

Countering China's Grey Zone Operations in the South China Sea: The Role of Alliances



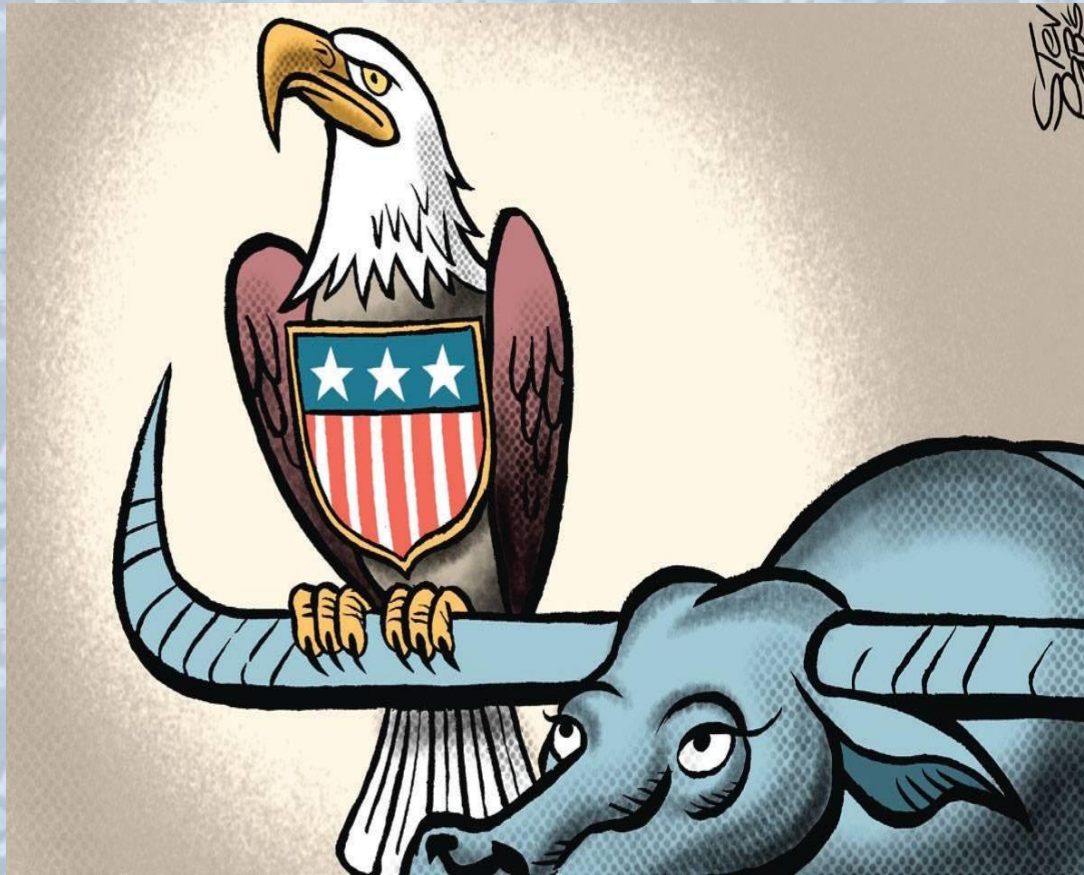
Presentation for the “2022 Symposium on Law of the Sea and Maritime Security Issues in the Indo-Pacific Region” Ministry of Interior, Republic of China, 22-23 November 2022

Introduction

- On 29 September 2022, the Philippines' National Defence Undersecretary and Officer-in-Charge Jose Faustino and U.S. Defence Secretary of Department Lloyd J. Austin announced their countries' commitment to the 1951 Philippine-U.S. Mutual Defence Treaty (MDT)



Introduction



- Both defence officials have recognized the need to modernize the alliance to secure the Philippines' future, address regional security challenges, and promote peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region.

Introduction

- **Such a goal requires the immediate implementation of the 2014 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), particularly infrastructure enhancements and repair projects at existing EDCA-agreed locations inside five Philippine Air Force (PAF) bases in the country**



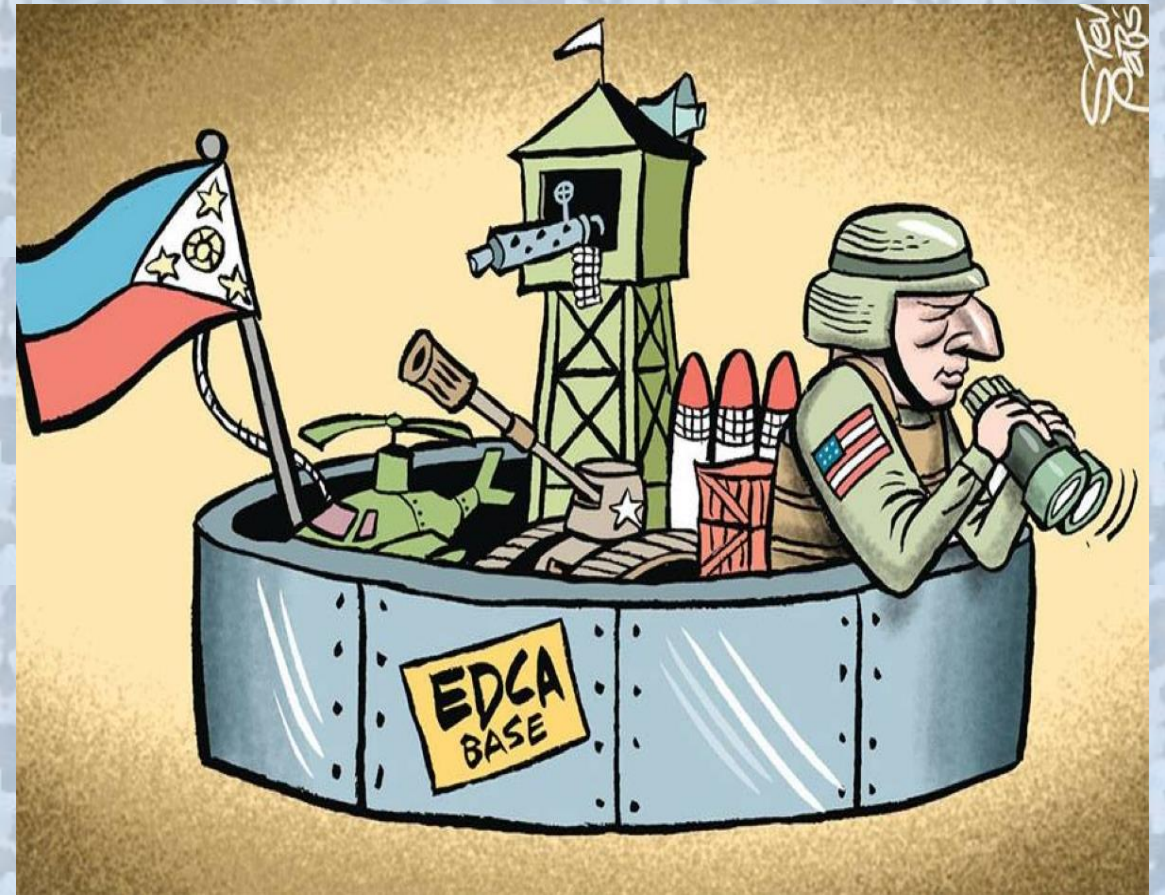
Introduction



- The two sides decided to hold over 500 joint activities in 2023, such as training, and capability-building exercises in maritime security, countering terrorism, transnational crime, and cyber security, and conducting humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations.

Introduction

- More significantly, during U.S. Defence Secretary Llyod Austin's second visit to Manila in early January 2023, the Philippines and the U.S. announced that American forces would be granted access to four more AFP bases there.



Introduction



- These sites will provide U.S. forces with strategic vantage positions from which they can mount operations in the event of an armed conflict in Taiwan or the South China Sea.

Introduction

- Interestingly, U.S. forces have intensified and broadened joint training focusing on combat readiness and disaster response with their Filipino counterparts on the Philippines' western coast, which faces the South China Sea, and its northern Luzon region across the Luzon Straits from Taiwan.



Introduction



- This scenario was unthinkable six years ago when former President Rodrigo Duterte hinted in October 2016 that his policy toward the alliance, and to the U.S., in general, would do a 180-degree turn from the Aquino Administration's thrust of strengthening security cooperation with the country's former colonial ruler.

Introduction

- During his term, he downgraded relations with the U.S. and forged ties with these two great powers whose ideologies and political systems are antithetical to the liberal concept of democracy.



Introduction



- Paradoxically, despite the Philippines' rapprochement with China, Chinese grey zone operations in the South China Sea continued--Chinese fishing vessels suspected to be the People's Liberation Army's Navy (PLAN), Chinese Coast Guard (CCG), and the maritime militia are engaged in a wide range of activities to claim maritime rights and interests by demonstrating Chinese presence in the country's exclusive economic zone.

Introduction



- Eventually, the Duterte Administration realized that, despite its efforts to appease China, the Chinese grey zone operation remained unabated against the Philippines.

Introduction

- It also realized that downplaying or ignoring these incidents enables China to advance its agenda of maritime expansion since its aggressive actions do not elicit serious responses from targeted states like the Philippines.



Introduction



- China will eventually gain virtual control of the fishing grounds and strategic waterways in the South China Sea without launching a major naval operation or triggering an armed and open conflict with the littoral states of Southeast Asia

Introduction

This presentation examines how the Philippines has responded to China's application of gray zone operations by challenging these coercive actions, and more significantly, reverting back to its alliance with the U.S.



Introduction



How has the Philippines responded to Chinese its gray zone operations with a focus on the Whitsun Reef stand-off?



