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## Mobilizing International Stakeholders' Pressure to Shape the Dynamics of the China-Philippines Maritime Dispute in the South China Sea

Ma. Daren Barquez\* and Nutthathirataa Withitwinyuchon

Institute of Diplomacy and International Studies, Rangsit University, Pathum Thani 12000, Thailand

Corresponding author; E-mail: [prayasaen@gmail.com](mailto:prayasaen@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

This study examines the evolving roles of international stakeholders in the ongoing maritime dispute between China and the Philippines, with particular attention to the narratives surrounding South China Sea claims and the implementation of the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal Ruling. Using a descriptive-analytical qualitative method and document-based data, it analyzes how international legal norms interact with geopolitical power asymmetries. China's noncompliance, grounded in historical claims and reinforced by military and economic strength, reveals the limits of international legal instruments when challenged by great powers. The study also considers the behavior of ASEAN, the United States, and other regional actors. Although the arbitral ruling provided juridical clarity and diplomatic leverage, enforcement remains elusive due to ASEAN's fragmentation and China's advantage in bilateral negotiations. Official narratives issued through white papers project peaceful intentions yet simultaneously advance strategic dominance, weakening multilateral efforts toward dispute resolution. The findings highlight that international law, absent credible deterrents, struggles to constrain state action. Realist international relations theory offers a useful lens for understanding China's assertiveness and the restrained or inconsistent responses of regional stakeholders. Accordingly, the study underscores the need for stronger multilateral cooperation, technological transparency, civil society engagement, and strategic alliances to achieve a more balanced and enforceable maritime order. Ultimately, the paper concludes that stability in the South China Sea hinges not only on legal legitimacy but also on collective political will, regional cohesion, and assertive diplomacy. Without these elements, the gap between legal victories and on-the-ground realities will persist.

**Keywords:** *South China Sea; West Philippine Sea; maritime dispute; historical claims; sovereignty; nine-dash line; exclusive economic zone*

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, the significance of maritime power has significantly increased, as nations focus on the sea for both strategic defense and access to vital resources. Dominance over shipping routes, natural resources, and strategic locales has emerged as a fundamental aspect of numerous nations' national agendas. To justify their assertions, sovereign powers frequently invoke international law, seeking to establish dominion over lands they deem justly theirs. Nonetheless, despite the presence of legal structures, tensions persist, especially in areas where territorial boundaries are fiercely disputed. The South China Sea is a significant crossroads, with multiple nations, including China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan, asserting claims to different portions of the territory, rendering it one of the most intricate and contested maritime zones globally.

Geographically, the South China Sea serves as the meeting point for the Indian subcontinent, China, and Southeast Asia. It serves as a focal point for global sea routes in the Southeast Asian region, connecting it to the Western Pacific. The majority of the reefs, islets, rock formations, and shoals in this region are situated in the Spratly and Paracel chains of islands, which are all the subject of competing territorial claims. Over the past decade, tensions have intensified, particularly between China and the Philippines, who both assert control over the sea and its minor islands.

The Spratly Islands, which are encircled by wealthy fishing grounds and have the potential to contain gas and hydrocarbon deposits, are one of the micro islands. There are over 100 small islands or reefs. The claimant

nations are engaged in a dispute regarding the possession of the islands, oil and gas exploration, and fishery rights. Over the past few decades, the struggle for sovereignty over the Spratly Islands has led to a series of diplomatic spats, travel restrictions, economic strains, and harassment and detention of mariners, as well as numerous military skirmishes. Additionally, the region serves as a productive fishing ground and a refuge for marine ecosystems, which contribute to the preservation of the seafood supply of neighboring countries. The possession of islands in a disputed maritime territory is considered a critical element of sea control. The country that administers the Spratly Islands has the potential to utilize them as a military outpost. In the future, the islands have the potential to serve as locations for military operations and surveillance operations by the navy and air force (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020).

The Chinese government maintains that it has undisputed sovereignty over the region and considers the entire South China Sea to be a significant aspect of its national image. As the region adjusts to China's development as a global power, the Philippines and other neighboring countries have expressed concern regarding China's active consolidation of its presence in the South China Sea. As it expands its military presence, the Philippines and its neighbors increasingly view China's actions with alarm. In response, the Philippines initiated arbitration on January 22, 2013, challenging China's maritime behavior under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (1982). China rejected the tribunal's jurisdiction, yet the tribunal affirmed jurisdiction on October 29, 2015, and delivered its award on July 12, 2016 (Medina, 2017).

The tribunal ruled that China's Nine-Dash Line, a demarcation that China employs to assert extensive claims over the South China Sea, which overlaps with the maritime zones of neighboring countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia, and its historical claims lack a legal basis, affirming the Philippines' rights within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). However, China rejected the award, arguing that the tribunal ignored historical and legal foundations for its claims (Ying, 2016).

While much research has been conducted on the South China Sea dispute, a significant portion focuses primarily on the bilateral relations between China and the Philippines. This research redirects attention to the activities of international actors, specifically ASEAN, Japan, Australia, and the United States, and their influence on policy formulation, diplomacy, maritime security operations, and the implementation of international standards. This research, in contrast to previous studies that mostly depend on single-state views or national reports, amalgamates several international viewpoints to illustrate how external interventions affect regional power dynamics, limit unilateral acts, and aid in conflict management. This study addresses a significant gap in the literature by illustrating that the issue transcends a conventional territorial dispute between two nations, instead revealing a conflict profoundly influenced by the strategic interests and activities of both regional and global entities.

### **1.1 Realism: An Applicable Theory**

According to the dictum of Morgenthau about international politics, everything in the international arena is considered a "struggle for power" (Buszynski, 2002). Due to the structure of the international arena, states often act aggressively to secure their interests. In addition, states and their governments establish national and foreign policies to ensure power and secure relations with one another. This is because, in international relations, greater interaction and agreement with countries, specifically with strong and dominant nations, demonstrate power and strength. The absence of cooperation, opposing views, and egoistic state behavior often hinders sovereignty and stability, highlighting the inherently conflictual and competitive nature of international relations. From a classical realist perspective, the use of power is the most rational course of action for states (Buszynski, 2002).

The territorial conflict between China and the Philippines exemplifies this dynamic: both nations want strength and supremacy, making the realist perspective pertinent. In realism, nation-states serve as the principal players, and their authorities engage in rational decision-making to promote national interests (Antunes, & Camisao, 2018). As De Castro (2024) highlights, the Philippines has navigated a strategy oscillating between hedging, deterrence, and strategic accommodation, reflecting rational decision-making under conditions of power asymmetry. These choices demonstrate how a weaker state attempts to safeguard sovereignty while adapting to the presence of a dominant neighbor.

Actions that jeopardize state security or existence are deemed unreasonable. The realist theory posits that leaders strategically endeavor to safeguard their states in an anarchic international system, motivated by self-interest and the pursuit of power, often culminating in predictable consequences such as wars (Antunes &

Camisao, 2018; Alenezi, 2024). Rational actors, particularly state leaders, are guided by considerations of survival, security, and national interest, and the Philippines' strategic navigation of this dispute reflects these principles (De Castro, 2024).

China serves as a revisionist force that challenges the global status quo, using its might and capabilities to safeguard national interests. China's employment of indirect coercion, such as the deployment of military-grade lasers, the utilization of high-pressure water cannons, and coordinated obstruction or breaching tactics, has emerged as a key element of its strategy in the South China Sea. These measures enable China to assert its maritime claims and deter Philippine vessels without breaching the threshold of open armed conflict.

