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The South China Sea and West Philippine Sea Conundrum: Philippines, its ASEAN Chairmanship, and the ASEAN Member-States

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The Philippines is a current hot ticket in international affairs. Such a condition is a manifest destiny founded by geography and sharpened by politics and security. Being an archipelago of its own, it has the challenging situation of being at the side of the South China Sea (SCS), a maritime hotspot due to overlapping territorial claims of nearby states.¹ Due to China's claim of the whole SCS via its nine-dash line, it took the legal pathway through a case in the

¹ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. "Maritime Claims of the South China Sea." Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Accessed October 31, 2025. <https://amti.csis.org/maritime-claims-map/>

Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), which it won.² This contextualizes its role in the great-power competition between China and the United States in the region, in which it has a military alliance with the latter since 1951.^{3,4} Moreover, it is clouded by the various strategic concerns of its neighbors coming from as wide as the whole Indo-Pacific. The assumption that a lot of states have the Philippines in their radar, whatever their interests may be, is within the ballpark.

However, the contrary is the reality with its immediate neighbors in Southeast Asia. Being a part of the region, ASEAN should be its theoretical and primary avenue for multilateral connections with other member-states. However, the organization is notable for its non-interference in domestic matters and its consensus-based decisions. On the surface, its cooperation is not as cohesive as the likes of the EU, nor does it follow the conventional logic of liberalism. This is the case for ASEAN especially in terms of security issues. Their national security interests are not aligned with one another, with various countries occupied with their own issues. It is not even clear whether SCS is a top and urgent priority for all states. Thailand is occupied by its borders with Myanmar.⁵ At the same time, the likes of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore prefer to hedge between the US and China.^{6,7,8}

It is in this complex situation that the Philippines will take the ASEAN chairmanship for next year. Therefore, it is important to ask three general questions with respect to the Philippine perspective: (1) What is it the security interest of the Philippines in relation to the SCS?; (2) Should the Philippines utilize its ASEAN chairmanship as an avenue for its security interests in the SCS?; and (3) What should be the possible responses of ASEAN for any SCS-related action the Philippines through its chairmanship may take?

The Point from Manila

To start, what is the Philippines' interest in the SCS? For itself, the Philippines relays the message of wanting to uphold the rules-based order as it received the decision coming from PCA regarding its disputed islands with China.⁹ It named its waters up to the extent of its EEZ

² Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA). "The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines v. The People's Republic of China)." Accessed October 31, 2025. <https://pca-cpa.org/ar/cases/7/>

³ Council on Foreign Relations. "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea." Global Conflict Tracker. Accessed October 31, 2025. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea>

⁴ U.S. Department of State. "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951, Volume VI, Asia and the Pacific, Document 95." Office of the Historian. Accessed October 31, 2025. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951v06p1/d95>

⁵ The Nation Thailand. "Philippines Push Binding South China Sea Code." Published September 18, 2025. <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/politics/40050591>

⁶ FactsAsia. "The China Factor in the Feasibility of Malaysian Hedging." Accessed October 31, 2025. <https://www.factsasia.org/blog/the-china-factor-in-the-feasibility-of-malaysian-hedging>

⁷ Chong, Alan. "Singapore's South China Sea Policy: Pragmatic Equidistance." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 39, no. 1 (2017): 76–100. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27301253>

⁸ Baviera, Aileen S. P. "The Influence of Domestic Politics on Philippine Foreign Policy: The Case of the South China Sea." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 39, no. 1 (2017): 50–75. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27301255>

⁹ GMA News Online. "DFA's Theresa Lazaro on South China Sea, West Philippine Sea." Published May 23, 2025. <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/960660/dfa-theresa-lazaro-south-china-sea-west-philippine-sea/story/>

in the conventionally-known SCS as the West Philippine Sea (WPS).¹⁰ The WPS is important to be take note of as the Philippines' maritime security concern mainly focuses on this part. All of these occurred while implementing its Self-Reliant Defense Posture and partnering with like-minded states.¹¹

Aside from maritime security, the economic benefits of the WPS are also in line with the Philippine economy. As an archipelagic state, the said maritime space is fishing grounds for fisher folks in coastal provinces that provide food security.¹² It is also rich and energy and mineral resources that can be harnessed for the country's industrial sector.¹³ From here, it can be inferred that more than ideals, the Philippines also have tangible considerations for its position in the WPS.

Moreover, all sectors of the state are being galvanized to consolidate the mindset of its citizens in support of the state's interest in SCS. One example to push such initiative are programs such as the Balangay Forum.¹⁴ This is a platform in which representatives from the fishing, environment, education, women, and other sectors gather with foreign dignitaries, military officers, academics, and politicians to present perspectives and ideas regarding SCS, particularly WPS.

The interest of the Philippines in the SCS may be multidimensional, involving security measures and emphasis on international law, but two interrelated points remain consistent in scope: it is defending its own territorial integrity within the WPS and calling for a rules-based order in the whole SCS.