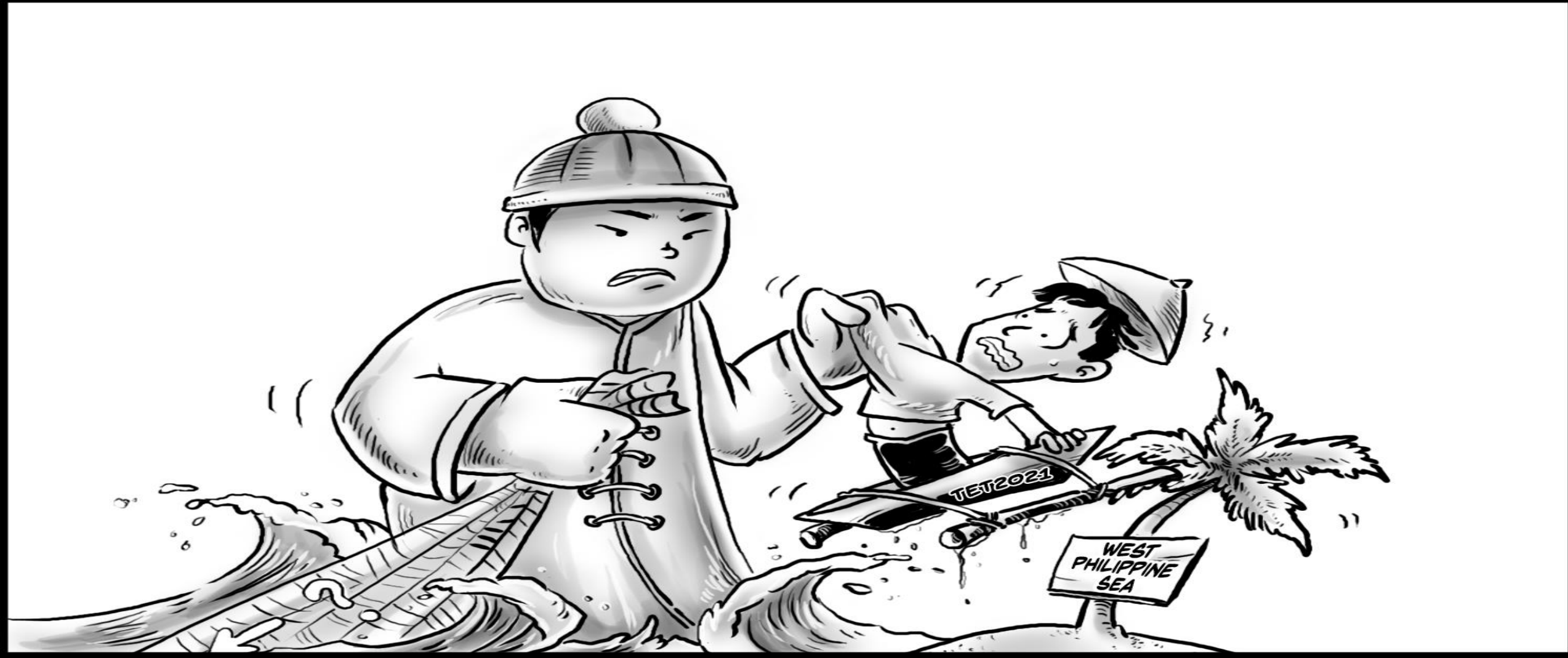
**How did China's Gray Zone Operations
against the Philippines cause the revitalization
of the Philippine-U.S. alliance?**

Introduction

- And how can alliances address Chinese grey zone operations in the South China Sea?



Chinese Gray Zone Operations against the Philippines



Chinese Gray Zone Operations against the Philippines, 2016-2020

Gray zone operations can be considered political warfare.





They involve the whole warfare directed at achieving the political goals of war bereft of the actual deployment of massive units of the army or the navy on the battlefield.

Chinese Gray Zone Operations against the Philippines, 2016-2020

- Specific to the South China Sea, Chinese fishing vessels suspected to be operated by the PLAN, the CCG, and the Chinese maritime militia are engaged in a wide range of activities aimed at asserting China's maritime rights and interests against the Southeast Asia littoral states—Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines.



Chinese Gray Zone Operations against the Philippines, 2016-2020

- In 1995, Chinese forces established a base on Mischief Reef deep inside the Philippines' EEZ: this led to non-violent confrontations between Philippine and Chinese maritime forces around the land feature and generated growing concern regarding China in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states.





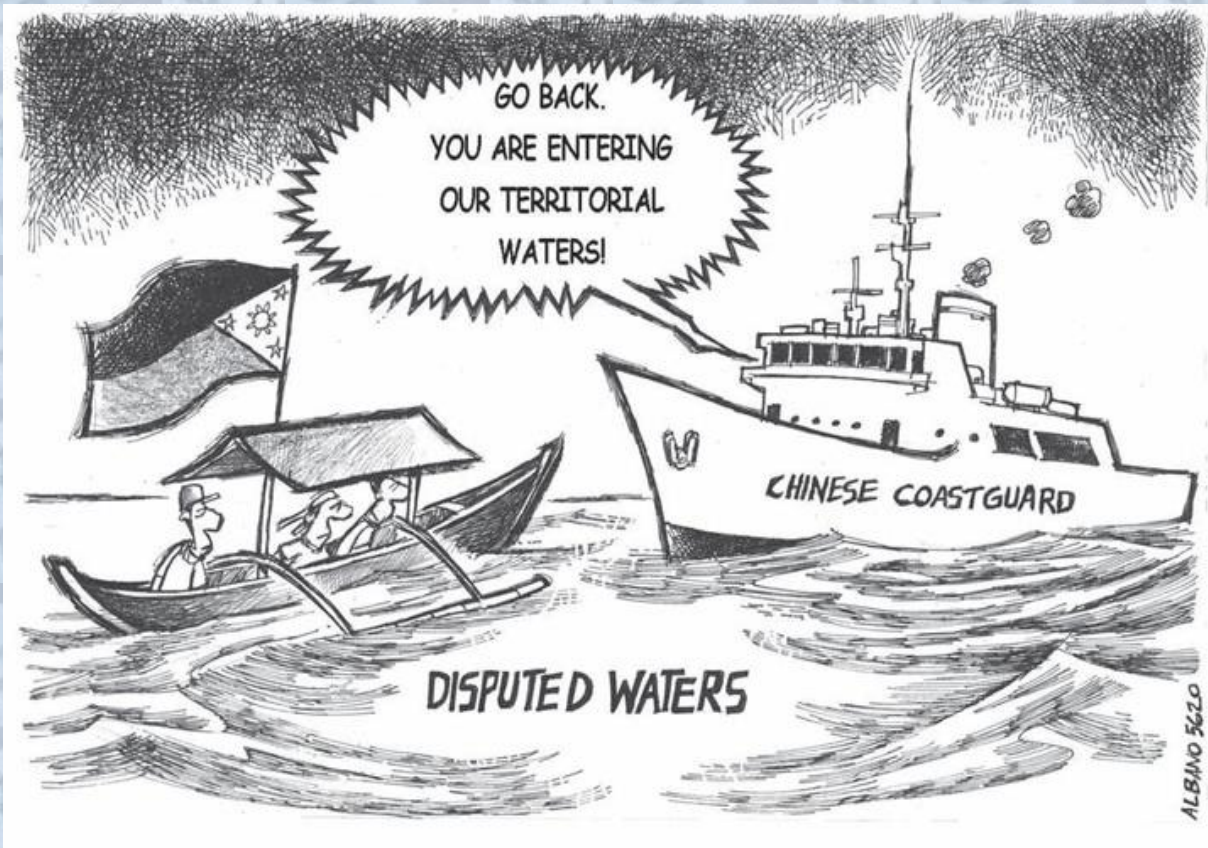
In mid-2012, Chinese civilian vessels confronted Philippine naval and coast guard vessels in a three-month stand-off near Scarborough Shoal; which began on April 10, 2012, when the Philippine Navy (PN) dispatched its flagship, the BRP *Gregorio Del Pilar*, to Scarborough Shoal to apprehend eight Chinese fishing boats allegedly illegally fishing in this land feature which both the Philippines and China claim.

Chinese Gray Zone Operations against the Philippines, 2016-2020

- In mid-June 2012, the tension subsided when the Philippines and China withdrew their civilian ships on the pretext that it was the beginning of the typhoon season.



Chinese Gray Zone Operations against the Philippines, 2016-2020



- However, Chinese patrol crafts returned to the shoal despite the Philippines' withdrawal of its lone coast guard boat and prevented Philippine vessels from approaching while Chinese ships continued their fishing operations. China eventually put Scarborough Shoal under its de facto control.

Chinese Gray Zone Operations against the Philippines, 2016-2020



After he became the Philippines' 16th president in 2016, President Rodrigo Duterte unraveled the late President Benigno Aquino's geopolitical agenda of balancing China's expansive claim in the South China Sea.