Consequently, China is capable of enforcing substantial operational restrictions on Philippine patrols and resupply operations, thereby effectively constraining the Philippines' freedom of navigation and access within its own EEZ (Misalucha-Willoughby, 2023, as cited in Sari, 2024). Along with these coercive actions directed at government vessels, Chinese ships have persistently harassed Filipino fishermen in contested waters. Rinoza and Maitem (2022) documented numerous incidents in which Chinese vessels shadowed fishing boats, obstructed their routes, and issued verbal warnings, thereby fostering an atmosphere of intimidation that deterred local fishers from accessing their traditional fishing grounds and compromised their livelihoods.

Together, these practices demonstrate a comprehensive strategy whereby China employs both state-directed maritime power and subtle forms of harassment to assert control over disputed waters without incurring a full-scale military confrontation.

## **1.2 Historical Context of China and the Philippines' Maritime Claim**

The Philippines and China have maintained economic, political, and military alliances. Manila, the capital of the Philippines, occupies a unique position in Southeast Asia, which influences the Philippines' engagement in China's expanding power (Yamazaki & Osawa, 2021). The South China Sea has been the subject of maritime entitlements by various nations in the region since the 1970s due to the presence of over 11 billion barrels of unexploited oil, approximately 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and its designation as a key military location (Center for Preventive Action, 2022). China has reinforced its presence through military infrastructure (Associated Press, 2022), while the Philippines maintains alliances with the U.S., Australia, and Japan, regularly filing diplomatic objections (Nepomuceno, 2022).

The Republic of the Philippines effectively presented its case against China's territorial incursion over the disputed territory in the Arbitral Tribunal in The Hague, Netherlands, on 22 January 2013, during the tenure of former Philippine President Benigno Aquino III. The Philippines effectively articulated its stance and rationale opposing China's unfounded claim to sea rights by commencing arbitration proceedings. The Philippines is the sole nation that possesses legal maritime rights over the disputed territory, as the West Philippine Sea is encompassed by the Philippines' EEZ and continental shelf, which include the northeastern section of the Kalayaan Island Group and Scarborough Shoal, as per the Department of Foreign Affairs (2022). Former Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. emphasized that the submitted evidence sufficiently supported the Philippines' jurisdictional claim, particularly since the territory in question fell within maritime boundaries defined by UNCLOS. Although the tribunal recognized these arguments in its ruling, the absence of a robust enforcement mechanism within UNCLOS made implementation difficult. This limitation reflects the convention's inability to compel state behavior or ensure compliance with its decisions. Moreover, China's position as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, with veto power, further complicates the situation, allowing it to dismiss the ruling despite its outcome favoring the Philippines (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016).

Doyo (2015) asserts that the Philippine government presented historical fragments of evidence in court that demonstrate the West Philippine Sea has been a part of the Philippines since ancient times. The declaration of possession of 33 maritime features in the disputed territory, first identified by a Filipino explorer named Tomas Cloma in 1953, was included in the documents. The surrounding countries have no legal or valid claims to the territory. Furthermore, during the proceedings, government officials submitted "First Scientific Map of the Philippines", as part of the historical evidence supporting their territorial claims. This centuries-old cartographic piece not only illustrates the country's biodiversity, cultural elements, and foreign influences but also includes detailed insets and outlying islands that cover what is now known as the West Philippine Sea.

Nevertheless, China has dismissed the tribunal's ruling as nothing more than symbolic, labeling it a "paper tiger" with no real impact on the ground. This stance highlights a critical flaw in UNCLOS: the absence of concrete enforcement mechanisms to compel compliance. As a result, UNCLOS's role is effectively reduced to interpreting legal provisions without the power to enforce them, limiting its ability to resolve pressing geopolitical conflicts. China maintains that it is the most legitimate claimant of the West Philippine Sea, as evidenced by its historical claims and other relevant factors, in contrast to the other party in this territorial dispute. Medina (2017) asserts that China has reaffirmed its assertion that the disputed territory is subject to its maritime jurisdiction due to its inclusion in the "Nine-Dash Line".

### **1.3 International Stakeholders in the Dispute**

It is seen that international institutions perform a significant role in promoting cooperation among states through interdependence (Devitt, 2011). Liberal Institutionalism argues that cooperation among states is possible and feasible, and such cooperation can result in conflict resolution, reduced competition and the promotion of peace. Ever since the dispute started, international organizations have facilitated dialogues and attempts to settle the dispute have taken place. Additionally, the Philippines has addressed the issue by cooperating in the creation of agreements.

This issue can be viewed through the China-Philippines maritime dispute, which shows how non-cooperation perpetuates international tension. The decision of China to be obstructive and uncooperative prevents peaceful resolution from taking place. Despite various attempts at settlement by the Philippines and international organizations, the actions of China hinder the establishment of an end to the dispute. Additionally, the inability of China to cooperate not only risks the security of its citizens and the Philippines, but also those of its neighboring countries within Southeast Asia. With this, it can be seen that China is being favored with the asymmetrical power distribution in the Asian Maritime region (Rubiolo, 2020).

The imbalance of power between China and the Philippines suggests that resolution may require intervention by a stronger external actor, such as the U.S., which has historically supported regional security in Southeast Asia (Caruana, 2023). Cooperation among all parties, as liberal institutionalism emphasizes, remains essential to achieve peace, security, and adherence to maritime law (Devitt, 2011). Countries in the region have developed alliances with the U.S., which includes the Philippines, whose relations date back to 1951. This intervention of the U.S. can help through the promotion of maritime international laws and the prevention of ongoing Chinese incursions in the area (Caruana, 2023). With this, the role of Liberal Institutionalism in the maritime dispute is to be a reminder that peace, security and settlement can be achieved if all agents and parties involved will be cooperative with all rules and agreements established.

### **1.4 Significance of the Philippines and China's Relationship**

The Philippines and China, separated by roughly 600 miles of the South China Sea, have a long history of engagement, including early tribute expeditions as well as subsequent diplomatic and cultural interactions (Wong, 1984). During the Cold War, ties between the Philippines and China were tense as the Philippines aligned with the U.S., while China adopted communism (Wong, 1984; Go & Foster, 2005). Subsequent to U.S. withdrawal, both nations progressively restored diplomatic relations, as seen by the 1957 reestablishment of ties and China's "Ping Pong Policy," which enhanced Beijing's regional influence (Wong, 1984).

The contemporary maritime dispute demonstrates how historical and administrative actions are interpreted differently under competing legal frameworks. Qi et al. (2025) provide a legal critique of Philippine activities in contested areas such as Scarborough Shoal and Sabina Shoal. They argue that the Philippines' patrols and infrastructure measures challenge China's claims under its interpretation of UNCLOS, illustrating that the dispute is shaped as much by legal interpretations as by political or strategic considerations. Integrating this legal perspective contextualizes the historical dispute, showing how past and present actions are filtered through competing narratives of sovereignty and international law.

Current relations are characterized by pronounced power imbalance, with China's structural advantage affecting strategic exchanges and often limiting the Philippines' influence (Yamazaki & Osawa, 2021). Institutional initiatives like the Bilateral Consultation Mechanism (BCM) have enabled discourse but produced no tangible results, indicating ongoing trust problems (Lye Liang Fook, 2024).

The Philippines has implemented a hedging policy that reconciles conflict and collaboration, guided by security considerations and regional maritime dynamics (Liu, 2023). Leadership transitions, from Duterte to Marcos Jr., have influenced this strategy, indicating a transition from deference to a more assertive balancing, notably through the deployment of coast guard “white hulls” to assert maritime presence without provoking military conflict (Putra, 2024; Putra, 2023).

Furthermore, Manila utilizes both internal and international perspectives to enhance its influence, integrating legal, diplomatic, and normative measures to confront China’s assertiveness (Chong, 2021). This layered approach highlights that the importance of the Philippines–China relationship transcends geographical proximity and territorial conflicts; it embodies a complex interaction of historical connections, power imbalances, institutional involvement, and strategic adjustments in the South China Sea.

