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## CHINA'S INFORMATION WARFARE IN THE PHILIPPINES

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# CHINA'S INFORMATION WARFARE IN THE PHILIPPINES

In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague delivered a unanimous and final decision rejecting China's expansive nine-dash line. It ruled that China has no lawful claims to areas covered by the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and its continental shelf. However, China repeatedly refused to acknowledge this, claiming that the ruling is "illegal, null, and void."

Over the years, China has continuously employed different measures to protect and advance its national interest in the West Philippine Sea. It has repetitively engaged in aggressive and coercive gray zone activities such as swarming, blasting of water cannon, destruction of the marine environment, and even forming blockades within the Philippines' EEZ.

Parallel to these activities, China has also been engaging in a massive information warfare to bolster its propaganda and push its narrative of ownership in the West Philippine Sea. What is surprising, however, is that over time, China has found unlikely allies, who have also repeatedly echoed its national interests: Filipino politicians, journalists, and experts.

This paper is an exploratory study on China's information warfare in the Philippines. It provides an in-depth look at China's motivations, primary objectives, and methodology in implementing its information warfare. It also explores Chinese disinformation operations in the Philippines from 2016 until 2023 and the consequent responses of the Duterte and Marcos Jr. administrations. Finally, it provides recommendations on ways forward for the Philippines in addressing China's information warfare.

## The Philippine Situation

In August 2023, the National Security Council claimed that China is using “political operators” to bolster Beijing’s claims in the West Philippine Sea.<sup>1</sup> While this was expected from China, what was unexpected was that these operators include Filipino experts, journalists, and influencers, who are pushing forward China’s national interest, rather than those of their own country.

National Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro said he is not alarmed by the false narratives China is propagating about the West Philippine Sea. He said disinformation and information operations naturally form part of China’s playbook. The national defense Chief explained that the government is working to counter the narratives of this information operation, including personally explaining to the Filipino people why they should not believe China’s narrative.<sup>2</sup>

### Terminology

To understand the actions of China, it is imperative to understand first the different terminologies that will be used throughout this paper. The United States Department of State defined disinformation as the “intentional creation and dissemination of false content to mislead an audience.” When this false information is propagated and used to promote arguments for political effect, it becomes propaganda. On the other hand, when the free flow of information is constrained through technological means or through the use of force, censorship occurs. Moreover, information manipulation happens when disinformation, propaganda, and censorship are utilized to build an information environment that is conducive in advancing a nation’s policy objectives.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace emphasized that an important aspect of disinformation is malign intent. It defined disinformation as the “creation, presentation, and dissemination of verifiably false content for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public and may cause public harm.”<sup>4</sup> The foundation also noted that disinformation is often a tactic used in influence operations, which refers to the “coordinated efforts to influence a target audience using a range of illegitimate and deceptive means, in support of the objectives of an adversary”. These operations are conducted by malign individuals and encompass hybrid adversarial activities such as coercion, sedition, and election interference to achieve broad and lofty goals.

Influence operations, however, is not just limited within one country. As we have seen over the years, foreign interference has become more rampant and aggressive in the advent of digital technology. This happens when a foreign state actor or its agents engage in coercive, deceptive, and/or non-transparent efforts to disrupt the free formation and expression of an individual’s political will.

The US State Department reported that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is spending “billions of dollars annually on foreign information manipulation efforts”. It utilizes false or biased information to advance the positive narratives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and suppresses critical information that disputes its preferred narrative on issues such as Taiwan, the South China Sea, and its international economic engagements.

All these have formed part of what has now been called as gray zone activities. The Center for Strategic and International Studies defined these as the actions that lie in the contested arena between routine statecraft and open warfare. Generally, these activities can range from the spectrum of fake news and online troll farms, political coercion, economic coercion, cyber operations, proxy support, to provocation by state-controlled forces.

In the Philippines, National Security Council Assistant Director General Jonathan Malaya<sup>5</sup> said part of China’s gray zone activities is the conduct of malign influence operations through an information and cognitive warfare. In such a warfare, the battlefield is in the mind of the public and among the weapons used are disinformation, propaganda, and censorship in the traditional and new media.