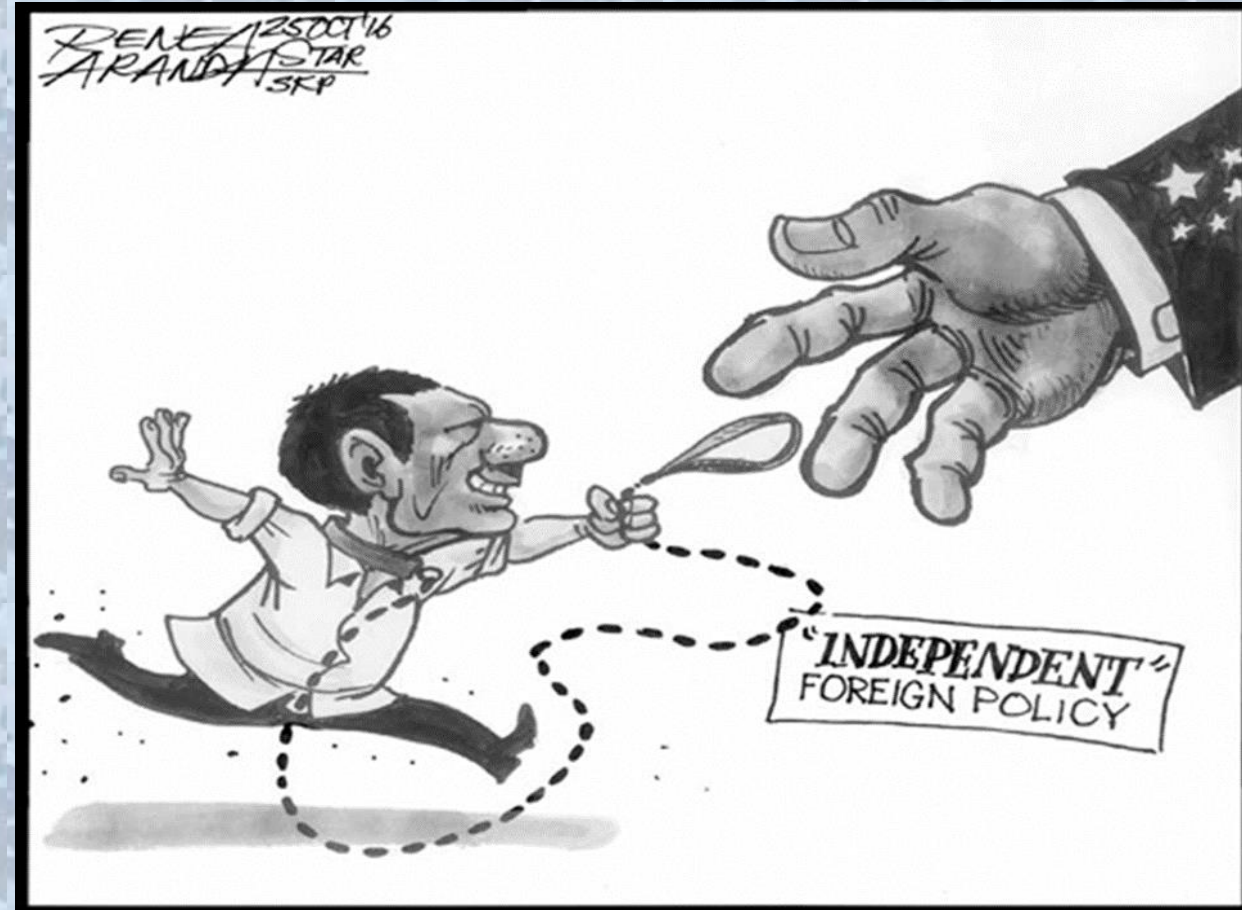
Chinese Gray Zone Operations against the Philippines, 2016-2020



The Duterte Administration accepted China's core procedural norms for dealing with the South China Sea dispute—shelving the sovereignty issue, discussing the conflict in bilateral forums, and agreeing on bilateral engagements such as joint development, strengthening of bilateral trade and increased trade—in exchange for Chinese support for Philippine development.

Chinese Gray Zone Operations against the Philippines, 2016-2020

President Duterte implied that his policy toward the alliance in particular, and to the U.S. in general would undergo a 180-degree from the Aquino Administration's policy of strengthening security cooperation with the country's former colonial ruler. Instead, his policies would be marked by creating distance into the alliance, while gravitating closer to China.





He also announced the country's military and economic separation from the United States, which was eventually clarified as not severance of diplomatic ties but merely the beginning of a foreign policy independent of America.

Chinese Gray Zone Operations against the Philippines, 2016-2020

His declaration of his separation from his country's only treaty ally was immediately seen as a serious setback for the United States, and a great Chinese diplomatic victory as this would have a radiating effect in the region that would bring other estranged neighbors closer to China's orbit.





Despite President Duterte's efforts to appease China, Chinese gray zone operations against the Philippines have remained unabated.

Chinese Gray Zone Operations against the Philippines, 2016-2020

In June 2018 month, the Philippine government issued a formal demand asking the CCG to stay away from the Philippines' traditional fishing grounds around the Scarborough Shoal and to stop harassing Filipino fishermen.



Chinese Gray Zone Operations against the Philippines, 2016-2020



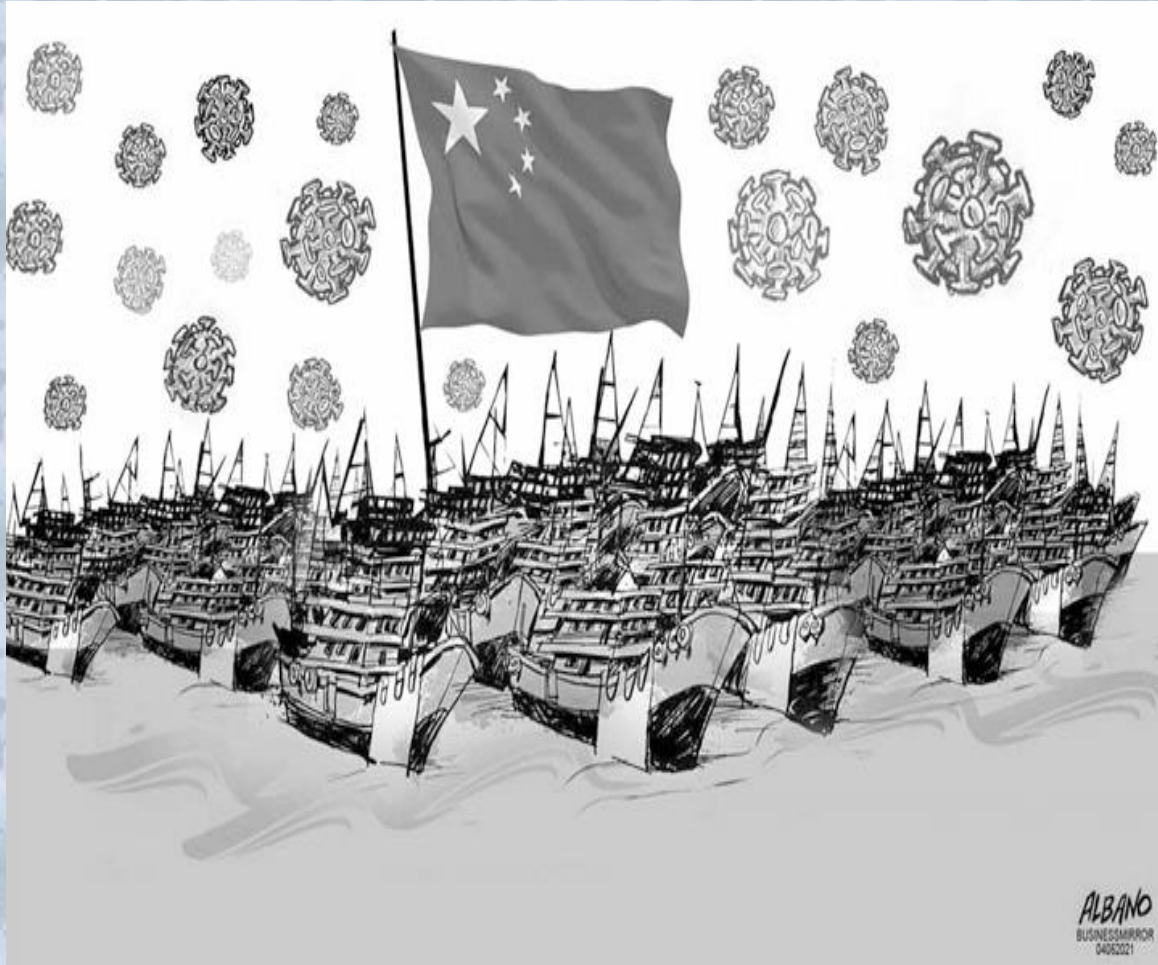
In late July 2018, the Philippine government informed China about the increase in offensive Chinese radio warnings against Philippine aircraft and ships flying and sailing respectively near Chinese reclaimed and fortified islands in the South China Sea.

Chinese Gray Zone Operations against the Philippines, 2016-2020

On 15 August 2018, President Duterte criticized China for its island-building activities and called on it to moderate its actions in the disputed waters.



Chinese Gray Zone Operations against the Philippines, 2016-2020



In December 2018, the AFP reported the presence of at least 275 Chinese fishing vessels surrounding the Philippine-occupied *Thitu (Pag-asa)* Island and adjacent three sandbars after the Philippine military began rehabilitating a dilapidated runway on the said land feature.

Chinese Gray Zone Operations against the Philippines, 2016-2020



On the midnight of June 9, 2019, a Chinese fishing vessel rammed and sank a wooden Filipino fishing boat, the F/B Gim Vir 1, which was anchored at the Reed Bank and immediately after the collision, the Chinese vessel turned off its signal lights and left the site as the Filipino boat sank.

Chinese Gray Zone Operations against the Philippines, 2016-2020



Former Philippine Supreme Court Senior Associate Justice Antonio T. Carpio saw the June 9 Reed Bank incident as a Chinese Maritime Militia's operation designed to drive away the Filipino fishing boats in the West Philippines Sea similar to the way that China is driving away Vietnamese fishing boats in the Paracels.