### 1.5 UNCLOS

The UNCLOS establishes a legal framework for the world’s oceans and waters. Therefore, the UNCLOS includes a regulatory framework for the recognition, resolution, or at least diplomaticization of sovereignty conflicts. This encompasses, but is not restricted to, the legal status of resources on the seabed outside national jurisdiction, territorial sea limits, and a binding procedure to resolve existing disputes between states (Pemmaraju, 2016).

Schofield & Freestone (2024) underscores the complexities of maritime law, including island classification, baseline determination, and EEZ entitlements, noting that legal pronouncements do not automatically result in compliance on the ground. This highlights the gap between legal decisions and political realities, reinforcing the challenges of enforcing UNCLOS provisions in a context of power asymmetry.

The arbitral ruling demonstrates the potential of legal frameworks to influence diplomatic and strategic behavior. While the Philippines seeks to leverage international law to assert its maritime rights, China’s noncompliance underscores the limitations of UNCLOS in regulating state behavior without mechanisms to enforce rulings (Davenport, 2022). Together, these insights illustrate that understanding the South China Sea dispute requires integrating legal, strategic, and realist analyses to fully appreciate both the formal and practical dimensions of the conflict (Schofield & Freestone, 2024; Qi et al., 2025).

## 2. Objectives

- 1) To explore the challenges of the UNCLOS enforcement in the case of the maritime dispute between China and the Philippines.
- 2) To determine the role of other stakeholders in the development and progression of the dispute.
- 3) To assess the impact of international stakeholders’ involvement on diplomatic relations and conflict resolution efforts.

## 3. Materials and Method

### 3.1 Research Design

In this study, the descriptive analytical method of research was employed to explore the challenges of UNCLOS enforcement, the roles of international stakeholders, and the broader implications of the 2016 arbitral ruling on the China-Philippines maritime conflict as it is the most appropriate way when factual data are essential to address the research questions. Burns & Grove (2003) define descriptive research as a method that provides “a snapshot of a situation as it occurs naturally”. To elaborate further, the descriptive method allowed the study to systematically document geopolitical, legal, and diplomatic events as they unfolded, ensuring that the discussion was based on observable and verifiable developments rather than assumptions.

Descriptive analysis was used to provide a structured overview of the geopolitical, legal, and diplomatic developments in the maritime dispute while the analytical approach allowed the researcher to interpret and evaluate the effectiveness and limitations of international legal mechanisms such as UNCLOS including its impact on other stakeholders. This analytical component is particularly suitable for this study because it enables the examination of causal factors, responses, and patterns in state behavior, allowing for a deeper understanding of why certain enforcement challenges persist. This approach, then, can be deemed imperative in identifying both structural limitations (e.g., enforcement gaps, veto power of China and other power asymmetries) and potential multilateral solutions. This method’s objective is to justify and establish the nature of an existing situation between

China and the Philippines in the South China Sea by presenting empirical evidence to describe and evaluate the patterns.

Due to the sensitivity of the issue, obtaining interviewees was not feasible; however, to avoid relying mainly on the researcher's interpretation, the study applied explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria for selecting documentary sources.

Inclusion criteria comprised documents, reports, and analyses directly related to the China-Philippines maritime dispute in the South China Sea (bilateral relevance); publications from reputable state institutions, intergovernmental organizations, and international institutions such as the Department of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, ASEAN, United Nations, and the Permanent Court of Arbitration (credibility); peer-reviewed academic publications and legal analyses providing empirical evidence, theoretical frameworks, or expert interpretations (peer-reviewed scholarship); sources published primarily after the 2016 arbitral ruling and up to 2025 to ensure temporal relevance; and materials offering alternative viewpoints from regional stakeholders, maritime experts, non-governmental organizations (NGO), and academic commentary to provide perspective diversity.

Exclusion criteria omitted sources addressing broader South China Sea issues not specifically tied to China-Philippines interactions (irrelevant scope), unverified news or online content lacking corroboration (unverified media reports), documents that were overtly opinion-based, and sources providing repetitive information without additional insights (redundant material). By applying these criteria, the study ensured that the data collected were credible, relevant, and multi-perspective, thereby minimizing reliance on a single interpretation and strengthening the objectivity of the analysis.

### **3.2 Data Collection**

The data collection approach for this study was conducted over a one-year period, from late 2024 to mid-2025, to capture current developments and ongoing geopolitical responses to the China-Philippine maritime dispute. This extended timescale was necessary considering the issue is continuously evolving and driven by legal, political, and strategic reasons. The dispute is a rapidly evolving geopolitical issue, with frequent developments including naval encounters, diplomatic initiatives, and policy adjustments. A one-year focus period enables the study to be timely, relevant, and comprehensive. Despite nine years following the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling, this study remains highly significant due to the unresolved nature of the region's territorial and maritime conflicts, as well as China's continuous defiance of the ruling. The developments in the South China Sea show how the ruling continues to influence regional diplomacy, legal debate, and geopolitical alliances. Therefore, its relevance nearly a decade later provides vital insights into international law enforcement, power dynamics, and the Philippines' future foreign policy path.

Data collection relied heavily on documentary and textual analysis of both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included arbitral tribunal decisions, UNCLOS documents, state-issued diplomatic notes, public reports from the Department of Foreign Affairs, ASEAN, United Nations, official statements from international institutions such as the Permanent Court of Arbitration, Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea Office of Legal Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, U.S. Department of State, and Congressional Research Service.

Secondary sources comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, legal commentaries, books, policy papers, and credible news reports that evaluated the outcome of the 2016 ruling and the evolving diplomatic landscape in the Indo-Pacific. To further address the lack of in-person interviews, the study also incorporated diverse perspectives drawn from regional stakeholders, maritime experts, non-governmental organizations, and academic analyses. These materials provided a broader range of viewpoints and helped ensure that the interpretation of events did not rely solely on the researcher but reflected a more balanced and multi-perspective understanding of the dispute.

The study also integrated materials that discuss the impact on various stakeholders, such as ASEAN states, fishermen, environmental groups, and international powers like the US and Japan. These sources offered insights into the broader regional and global implications of the ruling, including the continued militarization of maritime features, the effect on trade routes, the diplomatic stance of ASEAN, and the strategic realignment with extra-regional allies.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Challenges in the Enforcement of UNCLOS in the China-Philippines Maritime Dispute

The UNCLOS lacks an enforcement mechanism, which is the primary issue in its application to the maritime dispute between China and the Philippines. While UNCLOS sets out an extensive legal framework regarding maritime entitlements and resolution of disputes, it has no coercive authority to compel non-compliant states such as China to comply with decisions. According to UNCLOS provisions, States Parties shall resolve any disputes regarding the interpretation or application of this Convention through peaceful means, as stipulated in Article 2, paragraph 3, of the United Nations Charter. To this end, they shall pursue solutions utilizing the methods outlined in Article 33, paragraph 1, of the Charter (Article 279, Part XV, UNCLOS, 1982). Therefore, the objective is not to jeopardize international security, justice, and peace by attempting to address an issue. The Charter specifically indicates that parties may utilize any of the following: inquiry, arbitration, negotiation, mediation, among others.

As reported by Carpio (2016), China did not attend the proceedings and then went on to reject the ruling as “null and void.” Another problematic matter is the structural disequilibrium of global power. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council with veto capacity, China has the authority to influence or veto actions that seek to invoke consequences (Baviera, 2014). This institutional deficit therefore enables powerful states to evade international legal obligations without direct costs, making international arbitration susceptible when state sovereignty is coercively asserted.

