session of the United Nations General Assembly," Republic of the Philippines Presidential Communications Operations Office, September 22, 2020, <https://pcoo.gov.ph/presidential-speech/statement-of-president-rodrigo-roa-duterte-during-the-general-debate-of-the-75th-session-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly/>.

stand by our arbitral victory, and we believe that the West Philippine Sea row should be resolved through the UNCLOS.”<sup>203</sup> These statements emphasize the Philippines’ policy to protect its claims and interests in the SCS prior to, and during, the Whitsun Reef incident.

The first indication of resistance that was influenced by the administration’s policy to protect claims was the deployment of law enforcement vessels and military assets to patrol the area around Whitsun Reef. On March 7, 2021, the Philippine Coast Guard conducted the first of three patrols to collect photos and video of the Chinese vessels.<sup>204</sup> Follow-on patrols, conducted by the Philippine Coast Guard ship *Cabra* from March 26 to March 27 and from April 12 to April 13, further documented and identified the Chinese vessels. Not only were the photos and videos captured by the three patrols used to identify the Chinese vessels, they were also used by the National Task Force on the West Philippine Sea (NTF-WPS) to publicize Chinese presence in a statement released two weeks later. Deploying military assets to Whitsun Reef, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) reported on March 22 that a fixed wing aircraft completed a patrol of the area.<sup>205</sup> Additionally, on March 25, the AFP announced that it was deploying Philippine Navy ships “to reassure our people of the AFP’s strong and unwavering commitment to protect and defend them from harassment.”<sup>206</sup> By March 28, Department of National Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana stated that, in addition to Philippine Navy and Coast Guard vessels being deployed in the area, daily flights of AS-211 jet aircraft were also being conducted.<sup>207</sup> Equipped with optical sights and a .50 caliber machine gun, the AS-211

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<sup>203</sup> CNN Philippines Staff, “Duterte Raises PH Arbitral Win in Dialogue with Chinese Envoy,” CNN Philippines, accessed January 17, 2022, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/3/25/Duterte-Huang-Xilian-West-Philippine-Sea-Julian-Felipe-Reef.html>.

<sup>204</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, “Caught on Camera.”

<sup>205</sup> Bea Bernardo, “AFP Awaits Reports on the Situation in Julian Felipe Reef,” PTV News, March 22, 2021, <https://ptvnews.ph/afp-awaits-reports-on-the-situation-in-julian-felipe-reef/>.

<sup>206</sup> Priam Nepomuceno, “AFP to Deploy More Navy Ships for WPS Patrols,” Republic of the Philippines Philippine News Agency, March 25, 2021, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1134832>.

<sup>207</sup> Priam Nepomuceno, “PH Ready to Defend Sovereignty, Marine Resources: Lorenzana,” Republic of the Philippines Philippine News Agency, March 28, 2021, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1135123>.

aircraft can serve in light fighter roles.<sup>208</sup> In the two and half months after the incident began, AMTI notes that the Philippines increased the level of military and law enforcement patrols in the SCS “beyond anything seen in recent years” which shows that “Manila is determined to assert its rights.”<sup>209</sup>

The second indication of resistance was the Philippines’ issuance of statements and diplomatic protests that asserted Philippine sovereignty as well as condemned Chinese coercion. The first public statement initiated by the Philippines was issued on March 20, 2021, by the NTF-WPS. In the press release, the NTF-WPS provided pictures of Chinese presence and expressed concerns of overfishing and destruction to the marine environment due to the 220 Chinese vessels moored in the area. Noting the Philippines’ exclusive right to exploit resources in the area, the statement asserted that “the government will continue to monitor the situation as it remains steadfast in its duty to protect Philippine sovereignty and sovereign rights in the country’s maritime domain.”<sup>210</sup> The following day, on March 21, Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin, Jr. initiated the first diplomatic protest and publicized the action on the social media platform, Twitter.<sup>211</sup> On the same day, Secretary of National Defense Delfin N. Lorenzana asserted that Whitsun Reef falls within the Philippine EEZ and continental shelf under international law as well as the 2016 arbitral ruling.<sup>212</sup> In his statement, he remarked that “we call on the Chinese to stop this incursion

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<sup>208</sup> The Maritime Executive, “Philippines Sends Fighters to Monitor China’s Maritime Militia Buildup,” The Maritime Executive, accessed January 21, 2022, <https://maritime-executive.com/article/philippines-sends-fighters-to-monitor-china-s-maritime-militia-buildup>.

<sup>209</sup> “Out in Force: Philippine South China Sea Patrols Are Way Up,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, May 26, 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/philippine-south-china-sea-patrols-are-way-up/>.

<sup>210</sup> National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea, “National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea Statement on the Presence of China’s Maritime Militias at the West Philippine Sea,” PTV News, March 20, 2021, <https://ptvnews.ph/national-task-force-for-the-west-philippine-sea-statement-on-the-presence-of-chinas-maritime-militias-at-the-west-philippine-sea/>.

<sup>211</sup> CNN Philippines Staff, “Locsin Files Diplomatic Protest over Presence of Chinese Vessels at Reef in West PH Sea,” CNN Philippines, March 21, 2021, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/3/21/Chinese-vessels-West-Philippine-Sea.html>.

<sup>212</sup> Delfin N. Lorenzana, “Statement of the Secretary of National Defense on the Presence of Chinese Militia Boats in the Julian Felipe Reef,” Republic of the Philippines Department of National Defense, March 21, 2021, <https://www.dnd.gov.ph/Postings/Post/Statement%20of%20the%20Secretary%20of%20National%20Defense%20on%20the%20presence%20of%20Chinese%20militia%20boats%20in%20the%20Julian%20Felipe%20Reef>.

and immediately recall these boats violating our maritime rights and encroaching into our sovereign territory,” and added that “we are committed to uphold our sovereign rights over the WPS.”<sup>213</sup> In a follow-on statement on March 28, Secretary Lorenzana commented that “we are ready to defend our national sovereignty and the protect the marine resources of the Philippines.”<sup>214</sup>

## 2. U.S. Alliance

Another factor that influenced Philippine behavior was the U.S.-Philippine alliance in the months leading up to the incident. Particularly, distrust in the alliance was illustrated one year prior in February 2020 after President Duterte formally announced that the VFA would be cancelled in 180 days as a response to U.S. sanctions and travel restrictions associated with his war on drugs.<sup>215</sup> The VFA, supporting the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT), provides streamlined access procedures for U.S. troops to the Philippines.<sup>216</sup> Explaining the decision before it was formally announced on January 24, Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. commented that cancelling the VFA would be a “good move,” as it would test the U.S. to see if “they’re serious about the US-PH alliance or not.”<sup>217</sup> Illustrating continued distrust of U.S. commitment one month prior to the incident, President Duterte stated on February 12, 2021, that the U.S. was “taking so much from us,” yet failing to deliver military assets such as guided missiles that the Philippines requested.<sup>218</sup> Furthermore, he remarked that if “you [U.S.] want the Visiting Force Agreement done? Well, you have to pay” and added that “it is a shared responsibility, but

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<sup>213</sup> Lorenzana.

<sup>214</sup> Nepomuceno, “PH Ready to Defend Sovereignty, Marine Resources.”

<sup>215</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon’s Shadow*, 270.

<sup>216</sup> Schaus, “What Is the Philippines-United States Visiting Forces Agreement, and Why Does It Matter?”

<sup>217</sup> Christia Marie Ramos, “‘Good Move’: Locsin Hails Duterte’s Threat to Cancel VFA,” *Inquirer.net*, January 24, 2020, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1219037/dfa-chief-says-dutertes-threat-to-end-vfa-a-good-move>.

<sup>218</sup> Catherine S. Valentine, “Duterte: US Must ‘Pay’ for VFA,” *The Manila Times*, February 13, 2021, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2021/02/13/news/top-stories/duterte-us-must-pay-for-vfa/840322>.



your [U.S.] share of responsibility does not come free because after all when the war breaks out, we all pay.”<sup>219</sup>

Although President Duterte still vocalized distrust, the Philippines displayed strong institutional support and demonstrated resistance behavior by working with the United States and releasing statements that highlighted the alliance. On March 31, 2021, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan spoke with Philippine National Security Advisor Hermogenes Esperon to discuss the events occurring at Whitsun Reef.<sup>220</sup> In a statement released by the White House, National Security Spokesperson Emily Horne commented that the two officials would “continue to coordinate closely in responding to challenges in the South China Sea.”<sup>221</sup> Also showing military support on April 4, the Theodore Roosevelt Carrier Strike Group arrived in the SCS.<sup>222</sup> Heydarian notes that the aircraft carrier, as well as other U.S. Navy vessels, were deployed “in an indirect show of support for the Philippines.”<sup>223</sup> In a phone call on April 8, 2021, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro Locsin, Jr. discussed concerns regarding the PRC maritime militia vessels at Whitsun Reef.<sup>224</sup> On the same day, Philippine Department of National Defense Spokesman Arsenio Andolong also stated that

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<sup>219</sup> Valentine.

<sup>220</sup> Emily Horne, “Statement by National Security Council Spokesperson Emily Horne on National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan’s Call with National Security Advisor Hermogenes Esperon of the Philippines,” The White House, March 31, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/31/statement-by-national-security-council-spokesperson-emily-horne-on-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivans-call-with-national-security-advisor-hermogenes-esperon-of-the-philippines/>.

<sup>221</sup> Horne.

<sup>222</sup> Abhijnan Rej, “US Theodore Roosevelt Carrier Strike Group Back in South China Sea,” *The Diplomat*, April 6, 2021, <http://thediplomat.com/2021/04/us-theodore-roosevelt-carrier-strike-group-back-in-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>223</sup> Richard Javad Heydarian, “Whitsun Reef Standoff: Implications for the U.S.-Philippine-China Triangle in the South China Sea,” China-US Focus, accessed January 20, 2022, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/whitsun-reef-standoff-implications-for-the-us-philippine-china-triangle-in-the-south-china-sea>.