### China’s Objectives

Before we delve any further into China’s information warfare in the Philippines, it is pertinent to understand first China’s historical and cultural foundation and why it is conducting certain actions in some parts of the world.

Former United States Marine Corps officer and Professor Kerry Gershaneck<sup>6</sup> said the PRC primarily uses political warfare to destroy its enemies, despite having a massively powerful military backed by immense wealth and financial

## FEATURES

## ON THE COVER

Cover, title page, and contents page:  
[nextgov.com/cybersecurity/2019/05/how-china-uses-cyber-theft-and-information-warfare/256198](https://nextgov.com/cybersecurity/2019/05/how-china-uses-cyber-theft-and-information-warfare/256198); [securityaffairs.com/35114/security/china-admit-cyber-army](https://securityaffairs.com/35114/security/china-admit-cyber-army); [darkreading.com/vulnerabilities-threats/zero-days-in-edge-devices-become-china-s-cyber-warfare-tactic-of-choice](https://darkreading.com/vulnerabilities-threats/zero-days-in-edge-devices-become-china-s-cyber-warfare-tactic-of-choice) and [getrealphilippines.com/2016/06/philippine-corporate-media-failed-filipino-people](https://getrealphilippines.com/2016/06/philippine-corporate-media-failed-filipino-people)

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## 03

## THE PHILIPPINE SITUATION

Information warfare is a coherent part of the People's Republic of China's gray zone activities in the WPS and includes the use of fake news and online troll farms, political coercion, economic coercion, cyber operations, proxy support, and provocation by state-controlled forces

## 03

## CHINA'S OBJECTIVES

China's main objective is to ensure global and regional influence and control, promote its expansionist agenda without having to fire a single shot, and seize Philippines' exclusive economic zone

## 06

## CHINA'S METHODOLOGY

The PRC uses both hard and sharp power in carrying out coercive tactics and manipulation to influence countries and employs disinformation, social engineering, inauthentic amplification and micro-targeting



## 07

## SOCIAL ENGINEERING

Social engineering involves political leaders engaged in shaping public discourse and crafting public policies. Media is used to perform disinformation and mass targeting through both state-run news agencies and private companies



## 13

## INAUTHENTIC AMPLIFICATION

Inauthentic amplification of disinformation is undertaken by political operators and employs false experts, sensational influencers, and troll armies performing coordinated inauthentic behavior to infiltrate public discourse

## CONTENTS



# information warfare

resources. In a political warfare, all of a nation's capabilities are used to achieve its national objectives, but without engaging in a military war. He noted that China's main objective is to ensure global influence and control to achieve its expansionist China Dream. In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping promoted the term China Dream to describe a set of his personal and national principles and ideals in China.<sup>7</sup>

The PRC aims to achieve the China Dream without having to fire a single shot. Former Philippine Armed Forces Chief of Staff Emmanuel Bautista<sup>8</sup> said this strategy is inspired by Sun Tzu's Art of War, which promotes subduing the enemy without having to fight. Instead, economic, social, and political actions are pursued as alternatives to military means. Moreover, Bautista said China is also following Mao Zedong's thoughts, who advocated for the continuum of war and politics. He believed that politics is war without bloodshed and in pursuing an armed struggle in conjunction with other forms of struggle.

These ideologies gave birth to China's gray zone activities. Currently, they are pursuing their expansionist dreams without having to fire a single bullet. Instead, PRC uses political coercion, inducement, intimidation, disinformation, and other violent but covert operations, while still having its increasingly capable military and paramilitary forces looming ominously in the background to show tremendous power and support of its war of influence.

China is conducting a total war for regional and global supremacy through political, military, economic, and most currently, information warfare.<sup>9</sup> The ultimate objective of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders is to bring back what they believe is the proper, historic status of China as the "preponderant power in Eastern Eurasia" or simply, to bring back its former imperial grandeur as the Middle Kingdom.

American social scientist Steven Mosher<sup>10</sup> said China aspires to be the all-powerful Hegemon Power or what China's rulers call being "Everything Under the Sun." This means ensuring CCP's total control and the imposition of its all-encompassing civilization, not just over the Chinese population and its resources, but also over areas that China considers to be historically barbarian states or nearby nations in Asia and in other parts of the world such as Europe, Africa, and South America.