Moreover, the appeal of China to historical rights complicates legal clarity under UNCLOS. The government of China maintains that its actions within the West Philippine Sea are legitimized through centuries of historical use. The problem here is the legal and diplomatic contradiction in balancing historic claims with codified international maritime law. A second enforcement problem arises from diplomatic impasse (Ho, 2017). While UNCLOS invites states to resolve disputes peacefully, including through mediation, arbitration, or inquiry, China’s reluctance to engage in multilateral discussions undermines these mechanisms. According to Mitchell & Owsiak (2021), even bilateral discussions have remained restricted and symbolic because of the increasing trust deficit. This diplomatic inertia adds to the longevity of the conflict and inhibiting the successful application of UNCLOS provisions. Lastly, the militarization of disputed features by China weakens the enforcement of legal rulings. Artificial island-building, missile system installation, and repeated deployment of maritime militia in contested waters serve as *de facto* enforcement of Chinese claims. Not only do they interfere with Filipino fishers and oil explorations, but they also create a permanent physical presence that no paper ruling can reverse arbitrarily.

#### 4.1.1 Realism: Motivation Behind Philippines’s Passive Behavior

From this perspective, the tension is rooted in the distribution of power among global actors, capitalizing on competition and conflict. This systemic angle highlights how the structure of the international system shapes behavior. For a more fragile state like the Philippines, the advice is to maintain composure rather than directly defying a major power like China. Even in an anarchic setting, the Philippines tends to adopt a passive stance, such as avoiding legal action, believing it is in their best interest to minimize the risk of warfare, economic retaliation, or regional distrust against a much stronger adversary. As a result, they gravitate toward self-help strategies, securing relative gains in safety while sacrificing absolute gains such as full jurisdiction over the contested sea, the fear that has only helped solidify China’s manipulation of the status quo.

#### 4.1.2 Voluntary Compliance: China’s Refusal to Conform

On the other hand, Wisnugroho (2024) notes that the peak of the struggle in bearing the ruling lies in the unclear boundaries of enforcement. Although compliance requires a state to follow certain responsibilities outlined in international agreements and treaties, there is a clear lack of authority in their legal mechanisms. The only tools the law can enact are influencing a state’s image, imposing sanctions, and denying aid, all of which have been unsuccessful in intimidating a powerful country like China.

Now, the deciding factor lies in the liberty of state parties to pick independent alternatives, as long as they are deemed peaceful on both ends, but this leaves the upper hand to the more powerful country in reality. This constrained freedom stems from UNCLOS’s incapacity to go beyond the philosophical sphere of denoting disputes; it is largely incapable of producing actual physical solutions since there are no provisions addressing violations or negligence. Hence, the Philippines needs UNCLOS to step up in ensuring that global governance is

not compromised when faced with major economic powers, or else it risks losing its title as the basis for world guidelines.

#### *4.1.3 China's Use of Peace in Diplomatic Discourse*

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2016) has highlighted China's endeavors to uphold peace and stability in the South China Sea, especially in its bilateral relations with the Philippines. The ministry reported that China has started productive conversations and collaboration, including ideas for collaborative development, and asserted that these endeavors have produced favorable results. However, despite this self-portrayal of cooperation, China simultaneously challenges external assessments that question the legality of its maritime behavior. In the same document, China vehemently condemned the U.S. Department of State's Limits in the Seas No. 150 study, characterizing it as politically motivated and legally deficient. The Chinese government contended that its territorial sovereignty and marine rights are historically and legally verified, emphasizing its dedication to the international rule of law at sea.

In contrast to China's narrative, the U.S. analysis provides a systematic and legally grounded critique of China's claims. The Limits in the Seas No. 150 report, issued by the U.S. Department of State (2022), methodically examines China's maritime assertions in the South China Sea, especially concerning UNCLOS. It evaluates various critical allegations made by China, including claims of sovereignty over maritime features, the application of straight baselines across entire island groups, extensive maritime zones, and purported historic rights. The report determines that these assertions are incompatible with international law, particularly when the features in question do not meet the criteria for sovereignty or the establishment of maritime zones (U.S. Department of State, 2022). It further asserts that China's effort to delineate extensive areas of the South China Sea using straight baselines lacks legal basis under UNCLOS. The claim of historic rights is considered weak, lacking legal precedent and geographic specificity. The U.S. Department of State declares, "These claims severely undermine the rule of law in the oceans and various universally acknowledged provisions of international law as outlined in the Convention" (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

China predictably rejected these findings, framing the report as a political attack rather than a legal analysis. China dismissed the results as contrived, prejudiced, and politically motivated. Chinese officials argued that the study misrepresents international legal concepts and interferes in regional matters under the pretense of legal analysis (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016). Notwithstanding these criticisms, the U.S. study is thoroughly substantiated by legal citations and historical records, providing a robust counterargument to China's claims.

From the standpoint of the Philippines, these opposing narratives have concrete implications for sovereignty, resource security, and maritime rights. China's extensive maritime claims and actions represent an infringement of the Philippines' sovereign rights under UNCLOS. The Philippines has repeatedly reported that China has intruded into legitimate economic activities within its EEZ, including fishing and resource exploitation. Additionally, environmental degradation resulting from China's fishing practices and land reclamation activities at Scarborough Shoal and Second Thomas Shoal constitutes a violation of China's obligations to protect and preserve the marine environment, as stipulated in Article 192 of UNCLOS (Congressional Research Service, 2016).

These concerns were validated by the landmark 2016 arbitral ruling. The Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague concluded that China's maritime claims lacked legal foundation under UNCLOS and that its actions, particularly the hindrance of Philippine fishing and petroleum operations, were illegal. The Tribunal also found that China had failed to prevent its fishermen from exploiting protected marine zones, including traditional fishing grounds where the Philippines holds historical rights. Moreover, China's deployment of law enforcement vessels was deemed to pose considerable navigational hazards and threaten peaceful maritime activities (Congressional Research Service, 2016).

Despite these legal conclusions, China continues to defend and justify its activities, including its environmentally destructive reclamation efforts. China insisted that its extensive land reclamation in the Spratly Islands was not intended to harm the marine environment. Nonetheless, the Tribunal determined that China's construction of artificial islands on seven reef features resulted in severe ecological damage, particularly to coral reef ecosystems. It found that China had breached its obligations under international law to protect marine biodiversity. Reports further show that Chinese authorities inadequately regulated illegal activities by Chinese

nationals, including the harvesting of endangered species such as giant clams and sea turtles (Congressional Research Service, 2016).

#### *4.1.4 China's Strategic Framing of Maritime Sovereignty in the South China Sea*

The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (2016) reaffirmed China's unwavering commitment to upholding what it describes as its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights in the South China Sea. In the document, the use of the term Nanhai Zhudao (South China Sea Islands) is a strategic linguistic and legal framing that unifies China's territorial assertions under a single historical and sovereign claim, rather than treating them as a series of individual disputes over separate features. This framing allows China to present its claims not merely as territorial ambitions but as a restoration of historical rights and continuous governance over the region (Mastro, 2020).

China's white paper on the issue outlines its perspective on the origins of the dispute, asserting that the Philippines' so-called "illegal occupation" of features within the Spratly Islands is the root cause of tensions. According to the document, these actions by the Philippines lack both legal basis and historical legitimacy. China positions its claims as rooted in centuries of peaceful administration and usage, invoking the phrase since ancient times to underscore a narrative of continuity and legitimacy (State Council Information Office of the PRC, 2016). This historical framing is not simply rhetorical; it reflects a broader strategic agenda. Scholars argue that China's invocation of terms such as "inherent territory" and "historical rights" serves to delegitimize opposing claims and sidestep adverse international rulings, including the landmark 2016 decision by the Permanent Court of Arbitration. That ruling invalidated China's expansive nine-dash line and upheld the Philippines' sovereign rights within its EEZ as defined under the UNCLOS (Baviera, 2014).