<sup>224</sup> Ned Price, “Secretary Blinken’s Call with Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Locsin,” *United States Department of State* (blog), April 8, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-call-with-philippine-secretary-of-foreign-affairs-locsin-2/>.

“we are continuously in talks with the U.S. on the matter of mutual defense.”<sup>225</sup> On April 8, 2021, the Department of National Defense (DND) released a statement that remarked, “as the situation in the West Philippine Sea evolves, we keep all our options open in managing the situation, including leveraging our partnerships with other nations such as the United States.”<sup>226</sup> The next day, on April 9, 2021, Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro Locsin Jr. and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken released a joint statement which commented that “both sides reaffirmed the importance of working closely to enhance the Mutual Defense Treaty between the Philippines and the United States that has stood strong for nearly 70 years, in light of the recent geopolitical developments and challenges in the Asia Pacific region, particularly in the West Philippine Sea.”<sup>227</sup>

While the Philippines exhibited resistance behavior by initially reaching out to the United States for guidance, the Philippines also demonstrated accommodating behavior after President Duterte publicly rejected further assistance due to his distrust of U.S. commitments.<sup>228</sup> But then the two sides took steps to strengthen the alliance and the U.S. sent a carrier to the region. Commenting on further actions to remove the Chinese vessels from the area, Philippine Ambassador to the United States Jose Manuel Romualdez stated on April 20 that the United States is “obviously waiting for us to call them if we need their assistance” and added that, “both our Philippine Navy and the U.S. Navy are working on this.”<sup>229</sup> However, in an April 28 statement, Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque remarked that “we lost two islands and the United States did not move then,” and

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<sup>225</sup> Jim Gomez, “Philippines Warns It Could Seek US Help amid Feud with China,” AP NEWS, April 8, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/south-china-sea-philippines-china-manila-9e7a5306ad0f6fb52ec20fdb331c06ca>.

<sup>226</sup> Frances Mangosing, “Linking Up with Allies among Options vs China Incursions in West PH Sea, Says DND,” Inquirer.net, April 8, 2021, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/194974/linking-up-with-allies-among-options-vs-china-incursions-in-west-ph-sea-says-dnd>.

<sup>227</sup> “Statement: On the Conversation between Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro L. Locsin, Jr. and U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken,” Republic of the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs, April 9, 2021, <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/statements-and-advisoriesupdate/28826-statement-on-the-conversation-between-secretary-of-foreign-affairs-teodoro-l-locsin-jr-and-u-s-secretary-of-state-antony-j-blinken>.

<sup>228</sup> De Castro, “Duterte Rejects U.S. Assistance during Whitsun Reef Stand-Off.”

<sup>229</sup> Joyce Ann L. Rocamora, “US Ready to Help in Securing PH Exclusive Zones: Envoy,” Republic of the Philippines Philippine News Agency, April 20, 2021, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1137443>.

questioned “if you can really count on America.”<sup>230</sup> Additionally, President Duterte emphasized this stance during a televised address on the same day by stating, “Don’t count on them. They won’t come to our aid.”<sup>231</sup>

### 3. China’s Military Capabilities

A third factor that influenced the Philippine behavior was China’s military capabilities at the time of the incident. In the year leading up to the incident, China continued to assert regional dominance in the maritime littoral while also increasing its military posture toward the United States.<sup>232</sup> In August 2020, China conducted four ballistic-missile tests that landed between the Paracel Islands and Hainan. Because the weapons have the capability to target aircraft carriers and large ships, *Military Balance* notes that these tests “were signalling to the U.S. the potential cost if it intervened in a future South China Sea conflict.”<sup>233</sup> In April 2021, during the incident, the *Liaoning* aircraft carrier entered the SCS after conducting exercises near Taiwan.<sup>234</sup> The carrier’s arrival coincided with exercises that USS Theodore Roosevelt conducted in the SCS a day prior. Highlighting China’s willingness and capability to challenge U.S. provocation, Chinese military expert Wie Dongxu stated that the Chinese carrier “can establish wider maritime defensive positions, safeguard China’s coastal regions, and keep U.S. military activities in check.”<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Genalyn Kabling, “Palace Doubts US Will Help PH If Row with China on WPS Escalates,” *Manila Bulletin*, April 28, 2021, <https://mb.com.ph/2021/04/28/palace-doubts-us-will-help-ph-if-row-with-china-on-wps-escalates/>.

<sup>231</sup> Genalyn Kabling, “Don’t Count on United States to Help in West PH Sea Dispute — Duterte,” *Manila Bulletin*, April 29, 2021, <https://mb.com.ph/2021/04/29/dont-count-on-united-states-to-help-in-west-ph-sea-dispute-duterte/>.

<sup>232</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, “(2021) Chapter Six: Asia,” *The Military Balance* 121, no. 1 (January 1, 2021): 121, <https://doi.org/10.1080/04597222.2021.1868795>.

<sup>233</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, 221.

<sup>234</sup> Brad Lendon, “US and China Deploy Aircraft Carriers in South China Sea as Tensions Simmer,” *CNN*, April 12, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/12/china/south-china-sea-taiwan-military-tensions-intl-hnk/index.html>.

<sup>235</sup> Lendon.

In addition to China's growing military capabilities and assertiveness in the SCS, the Philippines also faced an increased threat from the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) to protect its claims prior to the incident. Used in peacetime to ensure the security of Chinese state and private vessels, the CCG routinely sails inside China's nine-dash line which overlaps with much of the Philippine EEZ.<sup>236</sup> However, in February 2021, the CCGs enforcement authorities were upgraded when a new law took effect. Wong notes that law allows the CCG to "fire on any fishing boats and coast guard vessels, board and inspect them, and demolish structures built on Chinese-claimed reefs and islands."<sup>237</sup> Not only does the new law increase the probability of shooting incidents occurring in the SCS, the law threatens food security by endangering Filipino fishermen.<sup>238</sup> With the new law in effect during the Whitsun Reef incident, the CCG was empowered to raise the threshold for escalatory action against the Philippines.

Recognizing China's strong military and law enforcement capabilities prior to the incident, President Duterte vocally opposed the use of force to manage SCS disputes. Addressing China's strong capabilities during the State of the Nation Address on July 27, 2020, eight months prior to the incident, President Duterte stated that, "unless we are prepared to go to war, I would suggest that we better just call off and treat this...with diplomatic endeavors."<sup>239</sup> Explaining his reasoning, he simply stated that "China has the arms, we do not have it."<sup>240</sup> Additionally, one month prior to the incident, on February 12, 2021, President Duterte stated that "I cannot afford to be brave in the mouth against China

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<sup>236</sup> Andrea Chloe Wong, "Philippine Security Implications from China's Growing Maritime Capabilities," Meeting China's Military Challenge: Collective Responses of U.S. Allies and Security Partners (Seattle and Washington, D.C.: The National Bureau of Asian Research, January 6, 2022), 80, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/philippine-security-implications-from-chinas-growing-maritime-capabilities/>.

<sup>237</sup> Wong, 80.

<sup>238</sup> Wong, 80.

<sup>239</sup> Duterte, "Rodrigo Roa Duterte, Fifth State of the Nation Address, July 27, 2020."

<sup>240</sup> Duterte.

because we are avoiding any confrontation that would lead to something which we can hardly afford” and noted that “we are the nearest to a theater of war.”<sup>241</sup>

One indication of accommodation that was influenced by China’s strong military capabilities during the incident was the concession of Philippine fishing interests. On April 19, 2021, President Duterte stated during a televised address that “I’m not so much interested now in fishing. I don’t think there’s enough fish really to quarrel about.”<sup>242</sup> Furthermore, Duterte emphasized that “you [k]now the cost of war, and if we go there and really find out and assert jurisdiction, it would be bloody. It would result in violence that we cannot maybe win.”<sup>243</sup> The following day, on April 20, Presidential Spokesman Harry Roque reiterated the president’s stance by saying “they are free to fish now and even though there are Chinese ships, they are not being prohibited from fishing there.”<sup>244</sup> Also highlighting his fear of conflict, President Duterte also remarked on April 28, that “China, let it be known, is a good friend, and we do not want a trouble with them, especially a war.”<sup>245</sup>

#### **4. Diplomatic Interests**

Another factor that influenced Philippine behavior during the incident involved diplomatic interests associated with the BCM. Discussed previously in the Thitu Island case study, the BCM was established by President Duterte and Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2016 as a bilateral platform to address differences while promoting mutual

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<sup>241</sup> Eimor Santos, “Duterte Asks US ‘To Pay’ for VFA,” CNN Philippines, February 12, 2021, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/2/12/Duterte-US-pay-VFA.html>.

<sup>242</sup> Genalyn Kabling, “Duterte to ‘Tolerate’ Fishing by China in West PH Sea,” Manila Bulletin, accessed February 12, 2022, <https://mb.com.ph/2021/04/20/duterte-to-tolerate-fishing-by-china-in-west-ph-sea/>.

<sup>243</sup> Kabling.

<sup>244</sup> Kabling.

<sup>245</sup> Genalyn Kabling, “Duterte Thanks ‘Good Friend’ China for Free COVID-19 Vaccines,” Manila Bulletin, April 28, 2021, <https://mb.com.ph/2021/04/28/duterte-thanks-good-friend-china-for-free-covid-19-vaccines/>.

trust.<sup>246</sup> On May 21, 2021, two months after the incident began, representatives from both countries met for the sixth time under the BCM to discuss the ongoing issue in the SCS. During the meeting, the Philippines reiterated its call for China to adhere to international law to include the 1982 UNCLOS and the 2016 SCS Arbitral Award. Describing the meeting, the Department of Foreign Affairs released a statement which noted “friendly and candid exchanges on the general situation and specific issues of concern in the South China Sea” and added that “both sides acknowledged the importance of addressing differences in an atmosphere of openness and cordiality to pave the way for practical cooperation and initiatives.”<sup>247</sup> Emphasizing favorable relations resulting from the BCM, the Philippines highlighted progress to resolve the Gem-Ver allision issue.<sup>248</sup> This issue occurring two years prior, was a SCS incident in which a Chinese vessel rammed and sank a Philippine fishing vessel near Reed Bank on June 9, 2019.<sup>249</sup> On a broad level, participation in the BCM highlights a forum for accommodation which illustrates how the Philippines is pursuing ways to work with, rather than against, China.