A Children's Party Hat

With this, will the Philippines utilize the 2026 ASEAN chairmanship for its concerns in the SCS? It will do so but in a cooperating stance.¹⁵ President Marcos already mentioned months ago and in the ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur that he will push for a binding Code of

¹⁰ LawPhil Project. "Administrative Order No. 29, s. 2012." Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines. Accessed October 31, 2025. https://lawphil.net/executive/ao/ao2012/ao_29_2012.html

¹¹ Supreme Court E-Library (Philippines). "Republic v. China (South China Sea Arbitration)." Accessed October 31, 2025. <https://elibrary.judiciary.gov.ph/thebookshelf/showdocs/2/9788>

¹² Donnellon-May, Genevieve. "Something fishy? Can the Philippines Protect the West Philippine Sea Amid Rising Geopolitical Tensions?" Published December 11, 2024. <https://pacforum.org/publications/yl-blog-97-something-fishy-can-the-philippines-protect-the-west-philippine-sea-amid-rising-geopolitical-tensions/>

¹³ Africa, Sonny. "Non-alignment to benefit from West Philippine Sea." Published July 10, 2024. <https://www.ibon.org/non-alignment-west-ph-sea/>

¹⁴ Civil Relations Service, Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). "DND Holds 2nd Balangay Forum in Celebration of MANAMO 2025." Facebook, September 18, 2025. <https://www.facebook.com/CivilRelationsServiceAFP/posts/dnd-holds-2nd-balangay-forum-in-celebration-of-manamo-2025september-18-2025-quez/1242037761299902/>

¹⁵ Bernama ASEAN. "ASEAN News: Regional Developments." Published September 25, 2025. <https://asean.bernama.com/news.php?id=2454796>

Conduct (COC) regarding the SCS, which is already believed to be a futile future attempt.¹⁶¹⁷ A partial reason for anticipating its failure lies in the very nature of ASEAN. Any organization with a loose sense of functionality will also have a loose sense of leadership. An example of this would be the association itself, which implements a chairmanship on a rotation basis for all member-states annually. Article 32 of its charter lacks nuances, but essentially points out that the chairman must advocate for the ASEAN interest through cooperation and coordination, as well as a swift response to emergencies and crises.¹⁸ The Philippines is expected to uphold the given points by next year.

The task of chairmanship is attainable if an issue at hand can be considered as low politics or economic in nature. However, a different story unfolds regarding a highly political and contentious issue like territorial disputes in the SCS. Other ASEAN member-states have different logics or understandings about the SCS. They also have varying approaches with China, the state in which they want to iron out a COC in the SCS with.¹⁹ As already mentioned, other ASEAN member-states are occupied with other pressing security issues reiterated during the latest summit, such as the situation in Myanmar.²⁰ Therefore, as the SCS and WPS are a priority for the Philippines, its chairmanship would, unfortunately, be an equivalent of wearing the biggest children's party hat for its own birthday. It may mean something, but it is essentially ceremonial and only for the time being. Therefore, the Philippines shouldn't galvanize its chairmanship to emphasize its agenda about the SCS and WPS.

Still in the Talking Stage

On the other hand, the ASEAN member-states, through the association, would declare their "hope for a stable and peaceful SCS" and talk about it. No more, no less. This reflects the ASEAN attitude amongst themselves that as long as it does not bother their domestic and economic interests, then they would not interfere at all. As pragmatic as it sounds, this should be the recommended stance of the organization, as it is a reliable method, whatever happens in the SCS. The maritime body matters for every member-state, with different understandings about it as the only caveat.

¹⁶ South China Morning Post. "Philippines Push for Binding South China Sea Code by 2026: Will It Succeed?" Published May 27, 2025. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3321621/philippines-push-binding-south-china-sea-code-2026-will-it-succeed>

¹⁷ Channel News Asia. "Philippines to take ASEAN chair with focus on South China Sea." Published October 28, 2025. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/philippines-asean-chair-2026-south-china-sea-5429731#:~:text=Philippines%20to%20take%20ASEAN%20chair,Search>

¹⁸ Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The ASEAN Charter. Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2008. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf>

¹⁹ Knipp, Kersten. "ASEAN summit: Torn between China and the US." Published October 25, 2025. <https://www.dw.com/en/asean-summit-torn-between-china-and-the-us/a-74496658#:~:text=ASEAN%20states%20are%20reacting%20to%20Chinese%20aggressiveness,of%20security%20and%20defense%20policy%2C%22%20said%20Heiduk.>

²⁰ Strangio, Sebastian. "ASEAN Foreign Ministers Voice 'Concern' About Ongoing Myanmar Conflict." Published October 28, 2025. <https://thediplomat.com/2025/10/asean-foreign-ministers-voice-concern-about-ongoing-myanmar-conflict/>

Communication would still be the most realistic and practical instrument of ASEAN even in the worst-case scenario. Hypothetically speaking, if an official armed conflict resulting from territorial disputes in the SCS that involves the Philippines occurs, it will force every member-state through ASEAN to respond. It will occur through diplomatic means that may include mediation or negotiation.

Overall, regardless of whether the uncertainty in SCS remains static or becomes heightened, the communication functions of ASEAN shall bring every member-state to the table. It is the rational thing to do for each of them, especially in a hypothetical armed conflict, for free trade will be affected across the Indo-Pacific. The credibility of the organization as a multilateral avenue would be upheld in this way.

At the end, the Philippines is expected to look for other multilateral and even minilateral avenues to pursue its interests in the SCS and WPS. A notable minilateral group will be the SQUAD, which focuses on military partnerships and exercises that include Japan, the USA, and Australia.²¹ On the other hand, ASEAN member-states may be involved in a bilateral or minilateral manner with the Philippines. One example is Vietnam, which also has vested territorial interests in the islands it claims in the SCS.²²

For ASEAN, the conundrum that the SCS and WPS from the Philippines provide is met with a lukewarm reception. The upcoming Philippine chairmanship will not push the ASEAN member-states to entertain the former's interests in its territorial disputes and maritime security. In spite of this, ASEAN would always be there for diplomacy, and the Philippines must at least utilize this as a pathway for understanding in a tumultuous region.

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²¹ The Japan Times. "US, Japan, Australia, Philippines Launch Maritime 'Squad.'" Published May 31, 2025.

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/05/31/asia-pacific/politics/us-japan-australia-philippines-squad>

²² Reuters. "Philippines, Vietnam Sign Defence Agreement." Published August 30, 2024.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-vietnam-sign-defence-agreement-2024-08-30/>