In a speech in 2017,<sup>11</sup> Xi Jinping said he considers these barbarian states as either tributary states that acknowledge China's so-called hegemony or potential enemies. China's expansionist intentions and actions do not believe in equality among nations. Instead, it believes that in a hegemonic world, citizens are considered as subjects and property of the state with no place for ideals such as representative democracy, human rights, sovereignty, free expression, and the rule of law.

Singapore's former ambassador Bilahari Kausika<sup>12</sup> explained that China's objective is for other countries to not just merely follow what it says but more importantly, to think that it is doing so out of its own volition without being told to do so. China employs legal and covert actions together with coercion, inducement, and persuasion to psychologically manipulate other nations and its citizens to and condition their behavior, not just direct their behavior. More specifically, PRC aims to ensure that foreign governments, including its elites, journalists, and civil society will accept its manipulated narrative and abstain from criticizing its actions and behaviors in their own country.

Applying these concepts to the Philippines, Ateneo School of Government Professor of Praxis and former Navy Vice Admiral Rommel Ong<sup>13</sup> said the PRC is engaging in elite cooptation or coercing key personalities that have an influence on policy or governance to ensure that the Philippine government is friendly, or at the very least, neutral, to give them complacency to do what they want to do in the country.

Moreover, former Supreme Court Associate Justice Antonio Carpio<sup>14</sup> believes China's main objective in the Philippines is, first, to perpetuate its expansionism agenda and cement the nine-dash, now ten-dash, line. This means seizing and taking control of 80% of the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone in the West Philippine Sea. Second, China hopes to cut Philippines' treaty alliance with the United States and remove their bases in the Philippines.

However, recent reports show that Filipinos are now recognizing and rejecting China's expansionist agenda in the Philippines and are leaning towards stronger alliances with like-minded countries. Furthermore, the decision of the Philippine government to be more assertive when it comes to its national sovereignty in the West Philippine Sea and resist China's gray zone activities has incurred reputational costs to China this year.

## China's Methodology

China has always considered the fight for public opinion as an essential battlefield to conquer through the use of various political warfare operations. Historically, China has always used political warfare to support combat operations.<sup>15</sup> Before a military confrontation, China usually initiates a political campaign in different parts of the world, which

involves the utilization of united front organizations and other sympathizers leading protests against the opposing country, supporting rallies in favor of China, and other activities such as the use of mass information channels including both the traditional and new media for disinformation and propaganda. These activities are part of China's strategic deception operations, which aims to confuse or delay the actions of its opponents to effectively respond to its actions.

More specifically, Chinese policy states that the first military strike is not necessarily always military. Oftentimes, the initial strike is political and strategic in nature, but will eventually justify a military reaction. Examples of these are perceived diplomatic miscommunication or a provoked statement by an opposing nation's government official, which can justify Chinese military action.

Presently in the Philippines, the PRC is using components of statecraft simultaneously to advance its national interest. It is using its hard power or the Chinese Navy, the Chinese Coast Guard, and its militias to conduct coercive tactics in the West Philippine Sea, while also using sharp power or manipulative policies or actions to influence other countries to conform to policies that are advantageous to China. This sharp power is being employed by the CCP's Central Committee, which consists of the United Front Work Department, which is in charge of the CCP's influence operations or in shaping public opinion towards China in the different parts of the world, the Propaganda Department, in charge of crafting China's narratives, and the International Liaison Department, in charge of engaging with the leaders or key personalities in other countries. However, these CCP committees do not have direct representatives in foreign countries. Their actions are often coursed through the Chinese embassies, which manage and execute the consequent activities that need to be conducted.

President Xi has expanded PRC's efforts to influence and shape the global information environment to favor CCP's interest.<sup>16</sup> He ordered the Chinese state media to "tell China's story well" in 2013 and pressed again the state media to further strengthen its propaganda efforts in 2021 with the intention of influencing foreign audiences globally. As of 2015, China was reported to be investing USD 10 billion a year for its influence operations, which includes massive disinformation campaign, in the different parts of the world. This number is perceived to have gotten significantly higher over the years.