One indication of accommodation influenced by the BCM during the incident was the restriction of President Duterte’s cabinet to publicly decry Chinese coercion in the SCS. On May 17, 2021, three days prior to the meeting, President Duterte ordered his cabinet to refrain from “discussing this West Philippine Sea (issue) with...anybody,” and added that “if we have to talk, we talk only among us.”<sup>250</sup> Although the administration made several public remarks regarding the Whitsun Reef incident as the incident unfolded, the later

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<sup>246</sup> “Philippines, China Convene Mechanism to Ease Tensions, Explore Cooperation in South China Sea,” Republic of the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs, May 22, 2021, <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/news-from-our-foreign-service-postupdate/28997-philippines-china-convene-mechanism-to-ease-tensions-explore-cooperation-in-south-china-sea>.

<sup>247</sup> Republic of the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>248</sup> Republic of the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>249</sup> CNN Philippines Staff, “Justice Dept. to Lead Negotiations on Fishermen Compensation in Chinese Boat Allision — DFA,” CNN Philippines, May 22, 2021, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/5/22/DOJ-negotiations-compensation-Gem-Ver-fishermen-Recto-bank-Chinese-vessel.html>.

<sup>250</sup> AFP News, “Duterte Bans Philippines Ministers from Speaking on S. China Sea,” Yahoo News, accessed January 22, 2022, <https://ph.news.yahoo.com/duterte-bans-philippines-ministers-speaking-072106916.html>.

restrictions on public criticism coincided with the upcoming May BCM meeting and the bilateral dialogue it promoted.

## 5. Economic Interests

Another factor that influenced Philippine behavior during the incident involved economic interests with China. As mentioned previously in the Thitu Island case study, President Duterte sought investment opportunities from China's BRI to support his "Build Build Build" infrastructure strategy. Noting the BRI's significance in December 2020, three months prior to the incident, United Overseas Bank (UOB) Ltd. remarked that "the Philippines was among the ASEAN countries that benefitted the most from the new investments related to China's Belt and Road Initiative in recent years" and added that "the political rapprochement between mainland China and the Philippines that is taking place during the Duterte administration is boosting trade and investment relations."<sup>251</sup> Two months before the incident, on January 16, 2021, the Duterte administration signed its seventh agreement with China in support of infrastructure and development projects.<sup>252</sup> Commenting on the Sino-Philippine relationship the same day, President Duterte stated that, "China plays a very key role in reviving our region's economy. Let us do all we can to revive economic activities between the Philippines and China."<sup>253</sup> Both the statement and signed economic agreements emphasize the Philippines' continued economic interests with China prior to the Whitsun Reef incident. Illustrating continued favorable economic relations after the incident, the Estrella-Pantaleon Bridge was opened in Manila four months after the incident in July 2021.<sup>254</sup> Built under China's BRI and the Philippines'

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<sup>251</sup> Ben O. de Vera, "China Emerges as PH's Most Important Source of Investments," *Inquirer.net*, December 9, 2020, <https://business.inquirer.net/313538/china-emerges-as-phs-most-important-source-of-investments>.

<sup>252</sup> CNN Philippines Staff, "China Grants ₱3B to PH to Support Infra, Other Development Projects," *CNN Philippines*, January 16, 2021, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/1/16/China-P3-billion-grant-to-PH-for-infra-development-projects.html>.

<sup>253</sup> CNN Philippines Staff.

<sup>254</sup> Michael Hart, "China's Belt and Road Runs Aground in the Philippines," *Geopolitical Monitor*, September 23, 2021, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/chinas-belt-and-road-runs-aground-in-the-philippines/>.

“Build Build Build” program, the bridge was inaugurated by President Duterte and China Ambassador Huang Xilian.<sup>255</sup>

### **C. BEHAVIOR ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSION**

Assessing evidence of both resistance and accommodation based on five factors, the 2021 Whitsun Reef incident demonstrates one factor of resistance, four factors of accommodation, and one factor that influenced both types of behavior. First, the Philippines’ policy to protect claims initially influenced resistance behavior, which included the deployment of coast guard law enforcement vessels, increased patrols of military assets that included navy vessels and air force aircraft, and the issuance of diplomatic protests and statements stressing its sovereign rights. Second, the Philippines also initially demonstrated resistance behavior by seeking assistance from the United States—despite President Duterte’s vocal criticism.

Although the Philippines demonstrated some aspects of resistance behavior, the Philippines also engaged in accommodating behavior as the incident progressed. First, the Philippines accommodated China’s presence by publicly conceding fishing rights due to the president’s fear of conflict against China’s stronger military capabilities. Second, President Duterte’s distrust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance influenced the Philippines to reject further U.S. assistance to remove Chinese vessels from the area. Third, diplomatic interests associated with an upcoming BCM meeting influenced President Duterte to restrict his cabinet from further publicizing criticism of SCS disputes. Finally, economic interests were an underlying factor that influenced the Philippines to maintain favorable relations with China as President Duterte continued to pursue investment opportunities through the BRI.

Although there were initial indications of both resistance and accommodation, the overall classification of accommodation is most appropriate for this incident due to the Philippines’ concession of fishing interests and reluctance to remove Chinese vessels from the area with U.S. assistance. Two factors weighed heavily in this determination. First,

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<sup>255</sup> Hart.



China's strong military capabilities influenced President Duterte to give up fishing interests in order to avoid "any confrontation that would lead to something which we can hardly afford."<sup>256</sup> Second, the role of the U.S.-Philippine alliance also played a significant role because it influenced both resistance and accommodating behavior. While Philippine institutions maintained an alliance just strong enough to seek help from the United States in the form of diplomatic statements and indirect military support, President Duterte's distrust of the alliance led the Philippines to demonstrate accommodation by rejecting additional assistance to remove Chinese vessels. This teetering relationship with the United States could be illustrated in the status of the VFA during this time period—not fully restored, but not fully terminated either.

Assessing the factors stated in the hypothesis, the incident occurred during a period when the Duterte administration implemented a policy to protect territorial claims, the Philippines had a staggered alliance with the U.S., and when China had stronger military capabilities to assert its position in the SCS. Assessing the influence of each of these drivers, the Philippines initially demonstrated resistance behavior based on a policy to protect territorial claims, but ultimately accommodated China's presence by conceding fishing interests and declining American assistance to remove Chinese vessels. This behavior was influenced by China's stronger military capabilities that exceeded the president's level of confidence in the U.S.-Philippine alliance when the incident occurred. Taking these drivers into account, the hypothesis that the Philippines is more likely to resist when the U.S. alliance is strong and Chinese capabilities are low remain valid as this case study provides a counterpoint. Illustrating opposite behavior, this case study shows how accommodating behavior is more likely when trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance is weak and China's military capabilities are strong. This case study also demonstrates that supplementary factors such as economic and diplomatic interests influence accommodating behavior in the Philippines.

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<sup>256</sup> Santos, "Duterte Asks US 'To Pay' for VFA."

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## **V. PHILIPPINE BEHAVIOR IN THE DUTERTE ADMINISTRATION (2016–PRESENT): SECOND THOMAS SHOAL INCIDENT (2021)**

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the causes of Philippine behavior in the 2021 Second Thomas Shoal incident that occurred in the South China Sea (SCS) during the Duterte administration. This chapter demonstrates that, from a big picture perspective, when the U.S. alliance is strong and Chinese military capabilities are also strong, Philippine leadership is more likely to resist—but with limits on how much it is willing to resist. Because China has stronger military capabilities than the Philippines, a strong U.S. alliance provides the Philippines with the confidence that it will receive support and backing to counter escalatory actions by China. However, China’s strong and increasingly assertive military capabilities in the SCS are becoming more of an immediate threat to the Philippines. These two drivers, combined with a foreign policy that prioritizes the protection of territorial claims, create conditions for the Philippines to exhibit restrained resistance against Chinese coercion. This chapter will assess how these broad drivers, among others, influenced Philippine behavior in this particular incident during the Duterte administration.

In the 2021 Second Thomas Shoal incident, five factors influenced Philippine behavior. First, a policy to protect territorial claims influenced resistance behavior, which included the continuous deployment and resupply of Philippine Marines on the shoal, as well as the issuance of diplomatic protests and statements that challenged Chinese coercion. Second, increased trust in U.S.-Philippine alliance, shown by the full restoration of the VFA, support for AUKUS, and increased bilateral meetings, led the Philippines to call for U.S. assistance that resulted in both countries releasing statements that warned China of allied defense commitments. Third, China’s stronger military capabilities, illustrated by more assertive live-fire exercises in the SCS, influenced accommodating behavior displayed in the Philippines’ reluctance to deploy navy or coast guard escorts vessels on a planned resupply mission. Fourth, economic interests, such as China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), encouraged the Philippines to maintain favorable relations with

China, despite growing criticism that such investments had not reached fruition. Finally, Philippine diplomatic interests, such as the Bilateral Consultative Mechanism (BCM), also continued to serve as an underlying factor that influenced the Philippines to manage SCS disputes peacefully. The chapter concludes that the Philippines' response to the Second Thomas Shoal incident should be best classified as one of resistance, because drivers such as the policy to protect claims and the U.S.-Philippine alliance outweighed the influence of accommodating factors in this case.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section provides a historical overview of the respective area and a brief description of the events leading up to the incident that includes China's initial actions as well as the Philippine response immediately afterward. The second section consists of the underlying drivers and the responses they influenced. In the third section, the chapter conducts a behavioral assessment to determine the best response classification of the incident and concludes by assessing the validity of the hypotheses.