The February 17, 2020 incident in the South China Sea that involved a People's Liberation Army's Navy (PLAN) ship directing its Gun Control Director (GCD) to the PN anti-submarine corvette the *BRP* (*Barko ang Pilipinas* or Ship of the Republic of the Philippines) *Conrado Yap* in the Spratlys.

Chinese Gray Zone Operations against the Philippines, 2016-2020



They are cases
of Chinese gray
operations
conducted
against the
Philippines.

Chinese Gray Zone Operations against the Philippines, 2016-2020

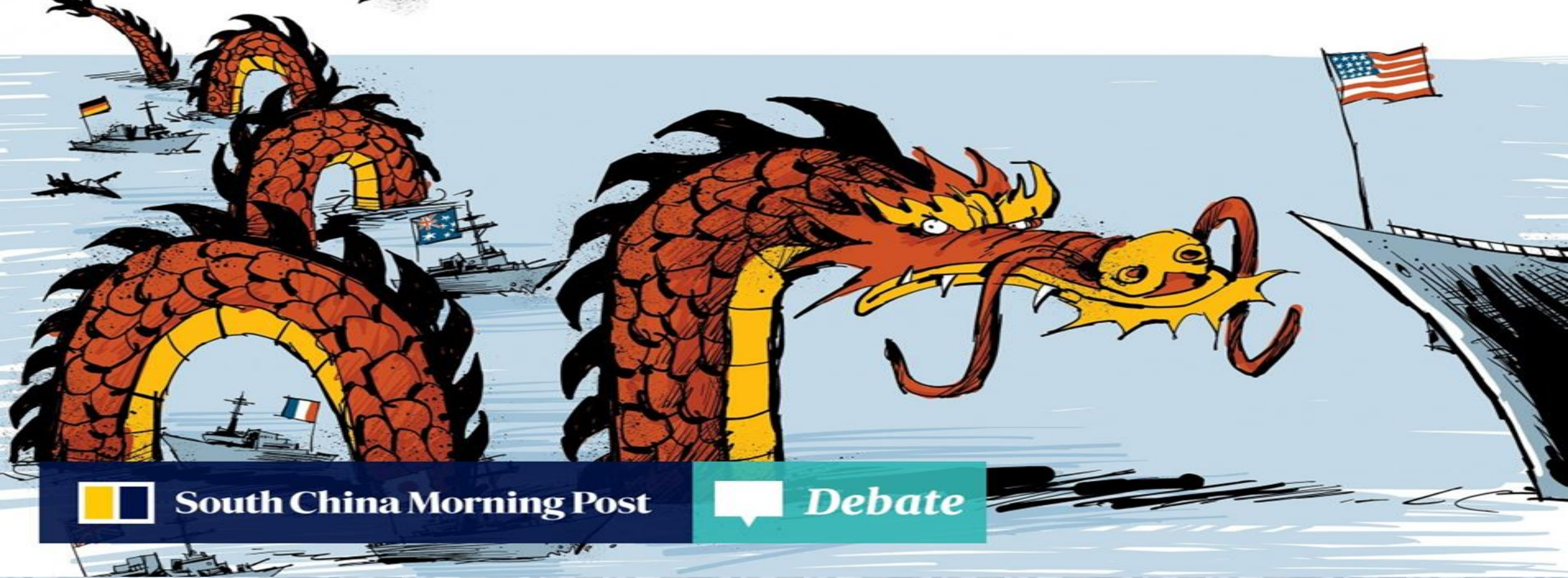
- In the context of the South China Sea, gray zone operations are actions in the sea that often blur the between military and non-military platforms, actions, and attribution for events and are often, but not always, undertaken to advance China's territorial claims.



Chinese Gray Zone Operations against the Philippines, 2016-2020



- China is working to achieve nothing less than the subjugation of its neighbors' civilian maritime populations—and, in turn, their governments—to Beijing's expansion and authoritarian vision of maritime sovereignty.



China's intention is to gain a position of advantage on conflicts over territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interest.