Despite this ruling, China has continued to reject international arbitration and instead doubled down on its sovereignty claims. As Mastro (2020) notes, China's narrative is anchored in a realist worldview cloaked in nationalist rhetoric, portraying itself not as an aggressor but as a rightful custodian of regional order. However, this narrative is accompanied by tangible actions ranging from the construction of artificial islands and expanded naval patrols to increased military presence and economic coercion, demonstrating what analysts describe as "reactive assertiveness" (Shah, 2017). Although China publicly pledges to uphold freedom of navigation and regional stability, its actions, particularly those involving the restriction of fishing rights and interference with maritime patrols, raise concerns about its true intentions. These contradictions underscore how China's white papers function as both strategic communications and political tools. At their core, they aim to reframe China's role in the region not as a revisionist power, but as a legitimate actor reclaiming historical rights and preserving maritime order on its own terms.

The maritime stance of China, as outlined in its Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation white paper, leans on cooperative language while veiling coercive strategies. The document outlines noble goals such as peaceful dispute resolution, ecological protection, and maritime safety while justifying firm responses to perceived territorial encroachments (State Council Information Office of the PRC, 2017). It reflects a dual-track strategy: extending olive branches through regional forums like ASEAN while fortifying its own maritime outposts and excluding foreign navies from contested zones. This strategic ambiguity enables China to shift the burden of escalation onto its adversaries while presenting itself as restrained and reasonable. It capitalizes on legal vagueness, especially the undefined scope of historical rights in justifying its expansive maritime claims (Mastro, 2020). In practice, however, China has repeatedly undermined multilateral negotiations by preferring bilateral talks where its political and economic weight is unmatched (Shah, 2017). Even though its white paper preaches harmony, its rejection of arbitration and militarization of reefs speak volumes. The ultimate objective is not merely resource access, but regional hegemony control over the rules, actors, and outcomes in the South China Sea. Its emphasis on non-interference and Asian solutions for Asian problems directly challenges the U.S.-led security framework. Thus, China's white paper stance appears more as a geopolitical playbook than a genuine roadmap for peace.

From the Philippines' standpoint, China's stance has triggered significant diplomatic, security, and economic dilemmas. While the Aquino administration pursued legal arbitration as a peaceful recourse, China dismissed the proceedings as illegitimate and refused to participate (Baviera, 2014). The result was a huge asymmetry as manifested in how a small nation leaning on international law versus a regional giant anchored in power politics. The 2016 tribunal ruling was a symbolic win for Manila, but China's complete disregard revealed

the limits of law without enforcement. China's behavior, including coercing fishermen, blocking access to resource-rich areas, and launching coast guard operations, exposes its intent to enforce its claims on the ground or sea, irrespective of legality (Mastro, 2020).

For Filipino stakeholders like fishers and coast guard units, the effects are tangible: economic displacement, security risks, and policy paralysis (Baviera, 2014). The refusal of China to budge on its sovereignty claims renders regional cooperation aspirational at best. At worst, it normalizes a status quo where China sets the terms and others adjust. The Philippines, under shifting administrations, has alternated between legalism, diplomacy, and appeasement, all while contending with an assertive China. China's white paper thus functions as both shield and sword invoking peace yet wielding pressure.

#### *4.1.5 Progress Through Diplomacy*

Meanwhile, Poling (2025) emphasized that the landscape of international law should not rely solely on self-regulation. China can misbehave all it wants, but at the end of the day, its actions still depart from what international law commands. This gives the Philippines an opportunity to act in its own favor, an approach that differs from both the former and current presidencies. While former President Rodrigo Duterte demobilized the adjudication, aligning with a more friendly attitude toward China's honor, the administration of Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos refuses to raise a white flag in response to China's continued illegal patrols.

The recent initiatives to bring the standoff into mainstream media have made threefold progress, with support growing from 8 to 27 allies, including the European Union (EU), all applying pressure on Beijing. This strategy is exactly what scholars have urged the Philippines to adopt: rally around their arbitral win. Alone, they may be ignored as a small-scale country, but as the issue repeatedly resurfaces on the world stage garnering support, asserting value, and gradually building international consensus, it becomes harder to shrug off. Although losing a single international case to the Philippines may not make China officially retreat, a pattern of defeats across various international platforms could force it to keep its dignity.

## **4.2 Impact of the UNCLOS Ruling on Other Stakeholders**

According to Schultheiss (2023), commentators on the South China Sea disputes dubbed the dilemma "lawfare" to illustrate the different movements of China, the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the US, highlighting the regulatory variations among their respective rules.

The UNCLOS ruling had far-reaching consequences not only for the two major claimants but also for other actors in the South China Sea. Its regional and international implications have been multifaceted and irregular. To start off, for Southeast Asian claimants like Vietnam and Malaysia, the decision provided them with legal confirmation of their own maritime claims (Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea Office of Legal Affairs, 2017). Vietnam also shares similar issues with China, particularly the Paracel Islands. The decision reinforced their diplomatic stakes by depicting the significance of maritime features not giving rise to extensive maritime zones, thereby constraining the extent of China's expansive claims. However, as with the Philippines, such nations are hindered by enforcement limitations, particularly due to the stronger military and economic influence of China.

Second, the ruling compelled regional players, especially ASEAN, to come to terms with the fact of great power non-compliance. Although certain member-states such as Indonesia and Vietnam celebrated the ruling, ASEAN's overall reaction was lukewarm. The absence of a united, developed regional position is an indication of ASEAN's internal conflicts and the susceptibility of some of its members to Chinese economic power. This leads to a diplomatic no man's land where the ruling is politically recognized but effectively unenforced.

The Tribunal also examined whether various maritime features in the South China Sea could independently generate maritime zones. Features that remain above water at high tide may qualify for a territorial sea of up to 12 nautical miles. In contrast, features submerged at high tide, such as low-tide elevations or submerged reefs, do not qualify. The Tribunal determined that many of the features China had reclaimed or artificially modified had lost their natural status, rendering them ineligible for maritime entitlements under UNCLOS. The assessment emphasized that eligibility must be based on the features' natural conditions, not artificial enhancements.

A critical question was whether any of the disputed features, particularly within the Spratly Islands, could support a broader claim, such as a 200-nautical-mile EEZ or continental shelf. According to UNCLOS, such zones

can only be generated from islands capable of sustaining human habitation or economic life. Rocks, which lack this capacity, are not eligible to create an EEZ or continental shelf. Upon evaluation, the Tribunal concluded that none of the Spratly Islands met the legal criteria to generate extended maritime zones. Furthermore, it rejected the notion that the Spratly Islands could collectively serve as a unit to establish maritime entitlements (Congressional Research Service, 2016).

More than this, the ruling has affected maritime and trade interests everywhere. The South China Sea is a strategic seaway through which about one-third of global shipping moves. The judicial validation of freedom of navigation and denial of China's excessive maritime claims offer a paradigm that favors the interests of global trade players. Nations like the U.S., Japan, Australia, and members of the EU have utilized the ruling as a benchmark to legitimize naval activities within the area and diplomatic backing of international maritime law (Wirth, 2016). Fourth, for other stakeholders who are non-state such as fishermen, environmental activists, and local businesses, the decision gave them hope but few concrete gains. Filipino fishermen have complained of continued harassment by Chinese ships off Scarborough Shoal despite the legal triumph.

The damage to coral reefs caused by China's land reclamation also persists, damaging regional marine biodiversity as well as fisheries. Thus, while the ruling offers a legal platform for asserting rights, it does not automatically translate to material gains or safety for local communities. Finally, the ruling heightened the involvement of outside powers such as the United States, which has deepened its strategic involvement in the Indo-Pacific. This entails regular military exercises with allies, freedom of navigation operations, and diplomatic pronouncements reaffirming the legitimacy of the ruling. Although such outside intervention heightens the issue's exposure, it may also risk characterizing the dispute in terms of the broader U.S.-China competition which may detract from ASEAN-focused approaches to resolution.