#### **A. OVERVIEW AND DESCRIPTION**

Second Thomas Shoal illustrates a unique case study in this thesis as the shoal was the site of significant incidents during both the Aquino and Duterte presidential administrations. As discussed in Chapter 2, Second Thomas Shoal is located in the Spratly Islands and lies 105 nautical miles northwest of the Philippines' Palawan province.<sup>257</sup> Defined as a "low-tide elevation," Second Thomas Shoal is claimed by the Philippines as part of the country's EEZ and continental shelf.<sup>258</sup> The Philippines views the shoal as a strategic military location and as a critical access point to areas such as Reed Bank that are assessed to have natural gas deposits.<sup>259</sup> However, China asserts that it has sovereignty as part of its Spratly Islands claims.

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<sup>257</sup> Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 170.

<sup>258</sup> Green et al., 170.

<sup>259</sup> Green et al., 170.

Since the Second Thomas Shoal incident of March 2014, which was discussed in Chapter 2, the Philippines has experienced additional harassment incidents with further escalation. One incident occurred in May 2018, when a Chinese helicopter was deployed to harass a small Philippine resupply vessel enroute to the *Sierra Madre*.<sup>260</sup> During the incident, the helicopter flew “dangerously close,” at approximately 40 to 50 feet, in an attempt to overturn the rubber vessel.<sup>261</sup> There were no reported injuries from the incident and the Philippines responded by filing diplomatic protests.<sup>262</sup>

Moving forward to the 2021 Second Thomas Shoal incident during the Duterte administration, the dispute began on November 16 when two Philippine vessels were sent to the shoal on a resupply mission.<sup>263</sup> However, three Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) vessels blocked the Philippine vessels by using water cannons to prevent them from reaching their destination. In the Philippines’ initial response two days later on November 18, Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. condemned and protested Chinese actions. On November 21, Philippine Defense Secretary Lorenzana announced that two civilian boats carrying navy personnel were en route to Second Thomas Shoal to resupply the Philippine marines stationed onboard the *Sierra Madre*. Additionally, he stated that a navy plane would conduct flights over the shoal once the boats arrived. Reacting to Philippine protests, China’s Foreign Ministry claimed that its coast guard vessels were upholding Chinese sovereignty and had taken action against Philippine vessels entering China’s waters without permission at night.<sup>264</sup> These actions marked the initial responses of both claimants. The incident effectively ended after the second supply mission arrived safely at

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<sup>260</sup> “Failing or Incomplete? Grading the South China Sea Arbitration,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, July 11, 2019, <https://amti.csis.org/failing-or-incomplete-grading-the-south-china-sea-arbitration/>.

<sup>261</sup> Jim Gomez, “Philippines Says It Protests China ‘Harassment’ of Navy Boat,” AP News, May 30, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/575ca64f275f42f3bbb6ed3ded9821fa>.

<sup>262</sup> Gomez.

<sup>263</sup> Joyce Ann L. Rocamora, “PH Outraged after Chinese Vessels Blocked PH Supply Boats,” Philippine News Agency, November 18, 2021, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1160135>.

<sup>264</sup> Jim Gomez, “Philippines Redeploys Boats to Shoal after Chinese Blockade,” AP NEWS, November 21, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/china-navy-philippines-manila-blockades-dc95a75f7255da3eff66b214ad9acbae>.

Second Thomas Shoal without incident on November 23—exactly one week after the first supply mission was blocked.<sup>265</sup>

## **B. DRIVERS OF RESPONSE**

### **1. Policy to Protect Territorial Claims**

One factor that influenced the Philippines’ behavior during this incident was the Duterte administration’s policy to protect Philippine territorial claims. On July 26, 2021, four months prior to the incident, President Duterte emphasized sovereignty in the State of the Nation Address.<sup>266</sup> Referring to the Philippine military’s role to protect claims, President Duterte stated that “the continuous upgrading of our defense capability shall ensure that we shall uphold our territorial integrity and sovereignty from external and [internal] security threats.”<sup>267</sup> In the same speech, President Duterte also referred to the 2016 arbitral ruling by saying, “we asserted the arbitration ruling on the South China Sea—clearly and in no uncertain terms—bilaterally, [at] the ASEAN and finally, at the United Nations General Assembly.”<sup>268</sup> He also emphasized that the “Arbitral Award is now part of the international law and beyond compromise and beyond the reach of the passing government to dilute, to diminish or abandon.”<sup>269</sup> These statements highlight the Philippines’ policy to assert its claims and interests in the SCS prior to the 2021 Second Thomas Shoal incident.

One indication of resistance that was influenced by the administration’s policy to protect claims was the deployment of military forces to Second Thomas Shoal. Since *Sierra Madre* was grounded on shoal in 1999, the AFP has maintained a permanent marine

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<sup>265</sup> The Associated Press, “Philippine Supply Boats Reach Marines at China-Guarded Shoal,” NPR, November 23, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/11/23/1058238037/philippine-supply-boats-reach-marines-at-china-guarded-shoal>.

<sup>266</sup> Rodrigo Roa Duterte, “Rodrigo Roa Duterte, Sixth State of the Nation Address, July 26, 2021,” *Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines*, July 26, 2021, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2021/07/26/rodrigo-roa-duterte-sixth-state-of-the-nation-address-july-26-2021/>.

<sup>267</sup> Duterte.

<sup>268</sup> Duterte.

<sup>269</sup> Duterte.

detachment on the vessel.<sup>270</sup> Serving three to six-month rotations onboard *Sierra Madre*, 7 to 12 personnel are armed with rifles and two 40-millimeter cannons. Additionally, as part of the November 23 resupply mission, the Philippines delivered new military personnel using two civilian vessels operated by the Philippine Navy.<sup>271</sup> Additionally, a Philippine military aircraft was observed flying overhead when the boats arrived at the shoal.

A second indication of resistance that was influenced by the policy to protect claims was through diplomatic protests and statements that denounced Chinese coercion. On November 18, 2021, two days after the incident began, Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. released a statement in which he remarked, “I have conveyed in the strongest terms to H.E. Huang Xilian, Ambassador of China and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing in outrage, condemnation, and protest of the incident” and added that “we do not ask permission to do what we need to do in our territory.”<sup>272</sup> On the same day, acting presidential spokesperson Karlo Nograles commented that Second Thomas Shoal is “part of our territory, and we will fully exercise our sovereign rights over our territory.”<sup>273</sup> Four days later, President Duterte himself emphasized territorial sovereignty in a speech given at the ASEAN-China Special Summit on November 22, 2021. Not only did President Duterte condemn Chinese actions by saying, “we abhor the recent events in the Ayungin Shoal and view with grave concern other similar developments,” he emphasized that “UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Award provide clarity for all countries that subscribe to the majesty of the law.”<sup>274</sup> Furthermore, one month after the incident, on December 2021,

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<sup>270</sup> Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 171.

<sup>271</sup> Frances Mangosing, “PH Boats Harassed by China Complete Supply Mission,” *Inquirer.net*, November 23, 2021, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/200566/ph-boats-harassed-by-china-complete-supply-mission>.

<sup>272</sup> Rocamora, “PH Outraged after Chinese Vessels Blocked PH Supply Boats.”

<sup>273</sup> M. J. Blancaflor, “PHL Will Assert Rights over Ayungin, Rest of EEZ,” *Daily Tribune*, November 27, 2021, <https://tribune.net.ph/index.php/2021/11/27/phl-will-assert-rights-over-ayungin-rest-of-eez/>.

<sup>274</sup> Rodrigo Roa Duterte, “Intervention of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte during the ASEAN-China Special Summit to Commemorate the 30th Anniversary of Dialogue Relations,” Republic of the Philippines Presidential Communications Operations Office, November 22, 2021, <https://pcoo.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/20211122-Intervention-of-President-Rodrigo-Roa-Duterte-during-the-ASEAN-China-Special-Summit-to-Commemorate-the-30th-Anniversary-of-Dialogue-Relations.docx.pdf>.

DFA Deputy Assistant Secretary Myca Fischer stated that the Philippines will continue to be a “persistent objector” and will “not get tired of filing diplomatic protests” to counter Chinese actions.<sup>275</sup>

## 2. U.S. Alliance

Another factor that influenced the Philippine decision to resist was increased trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance leading up to the incident. On July 30, 2021, President Duterte retracted the VFA termination letter after U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin III met with Philippine National Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana to discuss security challenges and defense commitments.<sup>276</sup> Explaining the decision in a statement, Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque remarked that the president’s “decision to recall the abrogation of the VFA is based on upholding PH strategic core interests, the clear definition of PH-US alliance as one between sovereign equals...and clarity of U.S. position on its obligations and commitments under the MDT (Mutual Defense Treaty).”<sup>277</sup> Supporting the decision, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana stated that the VFA “underscored the significance of the bilateral defense relations between the Philippines and the United States in light of new and emerging challenges that confront our nations.”<sup>278</sup>

Another example of strengthened ties and trust between the United States and the Philippines occurred on September 15, 2021, when Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States announced the formation of a trilateral alliance called AUKUS.<sup>279</sup> Describing AUKUS, De Castro explains that the “accord underscores the three countries’

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<sup>275</sup> Gabriel Pabico Lahu, “Lacson Asks DFA: What Happened to 200 Diplomatic Protests vs China?,” *Inquirer.net*, December 6, 2021, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/200882/lacson-asks-dfa-what-happened-to-200-diplomatic-protests-vs-china>.