The Whitsun Reef Stand-Off



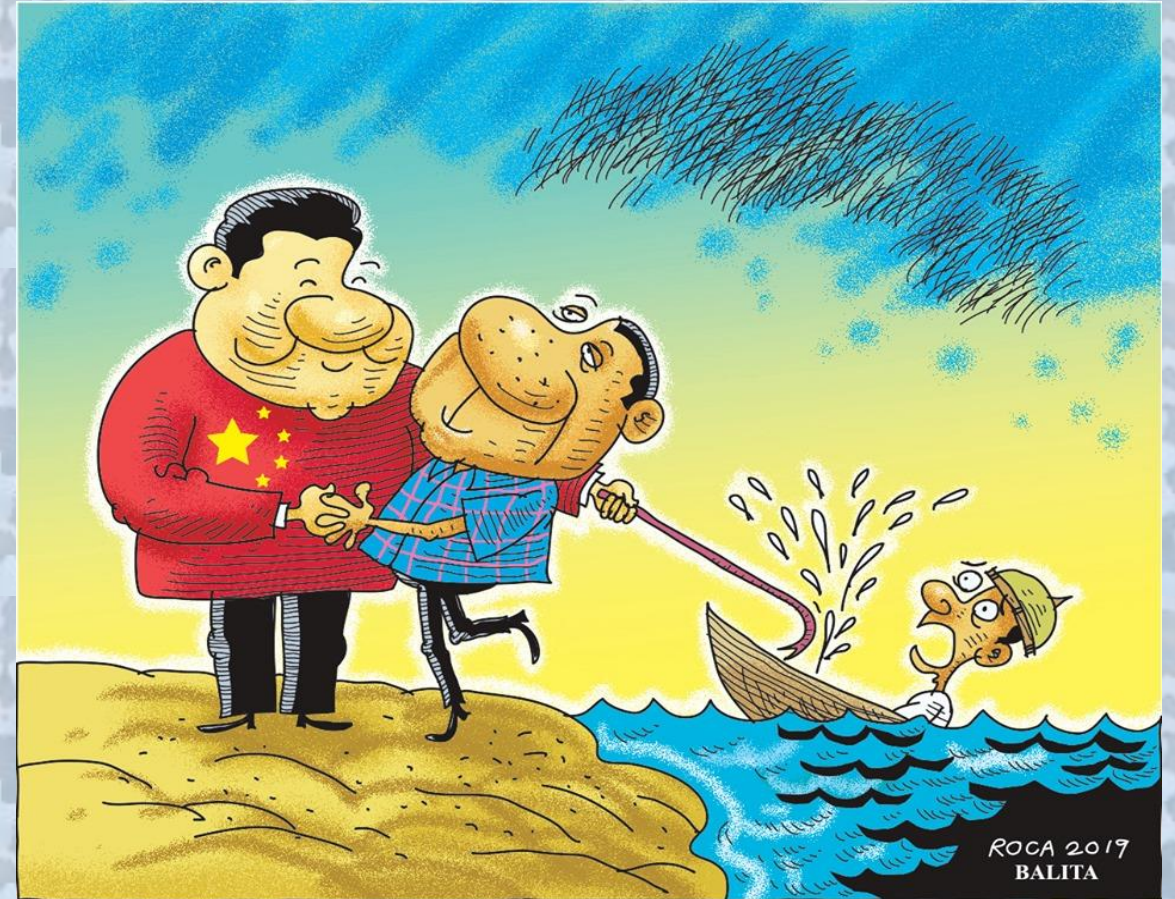
South China Morning Post



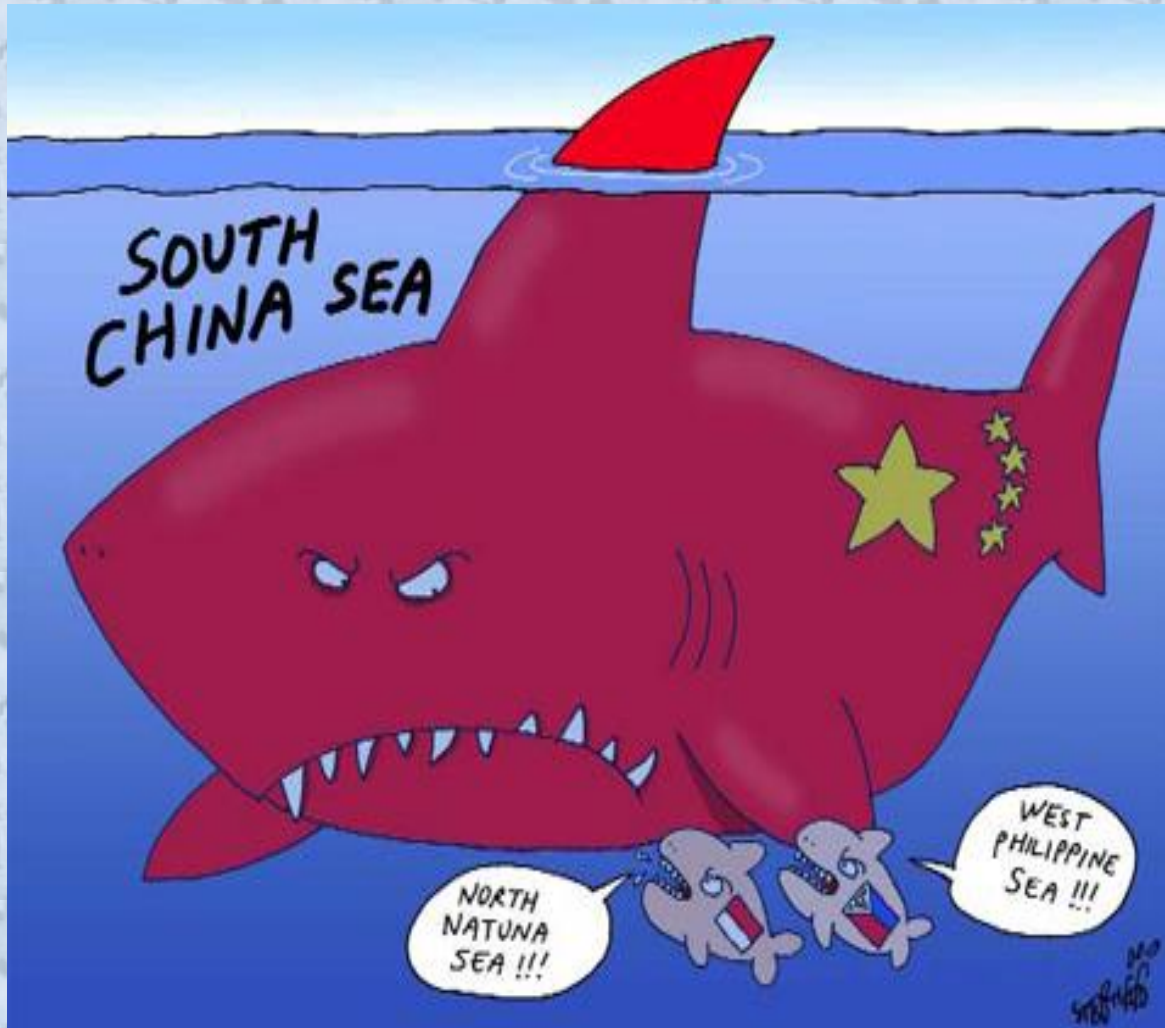
Opinion

The Whitsun Reef Stand-Off

Initially, Philippine political leaders and defense officials downplayed these Chinese gray operations conducted against Filipino fishing boats and naval vessels.



The Whitsun Reef Stand-Off



The Philippine government, however, eventually realized that downplaying or ignoring these incidents enables China to advance its agenda of maritime expansion through distinctly subtle aggressive actions since they do not generate serious and effective responses from targeted states like the Philippines.

The Whitsun Reef Stand-Off

China sees no need to launch on a major naval operation to control the disputed waters because it has no need for it, and it will eventually gain virtual control over the fishing grounds and strategic waterways in the South China Sea without triggering armed and open conflicts with the littoral states of Southeast Asia including the Philippines.



The Whitsun Reef Stand-Off



The change in the Philippine government's view on China's gray zone operations is reflected on how it responded to the passage of the CCG Law and later, in discovery of 240 Chinese fishing boats in Whitsun Reef.

The Whitsun Reef Stand-Off



On March 20, 2021, Secretary Lorenzana officially informed the Filipino nation about the presence of around 220-blue hulled Chinese fishing vessels moored in line formation at Julian Felipe Reef (international name Whistin Reef).

The Whitsun Reef Stand-Off

The PCG and the National Task Force on the West Philippine Sea (NTF-WPS) observed that the fishing vessels were believed to be manned by Chinese maritime militia personnel because despite clear weather at that time, the Chinese fishing vessels massed at the reef showed no actual fishing activities and had their full white lights turned on during night time.



The Whitsun Reef Stand-Off



These ships' position and movements the Chinese strategy of claiming these submerged land features by swarming the disputed waters with a huge flotilla that effectively defy the other countries' diplomatic or law enforcement efforts to expel it.

The Whitsun Reef Stand-Off

The goal is to accomplish by overwhelming presence what it has been unable to do through diplomacy, or economic statecraft or even the use of force—a classic gray zone operation



Responding to China's Gray Zone Operations



Responding to China's Gray Zone Operations



Then AFP Chief-of-Staff General Cirilto Sobejana warned that “ the pronouncement of China that their coast guard can open fire on people intruding to their territory is very alarming,” and ordered the deployment of more military assets to the South China Sea to safeguard Filipino fishermen against the CCG.

Responding to China's Gray Zone Operations

The Philippines' reaction to the Whitsun Reef incident was more vigorous after it observed the prolonged presence 200 Chinese fishing boat in the said reef and when it got U.S. diplomatic and military support to resist China's efforts to use thinly disguised coercive expansion through the maritime militia at the expense of other claimant states in the South China Sea.



Responding to China's Gray Zone Operations

General Sobejana ordered the immediate deployment of additional Philippine Navy (PN) ships to strengthen the country's maritime sovereignty patrols" in the disputed waters, and this led to a dramatic increase in the number of Philippine law enforcement and naval vessels from three to 13 ships that conducted a total number of 57 patrols around the Spratlys and Scarborough Shoals



Responding to China's Gray Zone Operations



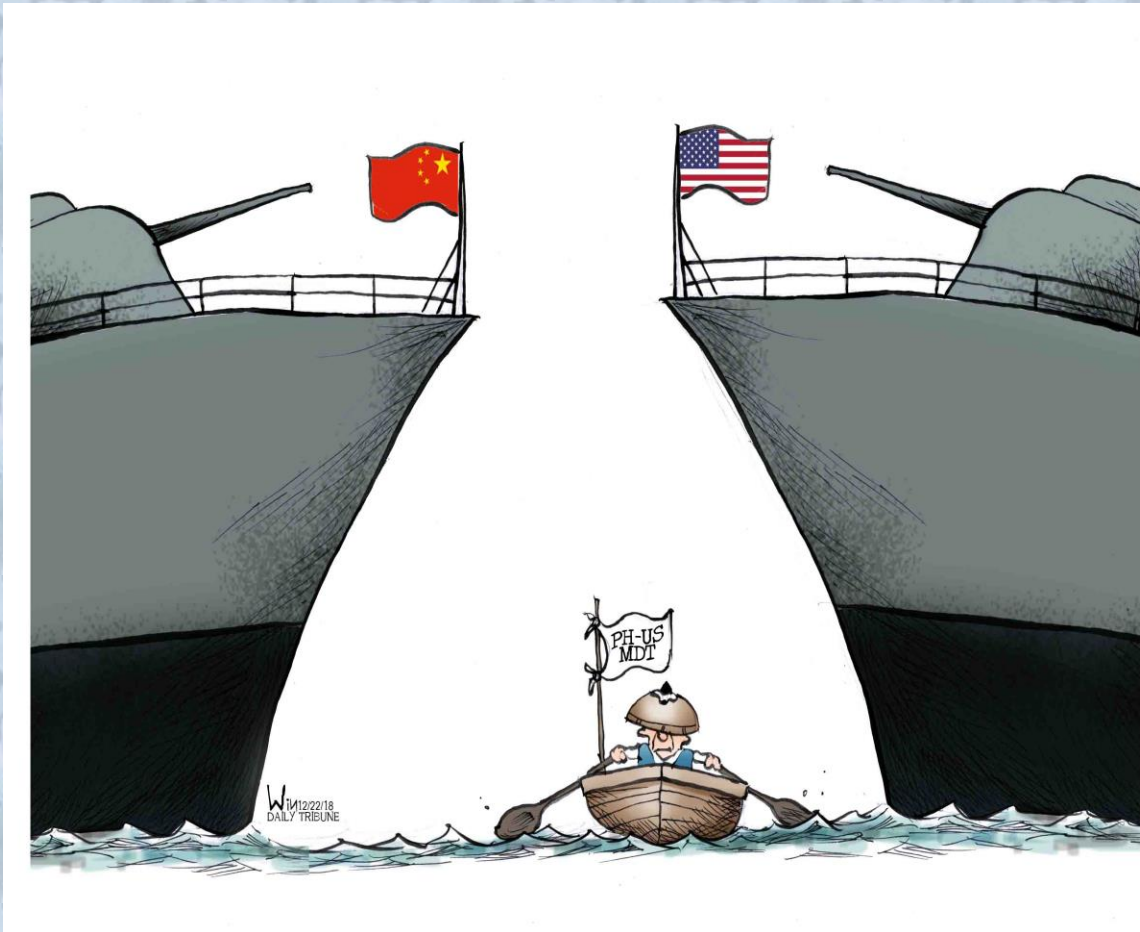
Although outgunned and outsized by their Chinese counter-parts, the Philippines' deployment of more ships and more frequent patrols in the disputed waters conveyed a powerful message that it was determined to assert its rights in the disputed reef.

Responding to China's Gray Zone Operations

The U.S. expressed its strong public support to the Philippines: as the U.S. State Department issued a statement that “the U.S. stands with our ally, the Philippines, regarding concerns about the gathering of PRC (People’s Republic of China) maritime militia vessels near Whitsun Reef.”