#### *4.2.1 China and Russia*

As mentioned, the republic struggles to advance its legitimacy, as it has invested significant effort in asserting historical reasoning paired with outpost intimidation. Moreover, China and several other states maintain a repressive outlook regarding warships and innocent passage, yet there are no signs of a possible team-up among them. Storey's (2021) study indicates that Russia's increasing alignment with China may influence Philippines' strategic approach. Despite Russia's stated position of neutrality and advocacy for peaceful settlement through international law, it expressed sympathy for China's dismissal of the 2016 arbitral verdict that benefited the Philippines. This position suggests that Russia is unlikely to support the Philippines in safeguarding its maritime rights. Its alliance with China, motivated by a mutual resistance to U.S. dominance, may encourage China's aggression in the South China Sea. For the Philippines, this indicates a reduction in possible external stabilizers and a more complex diplomatic landscape as the Russia-China alliance solidifies power dynamics unfavorable to smaller claimant nations (Storey, 2021).

#### *4.2.2 Philippines and United States*

Considering the prevalence of worldwide advocates and the absence of a law enabling historical narrative to possess regions, Poling (2025) said that the ruling is the main instrument of Philippines to maneuver China to meet halfway. In accord with the U.S. and its partners, the organization shall stand up for the Philippines as well to prolong the major elements of the international system. However, the Philippines cannot put its full trust in the U.S. as it can have an interest of its own.

Despite undertaking Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), issuing diplomatic statements, and enhancing defense commitments with the Philippines and other regional partners, the U.S. has not succeeded in substantially deterring China's de facto dominance over contested maritime features. This prompts essential concerns concerning the true efficacy of U.S. deterrence, a subject that continues to be inadequately examined in current scholarship, which frequently presumes that American military presence alone is sufficient to sustain regional stability.

Thus, the Quincy Institute (2025) reminded U.S. to build clear boundaries in cooperation, to evaluate if putting their name on the line for a small piece of land is beneficial for its interest. The institution also suggested giving primacy to the Philippine soldiers during heated occasions, and only providing modernizing tools and top information for the team. In their perspective, the strategy should revolve around heightened diplomatic support since the legitimacy has already been established, encouraging Philippines to engage through policy drafting

rather than risk the same fate as Taiwan. Failure to respond wisely could cultivate a backfire on the USA, or worsen the risk of warfare against a major power.

In addition, Zhafir (2025) also highlighted the narrow competence of the U.S. in its latest performances. Despite the preference of countries to seek diplomatic refuge from it, its opinion as a dominant power is still not absolute. Even if the U.S. can offer free investigation of navigation details to forward over declaration of maritime claims, it does not acquire territory in the disputed regions. Fundamentally, the USA has been slacking off in staggering their dominion through economic sanctions to sway China's repudiation (Wisnugroho, 2024).

#### 4.2.3 *International Bodies*

##### 1) ASEAN

The members of the ASEAN are split into dissimilar perspectives, falling short of putting up a more united front, thereby disintegrating substantial concord. Competing national interests among ASEAN members have continuously hindered consensus-building. Nations with greater economic or political affiliations to China, like Cambodia and Laos, often oppose robust collective declarations against Chinese encroachment, thus undermining ASEAN's negotiating authority. Secondly, ASEAN's institutional architecture is deficient in enforcement capabilities. The Declaration of Conduct (DOC) and draft Code of Conduct (COC) delineate norms for conflict resolution, although they lack the authority to enforce compliance from China or member states, illustrating ASEAN's greater weakness as a normative rather than a coercive entity in international relations.

The inability of ASEAN to provide a cohesive, binding response has implications for regional security and the strategic alternatives available to the Philippines. In the absence of robust multilateral support, smaller nations must depend on bilateral legal and diplomatic strategies, as shown by the 2016 arbitral tribunal verdict. The ASEAN's failure to achieve consensus on maritime issues effectively perpetuates power imbalances favoring China, since the body lacks the capacity to serve as a credible counterweight to forceful regional entities.

Furthermore, the protracted advancement of the COC discussions, after years of deliberation, exemplifies ASEAN's constrained influence. China has persistently opposed formalizing regulations that may limit its maritime operations, often using bilateral interactions with specific ASEAN nations to circumvent collective obligations. This tactic has enabled China to use ASEAN's consensus-driven decision-making framework, guaranteeing that any enforceable measures remain aspirational rather than implementable.

##### 2) United Nations

The General Assembly emphasized that 20 senior agents uphold the Philippines' cause in September 2024. Although Beijing's seat on the Security Council cannot be revoked, it cannot wholly impede nonbinding resolutions. The latest statistics show that Manila can clinch a 62 to 44 vote with 87 abstentions (Poling, 2025).

##### 3) International Court of Justice

Poling (2025) also underscored the enormous advantage Manila could gain when this issue is brought to the ICJ, given its background in battling alliances of small powers against dominant members of the Security Council.

#### 4.3 **Multilateral Framework for Compliance and Peaceful Resolution**

In light of the natural limitations in UNCLOS enforcement and regional power asymmetry currently prevailing in the region, the findings show the imperative for an enhanced more effective and cooperative multilateral mechanism to address the conflict. This mechanism has to incorporate legal, diplomatic, and strategic elements that uphold the rules-based global governance under a perspective that takes into account regional geopolitical realities. First and foremost, regional cooperation needs to be seriously enhanced. While ASEAN is confronted by structural and political limitations, it is still an important platform for communication and rule-making. Hence, speeding up the agreement on a legally binding COC between ASEAN and China is absolutely necessary (Pemmaraju, 2016). As mentioned by Williams (2016), unlike the 2002 DOC, the new COC must not only make provisions for conflict de-escalation, joint management of resources, and maritime security but also include provisions that are enforceable and which guarantee accountability among the signatories.

Moreover, Southeast Asian claimant states, especially the Philippines, must persist in strengthening strategic ties with extra-regional powers like the U.S., Japan, and Australia. These ties need to go beyond

conventional security collaboration and be expanded to economic support, maritime domain awareness, and cooperative coastal infrastructure development. Granted, all such efforts are likely to incite geopolitical friction; nevertheless, they are imperative for balancing China's aggression and establishing a credible deterrent against unilateral maritime activities. More than this, it is imperative to strengthen international institutions such as the UN, WTO, and ITLOS to enforce international judgments better. Enhancing the UNCLOS framework by imposing economic sanctions, diplomatic reprisals, or trade penalties against transgressors would lend more legitimacy to it. Though acquiring global consensus on this is no easy task, mounting advocacy from middle powers slowly shifts the diplomatic waves (Mitchell & Owsiak, 2021). It is equally important to integrate civil society and non-state actors in ocean governance. Indigenous groups like fisherfolk, green groups, and business communities can be a vital tool for reporting illegal practices, mapping environmental degradation, and advocating sustainable harvesting of sea resources. Satellites for monitoring reef destruction or IUU fishing are not only instruments for transparency but also sources of irrefutable evidence that can be used to guide subsequent diplomatic and legal action.

#### *4.3.1 The Right Approach*

Currently, the Philippines is considering two options: either to proceed with another arbitration under UNCLOS Annex VII to charge China for environmental damage, or to pursue a still-undecided larger case (Poling, 2025). Contrastingly, it would be ideal for China to at least exhibit an interest in controlling the controversial sea conflict by collaborating with ASEAN countries. In this way, the feud can shift toward addressing the exigent calls of nature, particularly studies on sustainability, countering piracy, and mitigating climate change (Yang et al., 2022).