<sup>276</sup> Jim Garamone, “Philippine President Restores Visiting Forces Agreement with U.S.,” U.S. Department of Defense, July 30, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2713638/philippine-president-restores-visiting-forces-agreement-with-us/>.

<sup>277</sup> Ruth Abbey Gita-Carlos and Priam Nepomuceno, “PH-US Alliance Makes Duterte Reconsider VFA: Palace,” Republic of the Philippines Philippine News Agency, July 30, 2021, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1148808>.

<sup>278</sup> Garamone, “Philippine President Restores Visiting Forces Agreement with U.S.”

<sup>279</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, “Philippines Enhances Ties with AUKUS,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, December 13, 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/philippines-enhances-ties-with-aukus/>.



commitment to deepen diplomatic, security, and defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.”<sup>280</sup> Welcoming the partnership to address regional security partnership in a statement released on September 19, Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro Locsin, Jr. commented that “the fresh enhancement of Australia’s military capacity through this trilateral security partnership would be beneficial in the long term.”<sup>281</sup> In the statement, he explains that the Philippines supports the partnership because the alliance would address a power imbalance between China and the weaker military capabilities of ASEAN states.<sup>282</sup> Additionally, he emphasized that Australia’s new naval capabilities would allow faster response times since the main balancer, the United States, is located across the Pacific Ocean. Also expressing support for AUKUS when he spoke at the 9<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-US Summit on October 26, 2021, President Duterte stated that “AUKUS will promote peace and stability in our region and maintain support for ASEAN Centrality.”<sup>283</sup> In the same speech, he also thanked the United States specifically for the “strong support for the 2016 [Arbitral] Award” as “this landmark decision serves as a foundation for a rules-based order in the South China Sea.”<sup>284</sup>

A third example of increased trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance occurred one day prior to the incident. From November 15 to November 16, 2021, the two countries held the ninth Bilateral Strategic Dialogue (BSD) to discuss cooperation in areas such as defense, law, and regional diplomacy.<sup>285</sup> After the meeting, the United States and the Philippines

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<sup>280</sup> De Castro.

<sup>281</sup> Teodoro L. Locsin, Jr., “Statement of Foreign Affairs Teodoro L. Locsin, Jr. on the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) Enhanced Trilateral Security Partnership,” Republic of the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs, September 19, 2021, <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/statements-and-advisories/update/29484-statement-of-foreign-affairs-teodoro-l-locsin-jr-on-the-australia-united-kingdom-united-states-aucus-enhanced-trilateral-security-partnership>.

<sup>282</sup> De Castro, “Philippines Enhances Ties with AUKUS.”

<sup>283</sup> Rodrigo Roa Duterte, “Intervention of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte at the 9th ASEAN-US Summit,” Republic of the Philippines Presidential Communications Operations Office, October 26, 2021, <https://pcoo.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/20211026-INTERVENTION-OF-PRESIDENT-RODRIGO-ROA-DUTERTE-AT-THE-9TH-ASEAN-US-SUMMIT.pdf>.

<sup>284</sup> Duterte.

<sup>285</sup> “United States, Philippines to Hold Ninth Bilateral Strategic Dialogue,” U.S. Embassy in the Philippines, November 12, 2021, <https://ph.usembassy.gov/united-states-philippines-to-hold-ninth-bilateral-strategic-dialogue/>.

issued a joint statement on November 16 that highlighted improved ties between the two countries.<sup>286</sup> Called the Joint Vision for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century United States-Philippines Partnership, the statement stressed the 1951 MDT as a “key pillar” of defense and security relations.<sup>287</sup> In addition to reaffirming current defense commitments in response to armed attacks against the Philippines, the statement was significant as it highlighted further intentions to “enhance the posture of our alliance to address new and emerging challenges.”<sup>288</sup>

One indication of resistance influenced by the strengthened U.S.-Philippine alliance was the release of statements from both the Philippines and United States that cautioned China of their defense relationship. In his November 18, 2021 statement, two days after the incident, Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. remarked, “I reminded China that a public vessel is covered by the Philippines-United States Mutual Defense Treaty.”<sup>289</sup> Reaffirming the 1951 MDT in a diplomatic statement the following day, U.S. Department of State Spokesperson Ned Price noted that “the United States stands with our ally, the Philippines, in the face of this escalation that directly threatens regional peace and stability” and added that “the PRC should not interfere with lawful Philippine activities in the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone.”<sup>290</sup>

### **3. China’s Military Capabilities**

A third factor that influenced Philippine behavior was China’s military capabilities at the time of the incident. As mentioned in the previous discussion regarding the 2021 Whitsun Reef incident in Chapter 4, China has continued to assert regional dominance

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<sup>286</sup> U.S. Department of State Office of the Spokesperson, “Joint Vision for a 21st Century United States-Philippines Partnership,” U.S. Department of State, November 16, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/joint-vision-for-a-21st-century-united-states-philippines-partnership/>.

<sup>287</sup> U.S. Department of State Office of the Spokesperson.

<sup>288</sup> U.S. Department of State Office of the Spokesperson.

<sup>289</sup> CNN Philippines Staff, “Chinese Vessels Blocked, Fired Water Cannon on PH Boats in Ayungin Shoal,” CNN Philippines, November 18, 2021, <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/11/18/Ayungin-Shoal-Chinese-Coast-Guard-Philippine-military.html>.

<sup>290</sup> Ned Price, “On the Situation in the South China Sea,” United States Department of State, November 19, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/on-the-situation-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

while also challenging the United States.<sup>291</sup> Continuing to demonstrate assertiveness in the SCS, China's military conducted several drills and exercises in the SCS prior to the incident. Noting the purpose of these exercises, Saballa explains that the "drills in the South China Sea serve as a 'deterrent' amid provocations by countries who also claim part of the contested maritime territory" and adds that the exercises are "a way for the Chinese military to strengthen its capabilities."<sup>292</sup> Six months prior to the 2021 Second Thomas Shoal incident, China conducted a large live-fire exercise in the SCS from May 14 to May 15, 2021. The exercises consisted of JH-7 bomber aircraft releasing "thousands of munitions" while conducting anti-ship missile strikes, bombing runs, and precision strikes.<sup>293</sup> This exercise occurred a few days after the United States conducted a freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) near the Paracel Islands. Additionally, three months later, China held a five-day military exercise southeast of Hainan that began on August 6, 2021.<sup>294</sup> This exercise also coincided with the U.S.-led Large-Scale Exercise (LSE) 2021. Furthermore, in early December 2021, China conducted another exercise in the SCS with H-6J bomber aircraft.<sup>295</sup> During this drill, Saballa notes that aircraft dropped bombs and laid sea mines in a demonstration of "standoff strike capabilities."<sup>296</sup>

Recognizing China's military strength at the State of the Nation Address on July 26, 2021, four months prior to the incident, President Duterte restated concerns about going to war with China.<sup>297</sup> Acknowledging China's military capabilities and the Philippines' inability to challenge the stronger power, President Duterte explained that "even on the coast beach of Palawan, before you can take off, the missile of China would be there in

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<sup>291</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, "Chapter Six," January 1, 2021, 220–21.

<sup>292</sup> Joe Saballa, "China Completes Mine-Laying Drill in South China Sea," *The Defense Post*, December 6, 2021, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2021/12/06/china-mine-laying-drill-sea/>.

<sup>293</sup> John Feng, "China Drops Thousands of Bombs and Missiles in Colossal Military Exercise," *Newsweek*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/china-drops-thousands-bombs-missiles-colossal-military-exercise-1594486>.

<sup>294</sup> Jeff Pao, "China vs West in Dueling South China Sea Exercises," *Asia Times*, August 5, 2021, <https://asiatimes.com/2021/08/china-vs-west-in-dueling-south-china-sea-exercises/>.

<sup>295</sup> Saballa, "China Completes Mine-Laying Drill in South China Sea."

<sup>296</sup> Saballa.

<sup>297</sup> Duterte, "Rodrigo Roa Duterte, Sixth State of the Nation Address, July 26, 2021."

about five or 10 minutes.”<sup>298</sup> He added that, “it would be a massacre if I go and fight a war now. We are not yet a competent and able enemy of the other side.”<sup>299</sup> Due to the military threat, he emphasized that the Philippines would keep options open for “diplomacy and détente...because that is how disputes are settled and never by force.”<sup>300</sup> President Duterte also expressed these sentiments during the incident itself. In his ASEAN-China Special Summit speech on November 22, 2021, President Duterte bluntly stated that, “the South China Sea is a strategic challenge that cannot be solved by force.”<sup>301</sup> Additionally, he made a plea for claimants to “exercise utmost [self-]restraint and avoid the escalation of tensions.”<sup>302</sup>

One indication of accommodation influenced by China’s strengthened military capabilities and the president’s fear of war during the 2021 Second Thomas Shoal incident was the reluctance to deploy military or law enforcement vessels as escorts during the resupply mission. Between November 16 and November 20, 2021, Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana discussed the upcoming resupply mission with Chinese Ambassador Huang Xilian.<sup>303</sup> Remarking on the talks afterward, Secretary Lorenzana stated that “the Chinese ambassador assured me that they [resupply vessels] will not be impeded but they requested there should be no escort.”<sup>304</sup> Conceding to this request, Secretary Lorenzana announced on November 21 that “there will be no navy or coast guard escorts for the Philippines’ resupply boats when they sail back to Second Thomas

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<sup>298</sup> Duterte.

<sup>299</sup> Duterte.

<sup>300</sup> Duterte.

<sup>301</sup> Duterte, “Intervention of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte during the ASEAN-China Special Summit to Commemorate the 30th Anniversary of Dialogue Relations.”

<sup>302</sup> Duterte.

<sup>303</sup> “Philippines Set to Resume Resupply Mission to South China Sea,” Reuters, November 21, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-set-resume-resupply-mission-south-china-sea-2021-11-21/>.