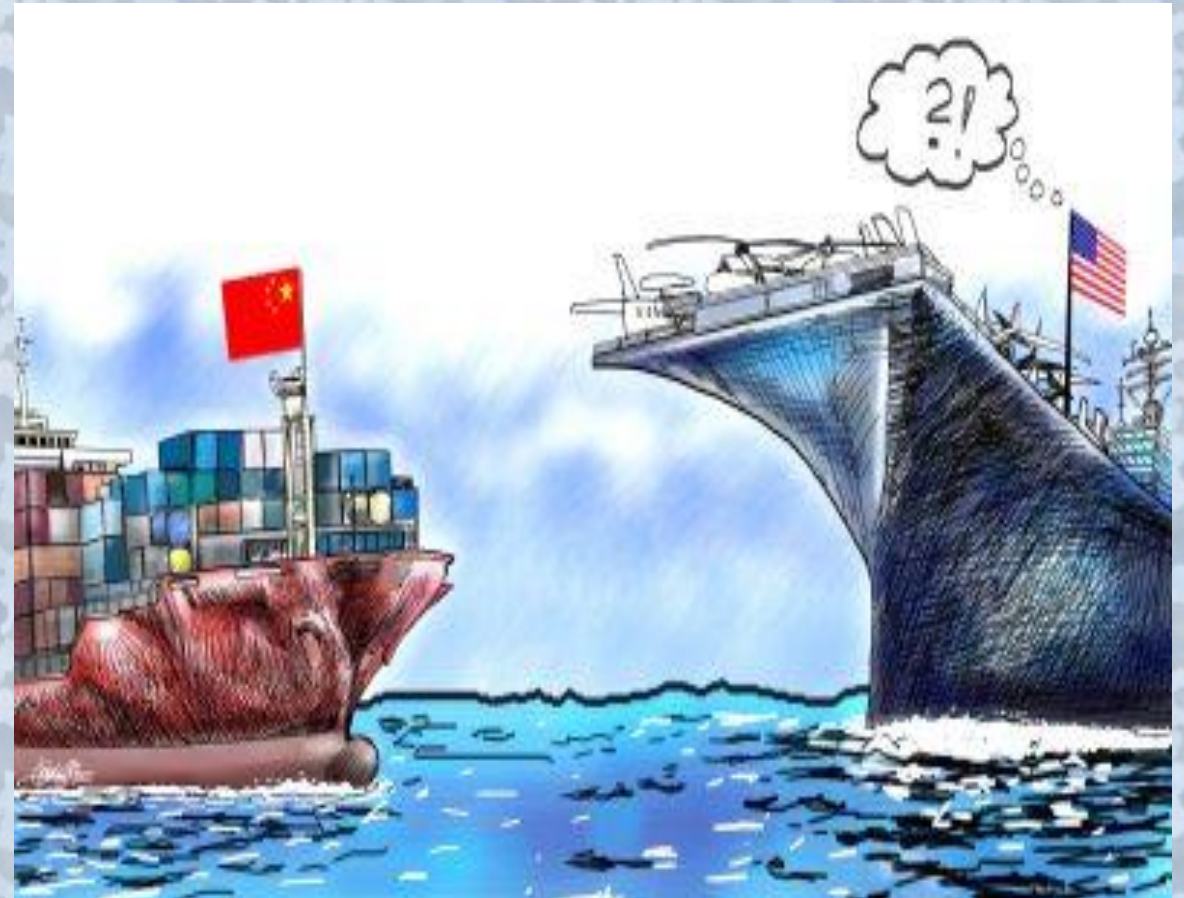
Responding to China's Gray Zone Operations



U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan called his Filipino counterpart, Secretary Hermogenes Esperon, to underscore support to its ally and the applicability of the 1951 Philippine-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) to the area.

Responding to China's Gray Zone Operations

In early April, the carrier battlegroup led by the U.S. S. Theodore Roosevelt and the amphibious assault ship *U.S.S. Makin Island* entered the South China Sea as a demonstration of American diplomatic and military support to the Philippines at the height of the Whitsun Reef stand-off.



Responding to China's Gray Zone Operations



- President Duterte, however, rejected the U.S.'s offer of assistance. Instead, he rebuked the U.S. by doubting American assistance to the Philippines in a possible full-blown conflict in the South China Sea.

Responding to China's Gray Zone Operations

Nevertheless, the incident did not prevent top Biden security officials from working with their Philippine counterparts—and in conjunction with an ongoing Philippine-U.S. military exercise—to resist Chinese coercive attempt to occupy a land feature inside the country's EEZ, and to prove the applicability of the 1951 MDT in a crisis situation in the South China Sea.



Responding to China's Gray Zone Operations



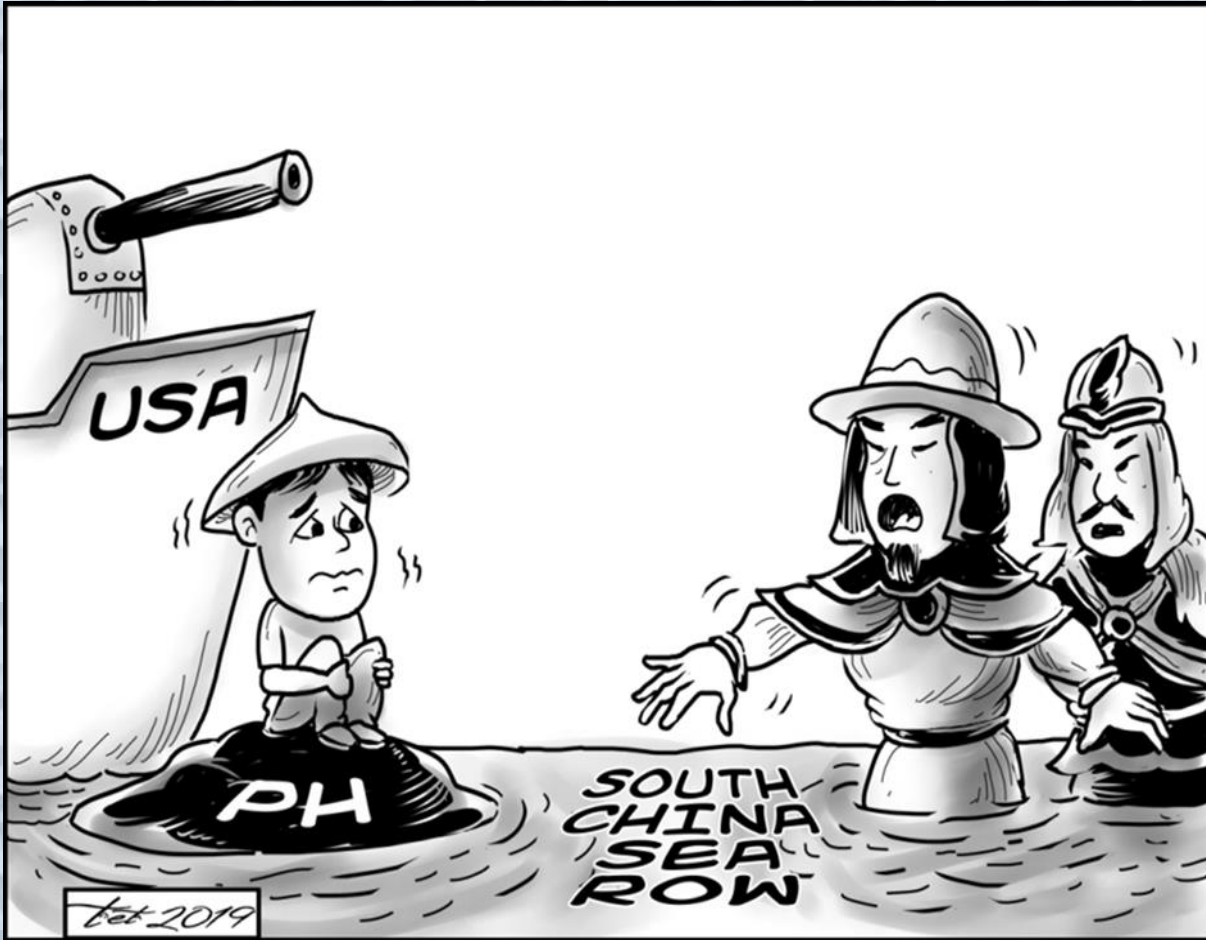
A few months later, President Duterte reversed his decision to terminate the 1999 VFA; this decision to bring back the VFA on track is his long over-due reaffirmation of the importance of the Philippine-U.S. to his country's security as it debunked the Chinese narrative that the U.S. is losing both the willingness and staying power to maintain its power projection capability in Southeast Asia

Responding to China's Gray Zone Operations

- In November 2021, the two countries formulated a new bilateral defence guideline that came in the form of the November 16, 2021 “Joint Vision for a 21st Century United States-Philippines Partnership.”



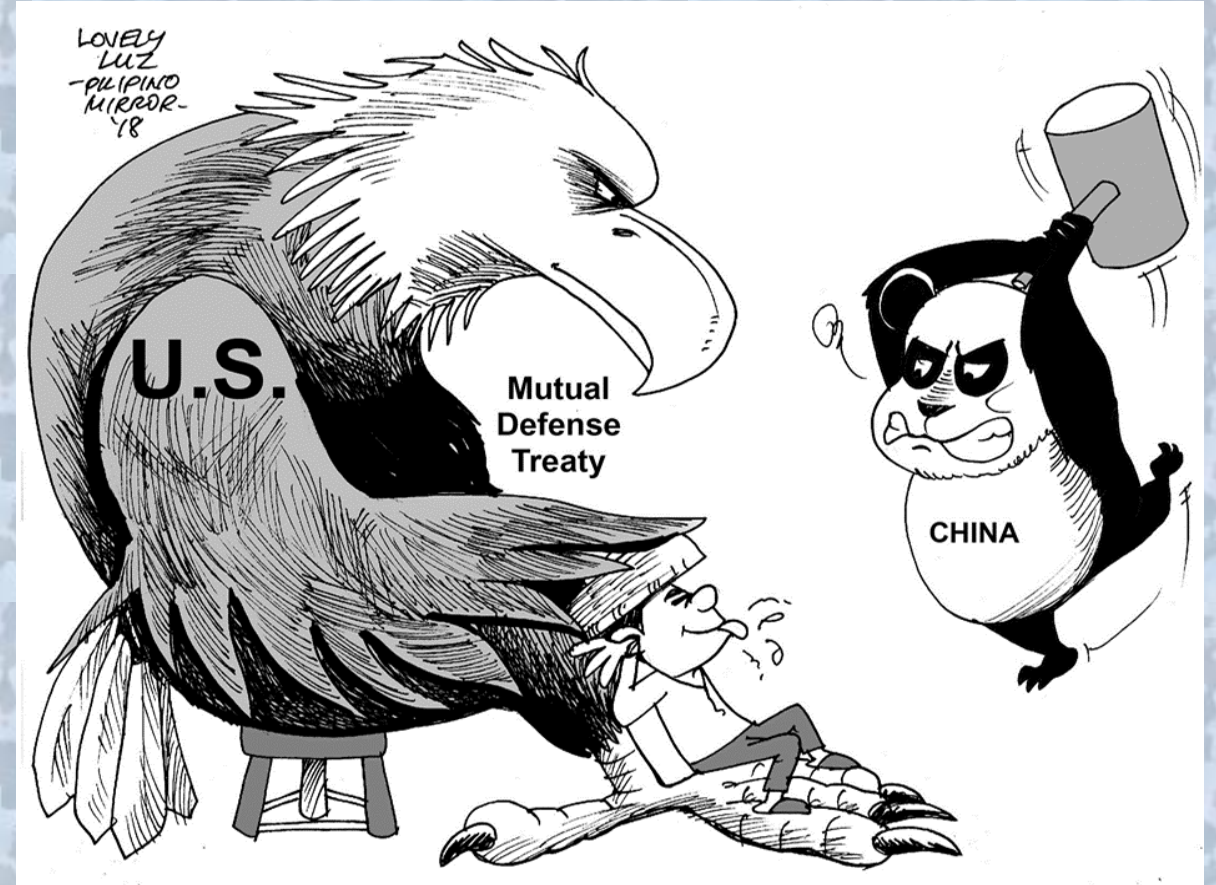
Responding to China's Gray Zone Operations