#### *4.3.2 Bilateral and Multilateral*

Maulaya (2020) emphasized the challenges and risks involved in crafting bilateral and multilateral agreements among states in contested maritime areas. Observing China's strategic behavior, a bilateral arrangement appears advantageous for Beijing, as it allows it to secure agreements without interference from other rivals, maximizing political, economic, and defense gains. However, this approach disadvantages the Philippines, which, as a comparatively weaker state, requires third-party involvement to advocate for its interests and assess risks objectively.

Multilateralism, in contrast, promotes consensus-building by ensuring that all stakeholders' perspectives are considered. The inclusion of diverse viewpoints increases transparency, reduces the risk of unilateral actions, and fosters equitable dialogue, particularly when aligned with international norms. Considering the complex dynamics of the dispute, incorporating perspectives from multiple actors is crucial for devising solutions that are both legitimate and sustainable.

#### *4.3.3 Minilateralism to Multilateralism*

While selecting a strategic framework is critical, implementation is often challenging due to procedural and political complexities. Tiongson (2023) suggests that minilateralism, collaboration among a limited number of states with shared interests, can serve as a stepping stone toward broader multilateral engagement. Panda (2021) defines minilateralism as "issue-based collaboration among a limited number of participants," allowing faster, more decisive action compared to conventional multilateralism, which can be slowed by large memberships and divergent interests. Minilateralism offers a practical mechanism for addressing urgent security concerns among a few key actors while complementing formal multilateral frameworks rather than replacing them. The success of this hybrid approach depends on regional stakeholders' willingness to use these smaller-scale cooperative actions as a foundation for reinforcing multilateral principles, particularly the Philippines' commitment to UNCLOS and the 2016 Hague Arbitral Award. Misalignment or lack of coordination risks empowering opposing geopolitical interests and undermining regional stability.

Maulaya (2020) stressed the significance and insecurities of crafting bilateral and multilateral deals between the involved states of the contested oceans. Observing China's actions, the most appropriate tool from its perspective is to pursue a bilateral arrangement. The agreement would stamp out speculation from other rivals and remain free from its lucrative, political, and defense dividends. However, this would be unjust to the Philippines, as it naturally needs outside influence to champion its visions as a weaker state. The necessity of

involving a third party to peruse genuine purposes or assess the dangers of any perils also calls for consensus building, something that bilateralism cannot provide.

Alternatively, multilateralism makes way for consensus building, where all manifestations are seriously heard. The entanglement of plural inputs assures transparency by diminishing the chances of unilateral initiatives and enabling accessible communication that empowers equality, especially when mapped onto global principles. Given the dynamics of the predicament, the inclusion of angles from discordant groups is vital in drawing settlements. Disagreement with dominant stances can create a healthy ground for evaluating narratives free from harassment and can intellectually produce a feasible solution to end the conflict.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the limitations of international law when confronted with the reality of geopolitical power asymmetries, which is an imperative concern within the realism theory in international relations. Realism argues that the international system is anarchic and that states act primarily in pursuit of their national interests, with power—particularly military and economic capability—serving as the main currency. This theory helps explain China's behavior in the South China Sea. With this, the strategic posture of China, ranging from militarization to economic coercion, aligns with the assertion of realism that powerful states operate above rules when those rules threaten their strategic ambitions.

Furthermore, the Philippine legal victory, while important, depicted the absence of enforceable mechanisms within UNCLOS, which subsequently made it an instructive case of international law colliding with political reality. Realism would argue that without a credible enforcement threat or strategic counterweight, legal norms alone are insufficient to regulate state behavior (Raditio, 2015). Analyses from maritime law experts such as Beckman (2021) similarly conclude that the ruling's effectiveness depends on external political will, not on legal merits alone. The failure of ASEAN to form a unified stance and the muted international response further reflect the realist understanding that alliances are often fragile when member states have conflicting national interests.

China's white paper reassertions and continued presence in contested waters expose not just legal resistance but a realist bid for regional dominance. This perspective is echoed by ASEAN scholars like Chong (2021), who note that economic interdependence constrains the willingness of Southeast Asian states to oppose Beijing. Realism also explains the hesitancy of many regional actors to challenge Beijing too forcefully, fearing economic reprisals or strategic backlash. Thus, the enforcement gap evident in this conflict is not just legal, but deeply political and rooted in the unequal distribution of power.

According to León (2019), realism theory also discusses the behavior of other actors including the U.S. and ASEAN member states, especially in responding to the South China Sea conflict. One of the best manifestations of this lies in how the U.S.' backing of freedom of navigation operations and strengthening of military ties with regional partners align with its realist objective to contain the influence of a rising China. From this angle, the U.S. is not simply defending international law but protecting its own geopolitical stake in the Indo-Pacific.

In addition, U.S. influence in the South China Sea is limited by a disparity between strategic objectives and actual implementation. While it demonstrates military presence and supports a rules-based system, its failure to ratify UNCLOS diminishes its credibility in upholding legal standards. Moreover, U.S. engagement is often reactive rather than proactive, emphasizing global influence over direct settlement of regional conflicts. This selective participation constrains U.S. capacity to effectively counter China's aggressiveness and leaves regional countries, such as the Philippines, managing issues with little external assistance. The case demonstrates that even a dominant state might find it difficult to implement international law when behaviors are contradictory, incentives are mismatched, and dependence on coercive diplomacy alone fails to alter regional conduct.

Existing literature rarely interrogates the contradiction between U.S. rhetoric and its institutional behavior, nor its impact on the Philippines' reliance on legal mechanisms such as the 2016 arbitral ruling. International relations scholars such as Mastro (2021) and Fravel & Glaser (2022) support this argument by emphasizing that U.S. actions in the South China Sea serve dual purposes: safeguarding legal norms and maintaining regional primacy.

On a similar footing, countries like Vietnam and Malaysia, though supportive of the arbitral ruling, have largely acted with caution, prioritizing stable relations with China over open legal confrontation. This mirrors the

realist belief that states behave prudently to preserve sovereignty and avoid provoking more powerful adversaries. ASEAN's divided response further exposes how realism shapes diplomacy: when national interests conflict with collective action, states often default to self-preservation. Nonetheless, ASEAN remains an essential forum for discourse and global prominence. Its function in organizing meetings, enhancing communication, and promoting diplomatic collaboration allows smaller member nations to jointly address problems, notwithstanding poor enforcement.

In this context, ASEAN's impact is mostly derived from norm-setting, diplomatic signaling, and the advocacy of soft norms, which may gradually affect state conduct and regional expectations. Even the Philippines' approach, oscillating between legalism, diplomacy, and appeasement, intersects with this tension between normative ideals and strategic necessity (Deinla & Dressel, 2019).

In this light, this paper critically evaluates ASEAN's failures and partial accomplishments, emphasizing the constraints of regional organizations in addressing issues that involve the interests of major powers and the vulnerability of lesser states. The South China Sea dispute illustrates that although ASEAN has the potential to be a significant organization for regional stability, its institutional deficiencies, member diversity, and non-binding processes limit its ability to prohibit unilateral acts or successfully enforce international rules. Comprehending these constraints is crucial for elucidating the persistent tensions, the Philippines' reliance on foreign allies, and the difficulties in establishing a rules-based maritime order in Southeast Asia.

Furthermore, realism explains why civil society and legal scholars may celebrate the arbitral award, but national governments remain constrained by cost-benefit calculations. This is reinforced by cross-referenced incident reports from Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (2023), Congressional Research Service (2025), and Roy (2023), which document that states' responses consistently shift depending on economic exposure to China. The case shows that while international norms like UNCLOS matter, they are filtered through the lens of power. The uneven reactions among states are a natural extension of realist assumptions that power dictates outcomes more than law.