<sup>304</sup> The Associated Press, “Philippines Sends Resupply Boats to Shoal after Chinese Blockade,” NPR, November 22, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/11/22/1057874455/philippines-sends-resupply-boats-to-shoal-after-chinese-blockade>.

Shoal.”<sup>305</sup> Recognizing China’s military strength, the Philippines accommodated China’s request to restrict the deployment of additional military vessels. Upholding its pledge, China did not interfere with the Philippine’s successful resupply mission on November 23, 2022.<sup>306</sup> However, the Chinese Coast Guard maintained a watchful eye nearby by taking pictures and recording video of the supplies being unloaded on the shoal.

#### **4. Economic Interests**

Although not linked with specific actions observed in this case, changing economic interests contributed to an overall shift away from accommodation and toward resistance behavior. As discussed in the previous case studies, President Duterte sought investment opportunities from China’s BRI to support his “Build Build Build” infrastructure strategy.<sup>307</sup> On June 10, 2021, five months prior to the incident, President Duterte continued to emphasize this endeavor by saying, “Philippines-China economic ties are of course the dynamic force that will continue to drive our bilateral relations forward. I am confident that my administration’s Build Build Build program, together with the Belt and Road Initiative, will reap long-term benefits for our peoples.”<sup>308</sup>

However, there were criticisms that infrastructure and economic benefits from China were not producing significant results. Calonzo notes that, as of July 2021, “most big-ticket projects funded by China have yet to break ground or haven’t been approved, with only three under construction.”<sup>309</sup> Additionally, he notes that China’s initial agreement to provide \$9 billion in loans only equated to \$590 million by 2019. Additionally,

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<sup>305</sup> Mark Valencia, “China-Philippines Clash in South China Sea Could Draw in US,” Asia Times, November 22, 2021, <https://asiatimes.com/2021/11/china-philippines-clash-in-south-china-sea-could-draw-in-us/>.

<sup>306</sup> The Associated Press, “Philippine Supply Boats Reach Marines at China-Guarded Shoal.”

<sup>307</sup> “Celebrating 46 Years of Diplomatic Ties, China, Philippines Vow to Cooperate Further,” Republic of the Philippines Presidential Communications Operations Office, June 10, 2021, [https://pcoo.gov.ph/news\\_releases/celebrating-46-years-of-diplomatic-ties-china-philippines-vow-to-cooperate-further/](https://pcoo.gov.ph/news_releases/celebrating-46-years-of-diplomatic-ties-china-philippines-vow-to-cooperate-further/).

<sup>308</sup> Republic of the Philippines Presidential Communications Operations Office.

<sup>309</sup> Andreo Calonzo, “Duterte’s Pivot to China Yet to Deliver Promised Billions,” BNN Bloomberg, July 4, 2021, <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/duterte-s-pivot-to-china-yet-to-deliver-promised-billions-1.1625248>.

only \$3.2 billion of direct investments were approved by 2020—a fraction of China’s original \$15 billion dollar pledge. Noting the slow progress, Camba notes that “both China and the Philippines oversold their partnership, raising expectations for the Philippine public that were unfulfilled.”<sup>310</sup> Although President Duterte continued to emphasize a favorable economic relationship with China in the months leading up to the incident, the benefits of Chinese infrastructure and investments had not yet come to fruition. As confidence in Chinese infrastructure investments began to slow at the time of the incident, Philippine economic interests became smaller and less influential.

## **5. Diplomatic Interests**

Another factor that influenced Philippine behavior during the incident was continued diplomatic ties between China and the Philippines. As discussed in previous case studies, the BCM is one diplomatic channel in which the two countries can discuss bilateral issues.<sup>311</sup> On May 21, 2021, six months prior to the incident, representatives from both countries met for the sixth time under the BCM to discuss SCS challenges.<sup>312</sup> While the Philippines reiterated its call for China to adhere to international law to include the 1982 UNCLOS and the 2016 SCS Arbitral Award, representatives from both sides emphasized “the importance of dialogue in easing tensions” and “acknowledged the importance of addressing differences in an atmosphere of openness and cordiality.”<sup>313</sup> Furthermore, the meeting emphasized the importance of using other diplomatic platforms including ASEAN and the East Asia Summit to promote peace and stability. Also illustrating favorable diplomatic relations during the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Summit, four days after the resupply mission occurred, President Duterte thanked and acknowledged “China’s reaffirmation of commitment to an early conclusion of negotiations on a substantive and

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<sup>310</sup> International Crisis Group, “The Philippines’ Dilemma: How to Manage Tensions in the South China Sea” (International Crisis Group, December 2, 2021), [https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/316-the-philippines-dilemma%20\(2\).pdf](https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/316-the-philippines-dilemma%20(2).pdf).

<sup>311</sup> Republic of the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs, “Philippines, China Convene Mechanism to Ease Tensions, Explore Cooperation in South China Sea.”

<sup>312</sup> Republic of the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>313</sup> Republic of the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs.

effective Code of Conduct on the South China Sea.”<sup>314</sup> Both the BCM meetings and the president’s statements show that the Philippines continued to stress favorable diplomatic relations with China prior to, and immediately after, the incident.

### C. BEHAVIOR ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSION

The 2021 Second Thomas Shoal incident shows an overall response of resistance due to the influence of two resistance factors outweighing three accommodating factors. Although numerically outnumbered by accommodating factors, stronger resistance factors led the Philippines to successfully resupply the shoal. First, a policy to protect claims initially influenced resistance behavior, which included the deployment and continuous presence of military personnel onboard the *Sierra Madre* to defend the feature, as well as the issuance of diplomatic protests and statements that condemned Chinese actions. Second, increased trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance, observed in the restoration of the VFA, support for AUKUS, and increase bilateral meetings, influenced the Philippines to resist by seeking diplomatic assistance from the United States that resulted in statements that emphasized the 1951 MDT as a warning to China. Although the Philippines demonstrated aspects of resistance behavior, the Philippines also demonstrated accommodating behavior. First, China’s strong military capabilities, observed in live-fire exercises in the SCS, influenced the Philippines to accept China’s request to avoid deploying navy or coast guard vessels as escorts for the upcoming resupply mission. A second factor that contributed to accommodating behavior in this case included the administration’s preference to manage the dispute through diplomatic channels such as the BCM. Finally, the pursuit to maintain favorable economic relations with China such as the BRI also likely played a role in accommodation. However, growing criticism of economic relations with China suggest that this factor may have had a diminished role in accommodating behavior and instead, possibly helped to shift Philippine behavior towards resistance in this case study. While the Philippines was influenced by two factors of resistance and three factors of accommodation, the overall classification of resistance is

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<sup>314</sup> “No Peace If the Strong Continues to Trample on the Weak, Duterte Tells Leaders’ Summit,” Inquirer.net, November 27, 2021, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/200719/no-peace-if-the-strong-continues-to-trample-on-the-weak-duterte-tells-leaders-summit>.

most appropriate because accommodating behavior did not impede the Philippines from continuing its planned resupply mission to the shoal.

Summarizing the drivers stated in the hypothesis, the incident occurred during a period when the Duterte administration implemented a policy to protect territorial claims, the Philippines had increased trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance, and when China had strong military capabilities to assert its position in the SCS. Assessing the influence of each of these drivers, the Philippines's policy to protect claims established a baseline level of resistance against China's actions, trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance increased resistance further, and China's military capabilities set an upper limit on the level of additional resistance. Assessing the overall classification of resistance with the hypothesis, this case study demonstrates that the Philippines increased resistance when trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance was strengthened but shows that the Philippines will accommodate and limit resistance when faced with strong Chinese military capabilities and other underlying factors.



## VI. CONCLUSION

This thesis has identified some of the main causes of Philippine responses to Chinese coercion in the South China Sea (SCS). This chapter first assesses how well the six hypotheses explain the observed behavior in five case studies. Based on this assessment, the chapter will then identify the combination of these factors is more likely to lead the Philippines to push back against Chinese coercion or accommodate Chinese actions in the SCS. Finally, the chapter discusses the implications of these factors for future SCS conflicts and provides U.S. policy recommendations to help the Philippines resist Chinese coercion.

### A. HYPOTHESES ASSESSMENT

In this thesis, six hypotheses were proposed to identify factors that explain Philippine responses to Chinese coercion in the SCS. The evidence found for the first hypothesis—that increased trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance leads to more resistance—was very strong in both administrations. During the Aquino administration, both the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident and 2014 Second Thomas Shoal incident exhibited an overall classification of resistance behavior that was influenced by high trust in the alliance. During the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident, increased trust resulted from the 2011 U.S. pivot to China, as well as the signing of the Manila Declaration in November 2011 which commemorated the sixtieth anniversary of the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT).<sup>315</sup> Similarly, in the 2014 Second Thomas Shoal incident, increased trust was reflected in several statements made by U.S. officials that asserted a favorable relationship with the Philippines prior to the incident, as well as the negotiation and signing of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement on April 28, 2014, while the incident unfolded.<sup>316</sup>

While the variable levels of trust observed during the Duterte administration suggest an overall impression of weaker trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance compared to the previous Aquino administration, each of the three case studies still provided evidence

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<sup>315</sup> U.S. Department of State Office of the Spokesperson, “Signing of the Manila Declaration on Board the USS Fitzgerald in Manila Bay, Manila, Philippines.”