- This document states the two sides' intention to ensure the MDT's relevance in addressing current and emerging threats and also mentions their common efforts to support a mutual understanding of the two allies' roles, missions, and capabilities within the alliance.

Responding to China's Gray Zone Operations

These developments indicate both countries' consensus on the need to transform the MDT from a mere consultative mechanism to an anchor that will provide stability to their alliance as they address common security challenges they will face way into the 21st century.



Why do Allies Matter in the Grey Zone?



Why do Allies Matter in the Grey Zone?



Alliances are formed to address a third party that is considered as a threat, which is a function of power, proximity, specific offensive capabilities and aggressive intentions, and the expected response to an emerging threat is to attempt to balance against it.

Why do Allies Matter in the Grey Zone?

The essential element in a meaningful alliance is a commitment for mutual support against some external actor.



Why do Allies Matter in the Grey Zone?



Alliances are necessarily self-conscious undertakings and their purpose is to enhance the security of allies or to advance their interests against the outer world.

Why do Allies Matter in the Grey Zone?

- *Assuring Weaker Allies--* Alliances generate assurances to reduce a weaker ally's sense of vulnerability by promising protection through defense commitments and the forward presence of both military and civilian forces.



Published: September 22, 2013

For the Philippines, America is the heavy lifter."

Why do Allies Matter in the Grey Zone?



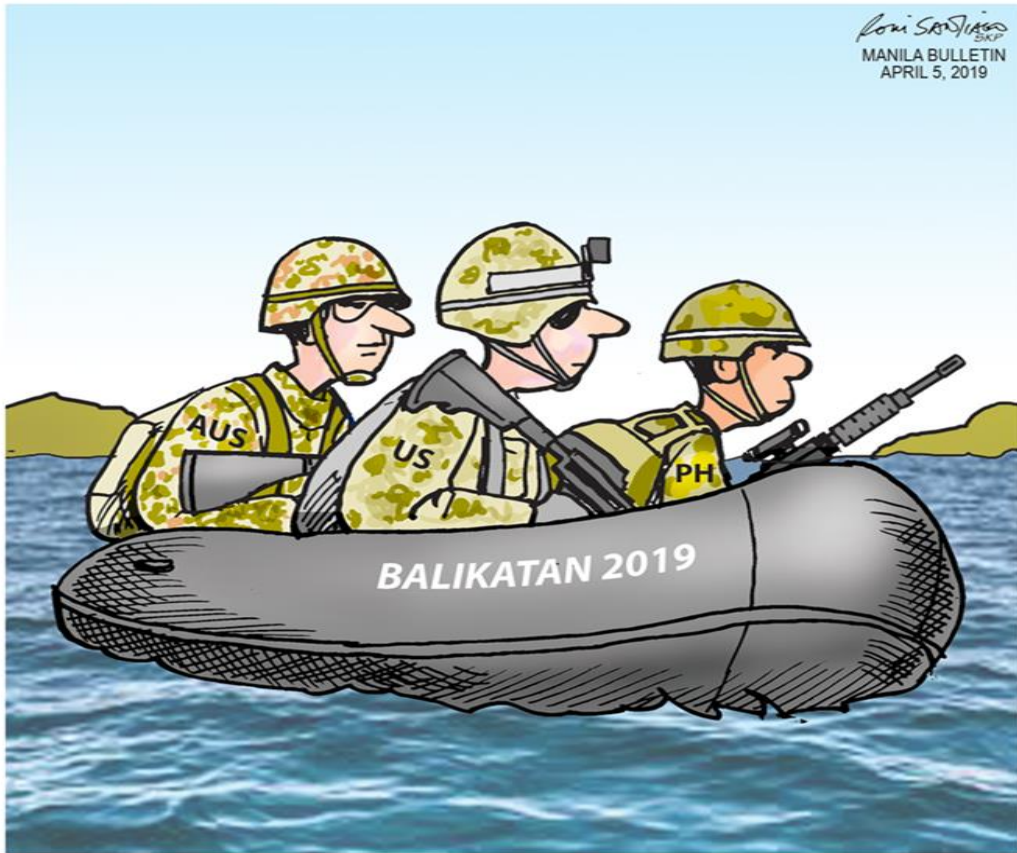
- To limit China's ability to conduct grey zone operations against the Philippines requires Manila, Washington, Canberra, and Tokyo to convey strong signals of commitment for mutual assistance through security agreements, troop deployments, arms transfers, and multinational exercises, thereby reducing the Philippines' sense of insecurity.

Why do Allies Matter in the Grey Zone?

- *The Development of a Surveillance System to Monitor Chinese Grey Operations*—This requires the development of a regionwide surveillance network that can detect, identify, and monitor Chinese vessels that are positioned for grey zone operations in the West Philippine Sea.



Why do Allies Matter in the Grey Zone?



- *Conducting Shaping Operations against China*— Shaping operations are coercive tactics aimed to complicate an adversary's calculations, and primarily target his strategic intentions, not necessarily its forces.

Why do Allies Matter in the Grey Zone?

- The goal is to create a sharp deterrent effect by undermining the adversary's sense of initiative and leadership of the crisis triggered by its grey zone operations through the imposition of multiple dilemmas, posturing assets to threaten what the adversaries values, and displaying the willingness to apply asymmetric capabilities.



Why do Allies Matter in the Grey Zone?



- *The Philippines and its allies should strengthen regional security institutions in the wider context of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—Manila, Tokyo, Canberra, and Washington should initiate institution-building efforts to enhance regional cooperation among Southeast Asian states through forums of discussions on maritime security and China's grey zone operations in the South China Sea.*

Conclusion

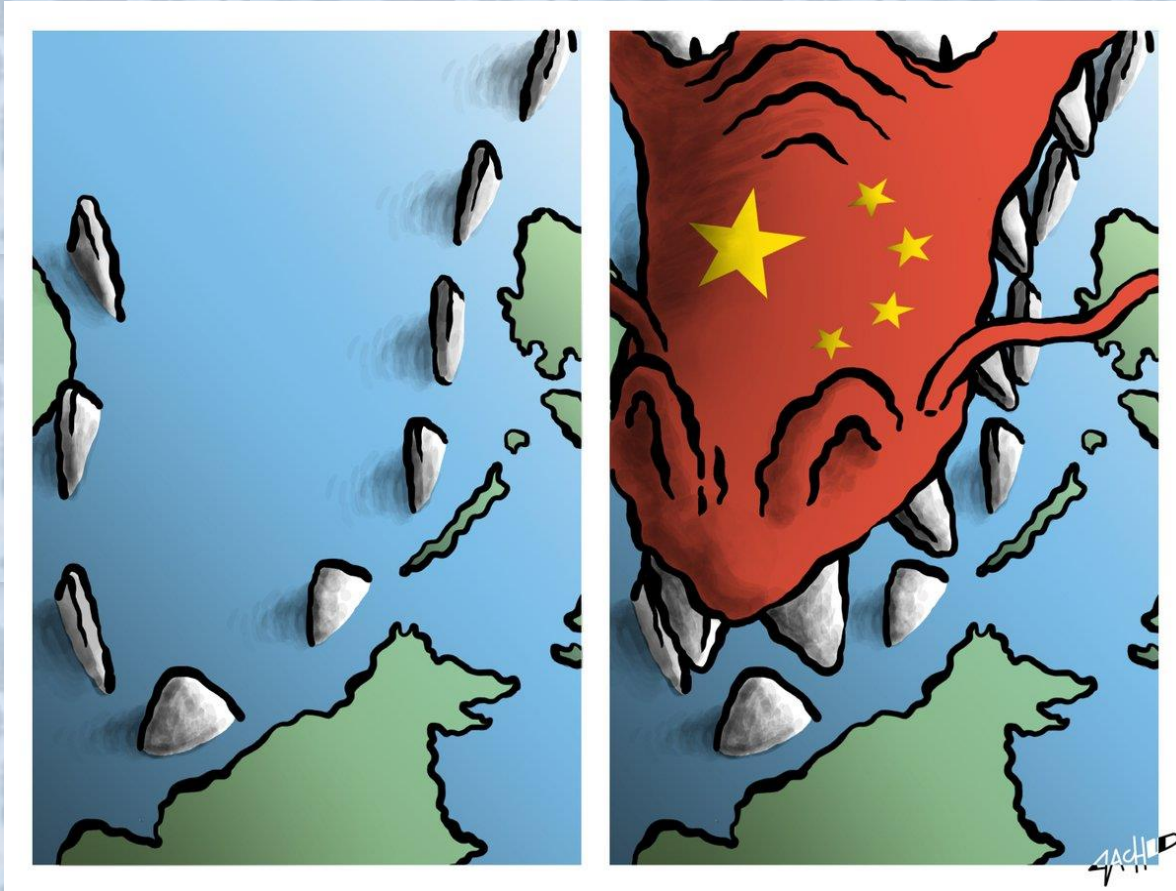


Conclusion

Since he took office in 2016, President Duterte's diplomatic strategy was aimed at appeasing China, as he believed that this policy was worth pursuing because it would make the country a beneficiary of the latter's emergence as a global economic power, and would moderate this regional power's goal of maritime expansion in the South China Sea.