Moreover, realism renders an imperative framework to understand the diplomatic strategies embedded in China's narrative of historical rights and maritime sovereignty. China's insistence on ancient claims, rejection of arbitration, and preference for bilateral dialogue reflect a realist tactic: shaping the rules of the game in a way that best serves national power. While the white paper promotes peace and mutual respect, China's concrete actions such as artificial island-building and exclusive patrol zones, reveal an underlying logic of deterrence and dominance (De Castro, 2016). These moves serve to normalize China's control while undermining any momentum toward multilateral legal enforcement.

From a realist lens, Zhang (2022) argued that such actions are not anomalies but calculated choices aimed at maximizing national interest. The strategy of reactive assertiveness, where China responds strongly to perceived threats while maintaining plausible diplomatic deniability, fits squarely within realism's toolkit. It allows China to appear restrained while reinforcing its claims on the ground. Scholarly debates also show contrasting interpretations: while Chinese academics such as Shicun (2018) emphasize historical continuity, Western analysts argue that these narratives are instrumental rather than historical (Renouard, 2014). This approach further weakens the credibility of legal norms by signaling that compliance is optional for powerful states. The arbitral ruling becomes more symbolic than operational when one side simply refuses to recognize its legitimacy. In this context, China's behavior is not a legal failure but a realist assertion of sovereignty under conditions of weak enforcement. Thus, the broader implications of the study reinforce realism's central insight: power, not law, is often the final arbiter in global politics.

Despite the sobering clarity that realism provides, the study also shows the importance of blending realist insights with practical, cooperative strategies. While power politics currently dominate, they are not the sole determinants of future outcomes. Realism, although often seen as pessimistic, can inform more grounded and strategic policymaking. For example, it suggests that the Philippines should continue cultivating strong bilateral and multilateral alliances to shift the power equation, particularly with nations committed to a rules-based international order.

Regional frameworks like a legally binding COC are more likely to be effective if paired with real strategic deterrents. Legal institutions must also be reformed not only to declare norms but to enforce them through collective pressure, including economic and diplomatic tools. Technology, surveillance, and civil society involvement can complement realist strategies by increasing transparency and raising reputational costs for

violators. In short, this study supports the view that realism does not render law useless; rather, it reminds us that law without power is vulnerable, and that legitimacy must be backed by capability. Realism invites policymakers to deal with the world as it is, not just as it ought to be, while still pushing incrementally toward justice and peace.

Meanwhile, from an international relations theory lens, the stance of China straddles realism and constructivism. Realism is evident in its power-centric behavior through military modernization, deterrence, and resource competition. Constructivism appears in how China constructs historical narratives to legitimize modern claims, which shows identity, legacy, and civilizational continuity (Mastro, 2020). The white paper rhetoric of peace and cooperation aligns with liberal ideals, but the exclusionary practices and unilateral actions undermine those very principles. China also selectively engages international law, invoking UNCLOS when convenient while discarding its rulings when adverse (Shah, 2017). This reveals a poststructuralist paradox: China positions itself as both a victim of Western dominance and an architect of a new Asian order. In doing so, it blurs the lines between legality and legitimacy, between history and hegemony. Its strategic ambiguity allows it to both reassure neighbors and keep them guessing. Ultimately, the white paper is less about resolving disputes and more about reconfiguring the regional order in its favor. The South China Sea, through China's lens, is not merely a maritime space but a stage for asserting identity, power, and destiny.

This study points to the striking disparity between courtroom wins and the politics of geopolitical enforcement. China's appeal to historical claims also challenges the universality of the codified law of the sea, injecting uncertainty that undermines legal precision. Diplomatic solutions remain hampered by intramural differences within ASEAN and China's advantage in bilateral negotiations. Militarization of contested features and intimidation of Filipino fishermen show how power projection still overwhelms legal authority. The inability of regional states to unite against China has boosted China's assertive stance. In parallel, attempts at peaceful negotiation and arbitration have been mostly symbolic, lacking genuine deterrence or accountability. These results highlight the ongoing gap between legal structures and enforceable outcomes.

The dynamics between sovereignty, narratives of the past, and international norms continue to define the status quo in disputed waters. Aside from state-level dynamics, the ruling had wider implications for other actors. States such as Malaysia and Vietnam had legal backing for their arguments but were caught in the same enforcement problem as the Philippines. Great powers such as Japan, Australia, and the U.S. used the judgment to legitimize their naval presence, promoting strategic agendas in the name of upholding maritime law. Non-state actors, especially local fishermen, environmentalists, and coastal communities, had an ethical platform but minimal functional security or economic respite.

Accounts of ongoing resource extraction, pollution, and encroachment on livelihood persist in the face of legal successes. Incident reports from AMTI, CSIS, and regional NGOs corroborate these impacts, providing alternative empirical evidence beyond the researcher's interpretation. China's official declarations and policy documents characterize its behavior as peaceful and lawful, yet these are contradicted by its increasing military presence and selective compliance with law. Strategic deployment of the language of law conceals a realist agenda seeking long-term predominance in the region. Legal and diplomatic measures, as useful as they are, remain inadequate without credible enforcement and collective regional opposition. The study indicates that there is a pressing necessity for cooperative multilateral action that interlaces legality with smart deterrence. In its absence, the sea war remains unresolved, shaped more by power than principle.

## 6. Conclusion

The principle of voluntary compliance hinders UNCLOS enforcement, as there is no universal supremacy to dictate states, allowing China to perpetually disregard the passing of the 2016 Hague ruling free from any backlash. Nevertheless, diplomatic breakthroughs under the Marcos administration are evident; these include the mobilization of international support and media attention, which have elevated the negative gravity on China. The 2016 arbitral decision was a historical legal triumph for the Philippines but has not yet resulted in full compliance and peace in the West Philippine Sea. China continues to defy the decision, insists on building artificial islands, denies Filipino fishermen access to fish, and grows stronger in contested seas.

The episode is an exact depiction as to how international law alone cannot resolve disputes over territories. To guarantee the Philippines' sovereignty and sea rights, cooperation with its neighboring ASEAN countries should be strengthened, and stronger partnerships with foreign allies should be built, coupled with pushing forward reforms in international legal entities. In the meantime, active participation of civil society and

utilization of modern technology can help monitor violations and make legal actions easier. There is still a peaceful way out, and this is through unity, international pressure, relentless labors of every leader involved, and continuous effort on the part of everybody involved. It is only proper that respect for international law, justice, and peaceful cooperation must always be preserved regardless of whatever long-term solution emerges in the West Philippine Sea.

Based on a realist angle, the Philippines' nonresistant behavior towards its territorial nemesis is rooted upon its fragile disposition within an anarchic international system. The band-aid solution adopted by Manila against China's odds of resulting in warfare means that the Philippines has habitually submitted to strategies immersed in relative security over absolute territorial achievement.

China and Russia have exploited cultural identity on their side to further their global placement through bureaucratic blockage, insinuating a communal interest in repelling Western-led judgments of maritime law. Although the Philippines-U.S. partnership is a fundamental component of strategic and diplomatic collaboration, it is characterized by inconsistency as a result of the U.S. reluctance to completely commit assistance. While Washington aids Manila in principle, it hierarchizes its own good, which may be in disarray with the Philippines'. International institutions like ASEAN, the UN, and the ICJ offer varying degrees of support. Nevertheless, to guarantee the Philippines' sovereignty and sea rights, cooperation with its neighboring organizations should be strengthened, and stronger partnerships with foreign allies should be built, coupled with pushing forward reforms in international legal entities.

The Philippines has the choice to pursue supplemental arbitration or directly invigorate diplomatic paths with regional partners. Multilateral approaches are encouraged over bilateral agreements, since the latter inordinately satisfy China due to the imbalance of power. A hybrid approach combining unilateralism with multilateralism may do a good turn as a pragmatic tool head-on, though the victory of the Philippines still rests upon steady synergy among worldwide actors oriented towards UNCLOS principles.

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