<sup>316</sup> U.S. Embassy in the Philippines, “Signing of Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement.”

in support of the hypothesis. Although the 2018–2020 Thitu Island incident demonstrated an overall classification of accommodation, the Philippines demonstrated resistance behavior by issuing diplomatic statements after trust in the alliance increased during the incident. This increased level of trust was attributed to the return of the Balangiga Bells by the United States in the same month as the incident began,<sup>317</sup> as well as U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s statement that clarified defense commitments in March 2019, three months after the incident began.<sup>318</sup> On the other hand, the 2021 Whitsun Reef incident provides a counterpoint to the hypothesis by showing that decreased levels of trust are more likely to lead to accommodating behavior. President Duterte’s announcement to cancel the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) in February 2020,<sup>319</sup> and further remarks that criticized U.S. commitments one month prior to the incident, resulted in the Philippines rejecting American assistance to remove Chinese vessels from the area. In the 2021 Second Thomas Shoal incident, better levels of trust, demonstrated by the president’s decision to retract the VFA’s termination in July 2021,<sup>320</sup> vocal support for AUKUS in September 2021,<sup>321</sup> and participation in the Bilateral Strategic Dialogue (BSD) in November 2021,<sup>322</sup> influenced the Philippines to demonstrate an overall response of resistance behavior.

Evidence found for the second hypothesis—that stronger policies to protect claims leads to more resistance—was also significant in both administrations. In both the 2012 Scarborough Shoal and 2014 Second Thomas Shoal incidents during the Aquino administration, the Philippines exhibited overall resistance behavior that was influenced by strong policies. Prior to the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident, President Aquino asserted

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<sup>317</sup> The Associated Press, “U.S. Returns Church Bells Seized from Philippines as War Trophies.”

<sup>318</sup> Pompeo, “Remarks with Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin, Jr. at a Press Availability.”

<sup>319</sup> Jim Gomez, “Philippines Notifies US of Intent to End Major Security Pact,” AP News, February 11, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/manila-philippines-us-news-ap-top-news-mark-esper-969de0066e93fbc26a4e258b7b7eca1d>.

<sup>320</sup> “Philippines’ Duterte Fully Restores Key Troop Pact with United States,” *The Straits Times*, July 30, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/philippines-and-us-boost-ties-as-tensions-grow-in-south-china-sea>.

<sup>321</sup> Duterte, “Intervention of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte at the 9th ASEAN-US Summit.”

<sup>322</sup> U.S. Embassy in the Philippines, “United States, Philippines to Hold Ninth Bilateral Strategic Dialogue.”

Philippine sovereignty in his State of the Nation address eight months prior to the incident when he announced his intent to submit a case against China to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea.<sup>323</sup> Continuing to assert a strong policy to protect claims during the 2014 Second Thomas Shoal incident, the Aquino administration made verbal statements that asserted Philippine sovereignty, publicly acknowledged the true purpose of *Sierra Madre* serving as a permanent outpost, and submitted a Memorial to the Arbitral Tribunal.<sup>324</sup>

The three case studies during the Duterte administration also demonstrated resistance behavior based on strong policies to protect claims. Although the 2018–2021 Thitu Island incident demonstrated an overall classification of accommodation, President Duterte’s emphasis on territorial claims and specific references to protect Thitu Island in his 2018 State of the Nation Address five months prior to the incident influenced the Philippines to push back against Chinese coercion by deploying military assets and continuing upgrade activities on the feature.<sup>325</sup> Similarly, the Philippines demonstrated resistance behavior during the 2021 Whitsun Reef incident based on a policy to protect claims—despite the incident also demonstrating an overall classification of accommodation. This policy was reflected in the president’s State of the Nation address eight months prior to the incident,<sup>326</sup> as well as in a speech delivered to the United Nations General Assembly where he emphasized the 2016 arbitral ruling six months before the incident began.<sup>327</sup> Resistance behavior based on this policy included the deployment of military and coast guard assets, as well as the issuance of statements and diplomatic protests against Chinese coercion. Finally, a strong policy to protect claims contributed to an overall classification of resistance behavior in the 2021 Second Thomas Shoal incident. This policy, also verbalized in President Duterte’s 2021 State of the Nation address four

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<sup>323</sup> Aquino III, “Benigno S. Aquino III, Second State of the Nation Address, July 25, 2011 (English Translation).”

<sup>324</sup> Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 186–87.

<sup>325</sup> Duterte, “Rodrigo Roa Duterte, Third State of the Nation Address, July 23, 2018.”

<sup>326</sup> Duterte, “Rodrigo Roa Duterte, Fifth State of the Nation Address, July 27, 2020.”

<sup>327</sup> Duterte, “Statement of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte during the General Debate of the 75th Session of the United Nations General Assembly.”

months prior to the incident, influenced the Philippines to deploy military assets and issue diplomatic protests and statements.<sup>328</sup>

Evidence found for the third hypothesis—that weaker Chinese military capabilities lead to more resistance behavior—was also significant in both administrations. In both case studies analyzed during the Aquino administration, weak Chinese capabilities directly correlated to an overall response classification of resistance. Within a discussion of China’s weak military capabilities during the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident, some areas that limited China’s ability to escalate SCS disputes against the Philippines were air strike and maritime projection capabilities. While China was in the process of military modernization at this time, maritime air strike capabilities from aircraft such as the J-15 were inhibited as China’s first aircraft carrier was not yet commissioned by the time the incident occurred.<sup>329</sup> Similarly, with the *Liaoning* aircraft carrier still conducting sea trials at the time of the 2014 Second Thomas Shoal incident, China had limited air strike capabilities that could complete the 700-mile journey to the Spratly Island chain from the mainland.<sup>330</sup>

The three case studies analyzed in the Duterte administration also supported the third hypothesis by illustrating the opposite conditions of strong Chinese military capabilities influencing accommodating behavior. During the Duterte administration, China’s military capabilities grew significantly after completing reclamation work and constructing runways on SCS features in 2016.<sup>331</sup> Increasing air strike capabilities against the Philippines during the 2018–2020 Thitu Island incident, China influenced accommodating behavior by constructing a 3,000-meter runway on Subi Reef—located only 14 miles away from Thitu Island.<sup>332</sup> This increased threat resulted in the Philippines accommodating Chinese coercion by not deploying additional military or law enforcement vessels. During the 2021 Whitsun Reef incident, China’s strong military capabilities

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<sup>328</sup> Duterte, “Rodrigo Roa Duterte, Sixth State of the Nation Address, July 26, 2021.”

<sup>329</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, “Chapter Six,” 2013, 113.

<sup>330</sup> Beckley, “The Emerging Balance in East Asia,” 105.

<sup>331</sup> Gregory Poling, “A Tumultuous 2016 in the South China Sea,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, February 22, 2016, <https://amti.csis.org/a-tumultuous-2016-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>332</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon’s Shadow*, 259–60.

influenced accommodating behavior after conducting ballistic missile tests and deploying the *Liaoning* aircraft carrier to the SCS for exercises.<sup>333</sup> Additionally, China empowered its coast guard to escalate disputes with firepower after implementing a new law one month prior to the incident.<sup>334</sup> These demonstrations of strength influenced the Philippines to concede fishing interests in the area. The 2021 Second Thomas Shoal incident also supported the hypothesis by showing how China's strong military capabilities influenced accommodating behavior—even though the overall behavior classification was resistance. Continuing to assert its military capabilities in the SCS by conducting live-fire exercises with H-6J bomber aircraft,<sup>335</sup> China influenced the Philippines to avoid using navy or coast guard vessels as escorts for the resupply mission.

Moderate evidence was found in both administrations for the fourth hypothesis that increased diplomatic interests led to more accommodating behavior. While diplomatic interests were not observed in the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident, the 2014 Second Thomas Shoal incident demonstrated accommodating behavior based on higher diplomatic interests. Diplomatic interests associated with the negotiation of a code of conduct (COC) in the SCS between ASEAN and China at the time of the incident influenced the Philippines to limit the role of military assets during the dispute in order to follow a “rules-based approach.”<sup>336</sup> During the Duterte administration, increased diplomatic interests influenced accommodating behavior in all three incidents that were observed. Prior to the 2018–2021 Thitu Island incident, the Philippines signed the Bilateral Consultation Mechanism (BCM), which discouraged multilateral or internationalization of issues.<sup>337</sup> The BCM influenced accommodating behavior as demonstrated by the Philippines' initial reluctance to publicize the dispute. During the 2021 Whitsun Reef incident, the BCM continued to influence the accommodating behavior as demonstrated by the president

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<sup>333</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, “Chapter Six,” January 1, 2021, 220–21.

<sup>334</sup> Wong, “Philippine Security Implications from China's Growing Maritime Capabilities,” 80.

<sup>335</sup> Feng, “China Drops Thousands of Bombs and Missiles in Colossal Military Exercise.”

<sup>336</sup> Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 176.

<sup>337</sup> Lye Liang Fook, “The China-Philippine Bilateral Consultative Mechanism on the South China Sea: Prospects and Challenges,” 2.

restricting his cabinet from publicly criticizing Chinese actions in the SCS three days before an upcoming bilateral meeting.<sup>338</sup> Finally, at the sixth BCM meeting held six months prior to the 2021 Second Thomas Shoal incident, both Philippines and Chinese leaders emphasized “the importance of dialogue in easing tensions.”<sup>339</sup>

Evidence found for the fifth hypothesis—that increased political interests in SCS claims lead to more resistance behavior—was weak but still significant in the 2018–2020 Thitu Island incident during the Duterte administration. Influenced by increased opposition to China’s actions in the SCS by Philippine voters leading up to the 2019 mid-term elections,<sup>340</sup> the Philippines increased resistance behavior by continuing upgrade activities, issuing diplomatic protests, and releasing public statements that denounced Chinese coercion.

Evidence found for the sixth hypothesis—that increased economic interests with China will lead to more accommodating behavior—was also significant. Although the 2014 Second Thomas Shoal did not demonstrate economic influences, the remaining four cases studies showed strong accommodating behavior based on this factor. In the 2014 Second Thomas Shoal incident during the Aquino administration, the Philippines demonstrated accommodating behavior by offering to pursue joint projects after losing an estimated \$23 million due to China’s month-long quarantine of Philippine fruit imports during the incident.<sup>341</sup>

During the Duterte administration, all three case studies demonstrated accommodating behavior based on economic interests associated with China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and his own “Build Build Build” infrastructure program.<sup>342</sup> One month prior to the 2018–2020 Thitu Island incident, the Philippines signed 29 economic

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<sup>338</sup> AFP News, “Duterte Bans Philippines Ministers from Speaking on S. China Sea.”