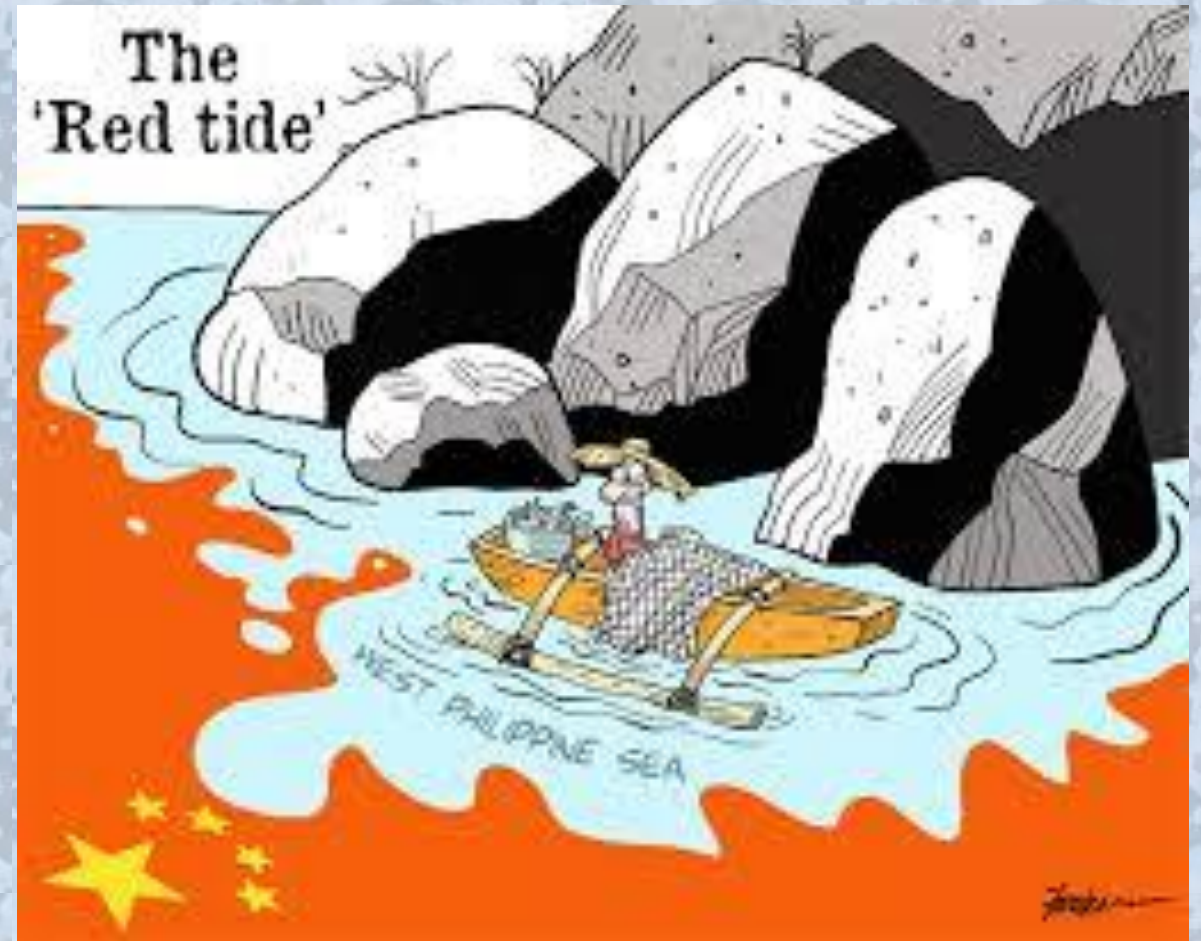
Conclusion



Unfortunately, President Duterte's efforts to appease China were all in vain as Chinese gray zone operations against the Philippines continued way into his six-year term.

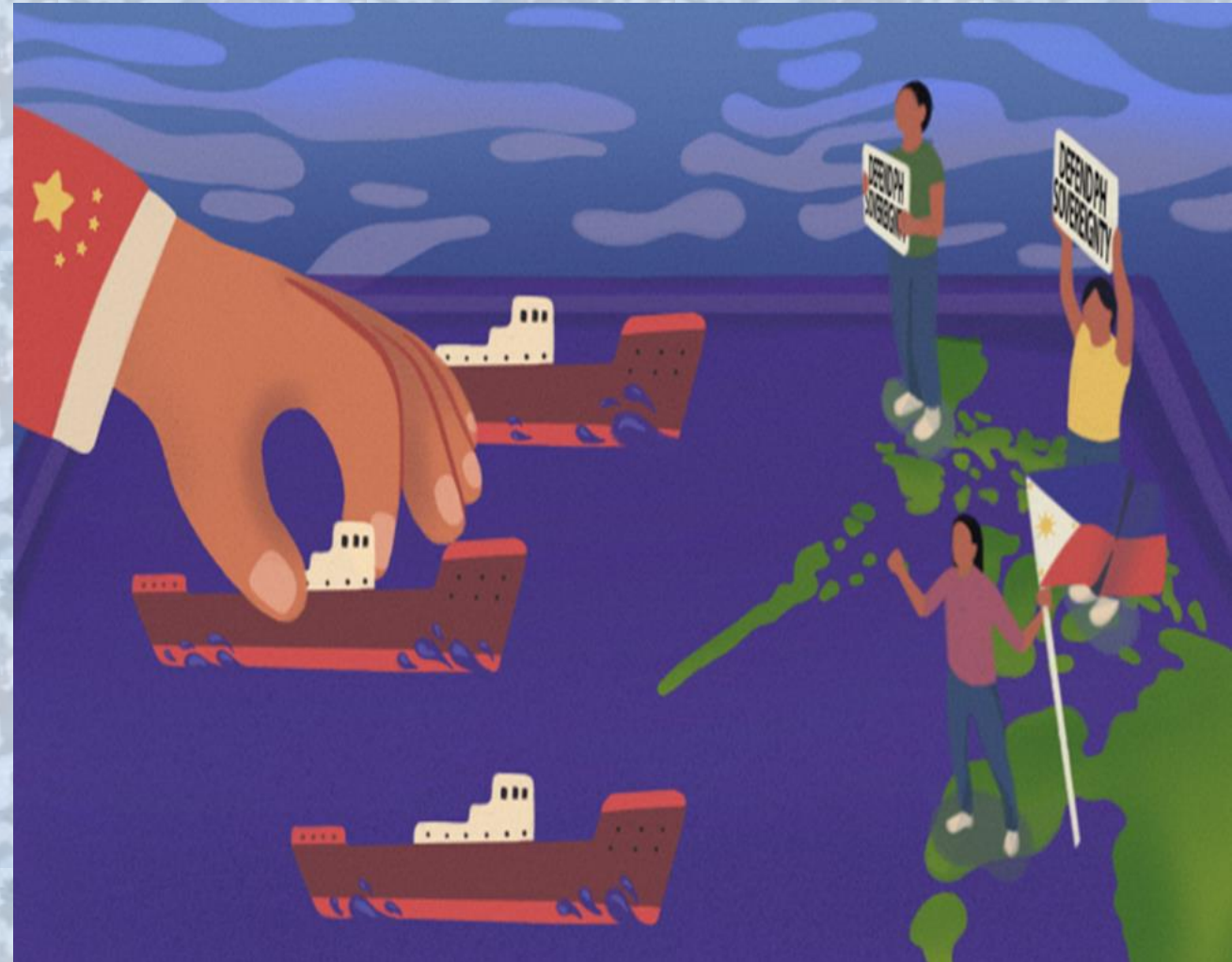
Conclusion

Philippine political leaders and defense officials overlooked these maritime incidents, however, the Philippine government realized that downplaying these incidents enables China to advance its agenda of maritime expansion through distinctly subtle aggressive actions since they do not generate serious and effective responses from targeted states like the Philippines.



Conclusion

The shift in the Philippine government's attitude on China's gray zone operations is reflected on how it responded to the discovery of 240 Chinese fishing boats in Whitsun Reef.



Conclusion



In these two maritime incidents, the Philippines showed to the world that the best way of countering Chinese gray zone operations in the South China Sea is to deny China its ideal goal of winning contentions by “rendering others’ armies helpless without fighting.”

Conclusion

- Furthermore, the Duterte Administration realized the importance of its alliance with the U.S. in addressing Chinese grey zone operations when it observed unabated coercive actions by the Chinese Coast Guard and Chinese maritime militias against units of the Philippine military and Filipino fishermen in the South China Sea despite the diplomatic rapprochement with China.





Thank you
very much
for your attention!