<sup>339</sup> Republic of the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs, “Philippines, China Convene Mechanism to Ease Tensions, Explore Cooperation in South China Sea.”

<sup>340</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon’s Shadow*, 267.

<sup>341</sup> Zhang, “Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing’s Use of Coercion in the South China Sea,” 146.

<sup>342</sup> Baviera and Arugay, “The Philippines’ Shifting Engagement with China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” 278.

agreements that included projects in industrial development and joint resource exploration projects in the SCS.<sup>343</sup> Influencing accommodating behavior, increased economic interests resulted in the Philippines initially restraining itself from publicizing the incident. Similarly, two months prior to the 2021 Whitsun Reef incident, the Duterte administration signed its seventh economic agreement in support of infrastructure and development projects.<sup>344</sup> Favorable economic relations continued to be an underlying influence leading up to the 2021 Second Thomas Shoal incident, as illustrated by President Duterte’s statement that emphasized the BRI five months prior.<sup>345</sup> However, increased criticism of BRI investment projects during this period suggest that this factor may have had a smaller, and less influential role in accommodating behavior while the incident occurred.<sup>346</sup>

## **B. RESEARCH CONCLUSION**

While individual factors played a role in Philippine responses, no single factor decisively swayed the Philippines to an absolute outcome of resistance or accommodation. Rather, the combinations and conditions observed at the time of each incident influenced the overall classification of behavior in a particular incident. For example, a policy to protect territorial claims influenced resistance behavior in all five case studies. However, because other factors influenced behavior, a policy to protect claims did not always lead to an overall response classification of resistance. With these considerations in mind, the following combinations of factors were found to highly influence certain outcomes: first, the relationship between the Philippine leader’s trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance and China’s military capabilities; and second, the link between China’s military capabilities and the Philippines’ economic interests with China.

First, the case studies showed that when trust in the U.S-Philippine alliance is high and China’s military capabilities are assessed to be weaker, the Philippines are more likely

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<sup>343</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon’s Shadow*, 265.

<sup>344</sup> CNN Philippines Staff, “China Grants ₱3B to PH to Support Infra, Other Development Projects.”

<sup>345</sup> Republic of the Philippines Presidential Communications Operations Office, “Celebrating 46 Years of Diplomatic Ties, China, Philippines Vow to Cooperate Further.”

<sup>346</sup> Calonzo, “Duterte’s Pivot to China Yet to Deliver Promised Billions.”

to push back against Chinese coercion. The logic behind this explanation is that higher trust in the alliance would provide the Philippines with the confidence that the United States would provide defensive support in case disputes escalated beyond the capabilities of the Philippines. Similarly, weaker Chinese military capabilities would provide the Philippines with assurance that escalation would be limited should tensions rise further. During the Aquino administration, this correlation was observed as the Philippines demonstrated an overall classification of resistance in both case studies. However, as conditions changed during the Duterte administration, China's military strength increased while trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance was relatively weaker than in the previous administration. This inverse relationship led to an overall classification of accommodation in the 2018–2020 Thitu Island incident and 2021 Whitsun Reef incident. The 2021 Second Thomas Shoal incident provides another aspect of this relationship by showing a case where there was both high trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance and strong Chinese military capabilities. While the Philippines demonstrated an overall classification of resistance in this case, China's strong military capabilities influenced aspects of accommodating behavior and limited the threshold of Philippine resistance.

Second, the case studies also show that when Chinese military capabilities are strong and economic interests are also high, the Philippines are more likely to accommodate. This logic can be explained by the Philippines facing an asymmetric military threat from a country that is also a large contributor to the Philippine economy. Since the Philippines are unable to directly challenge China's military, the Philippines is more likely to accommodate Chinese actions in SCS disputes rather than risk the consequences of economic fallout with China. During the Aquino administration, economic interests with China appeared to be isolated, as the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident was the only case study that demonstrated accommodating behavior based on this factor. During the incident, economic interests increased after China initiated a quarantine on Philippine fruit imports. Reacting to this action, the Philippines demonstrated accommodating behavior by offering joint exploration projects to China.

Similarly, the Duterte administration demonstrated higher levels of accommodation based on these two variables. Proactively pursuing infrastructure investment projects such



as China's BRI during a period when China's military capabilities were strong, the Duterte administration accommodated Chinese coercion in all three incidents during his term. In both the 2018–2020 Thitu Island incident and 2021 Whitsun Reef incident, the Philippines' efforts to strengthen economic ties with a militarily stronger China influenced an overall classification of accommodation. While the 2021 Second Thomas Shoal incident demonstrated an overall classification of resistance, high economic interests and strong Chinese military capabilities also influenced accommodating behavior during the incident.

### **C. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF SCS DISPUTES AND U.S. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Observing changes in behavior in the past two administrations, this thesis has shown that Philippine behavior has shifted from strong resistance behavior during the Aquino administration to more accommodating behavior during the Duterte administration. One significant factor that has influenced, and will continue to influence, this change is China's strengthened military capabilities which threaten Philippine interests in the SCS. As China continues to increase its capabilities in the future, regional claimants will rely more on their powerful allies to maintain regional stability to counter the asymmetric threat. Related to this challenge, trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance is a second critical factor that has influenced behavior in the last two presidential administrations. While the alliance demonstrated a downward trend during the Duterte administration, the increased trust demonstrated in the recent 2021 Second Thomas Shoal incident may mark a turning point for a better relationship in the future. However, rebuilding trust is a long-term process that will depend on the interests of future presidential administrations in both countries. Without these considerations, trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance may once again backslide. Finally, economic interests are a third significant factor that has increasingly influenced Philippine behavior to accommodate Chinese coercion over time and will likely continue to be a critical factor after the upcoming May 2022 Philippine presidential election. Castaneda notes that Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., the frontrunner, and his family "maintain warm relations with the Chinese-Filipino business community and have

courted investment ties with China in their bailiwicks.”<sup>347</sup> Unless the Philippines shifts its economic interests to other sources of prosperity, China will continue to use economic coercion to influence Philippine behavior in SCS disputes.

Assessing these factors and their significance in SCS disputes, two policy recommendations are provided for the United States to increase trust in the U.S.-Philippine alliance and decrease Philippine economic interests in China. First, the United States should continue issuing diplomatic statements that assert the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty to provide the Philippines with the confidence that the United States will defend security interests. Additionally, the United States should explicitly describe how and when it will defend Philippine interests. Vague security assurances and a perceived lack of U.S. action in past disputes were concerns that diminished trust during the Duterte administration. However, when the United States clarified its commitments, as illustrated in Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s March 2019 statement, trust in the alliance increased and led the Philippines to demonstrate more resistance behavior.<sup>348</sup> Increasing these types of assurances will not only provide the Philippines with greater confidence that the United States will defend SCS interests, they will also bolster the confidence of other Southeast Asian claimants that the United States is committed to protect their respective interests in the region as well.

Second, the United States should provide the Philippines with increased financial incentives and investment opportunities that will reduce economic dependence on China and decrease accommodating behavior. In the current administration, President Duterte has been persistent in his pursuit of infrastructure investment opportunities associated with China’s BRI. So far, China has pledged \$24 billion in bilateral funding and investments to the Philippines,<sup>349</sup> while the United States has obligated a fraction of that number with

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<sup>347</sup> Jason Castaneda, “Philippine Frontrunner Marcos Favors China over US,” *Asia Times*, February 1, 2022, <https://asiatimes.com/2022/02/philippine-frontrunner-marcos-favors-china-over-us/>.

<sup>348</sup> Pompeo, “Remarks with Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin, Jr. at a Press Availability.”

<sup>349</sup> Estrada, “The Belt and Road Initiative and Philippine Participation in the Maritime Silk Road.”

only \$8 million toward Philippine infrastructure in 2021.<sup>350</sup> However, increased criticism of BRI projects in the Philippines, coinciding with an overall drop in Chinese BRI spending due to COVID-19, provides the United States with an opportunity to pull Philippine economic interests away from China.<sup>351</sup> The United States can increase infrastructure financing and investments through the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (USIDFC), which was established by the 2018 Better Utilization of Investment Leading to Development (BUILD) Act.<sup>352</sup> Noting its creation as a direct response to China, Runde and Bandura note that the USIDFC offers low and lower-middle economies “a private-sector, market-based solution” as an alternative to China’s state-to-state financing.<sup>353</sup> Additionally, with a spending cap of \$60 billion for investments, the USIDFC provides an economic avenue for the United States to level the playing field in its Philippine infrastructure competition with China. While the likelihood of China fulfilling its pledges remains questionable, the United States can increase investments in the Philippines and, more importantly, follow-through with such investments to counter Chinese incentives in the future.

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<sup>350</sup> U.S. Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development, “U.S. Foreign Assistance By Country,” [ForeignAssistance.gov](https://foreignassistance.gov), February 24, 2021, <https://foreignassistance.gov/cd/philippines/2021/obligations/0>.

<sup>351</sup> Eric Olander, “AEI: Chinese BRI Spending Plummeted in 2019,” *The China Africa Project*, February 12, 2020, <https://chinaafricaproject.com/2020/02/12/aei-chinese-bri-spending-plummeted-in-2019/>.

<sup>352</sup> Daniel F. Runde and Romina Bandura, “The BUILD Act Has Passed: What’s Next?,” *Center For Strategic & International Studies*, October 12, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/build-act-has-passed-whats-next>.

<sup>353</sup> Runde and Bandura.

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