In this era of social media, disinformation experts at the Veracity Authentication Systems Technology (VAST) has identified four key ways disinformation is being spread by a host of online actors including governments and other state-backed entities. These include social engineering, which aims to manipulate and misrepresent incidents, issues, and public discourse to sway public opinion in

## Social Engineering

Social engineering is a psychological manipulation technique which tricks people into taking actions and giving away important information. In propagating disinformation, it is used by actors to manipulate and misrepresent incidents, issues, and public discourse to sway public opinion or public policy in favor of a specific interest or agenda.

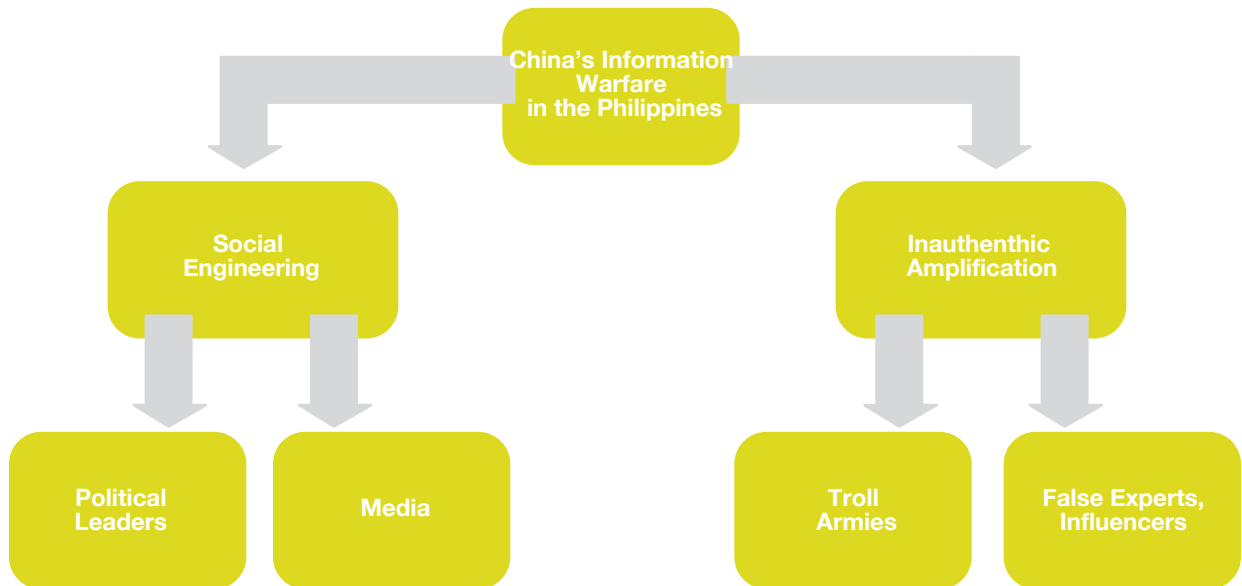
In the Philippines, political leaders play a key role not just in shaping public discourse but in crafting public policies that affect the whole nation. This was evident during the Duterte administration, when massive disinformation about the Philippines-China bilateral relationship, censorship of the coercive actions of China in the West Philippine Sea, and the economic contributions of China to the Philippines proliferated.

favor of a specific interest or agenda. Another way of spreading disinformation is through inauthentic amplification or the use of trolls, fake online accounts, paid accounts, spam bots, and even fake and sensational influencers or experts to maximize the reach and volume of malign content. Also being conducted presently is micro-targeting, which exploits social media targeting tools, originally designed for advertisements and user engagements, to identify and then engage social media users that are prone to sharing and amplifying disinformation. Lastly, VAST noted that online actors also use harassment and abuse to spread disinformation online. This is conducted using a mobilized group of fake accounts and trolls with the intention of obscuring, marginalizing, and droning out legitimate journalists, experts, and academics, who are providing views in contrast with the narrative they aim to propagate.<sup>17</sup>

This paper will use VAST's identified ways to propagate disinformation campaign as a framework to categorize the information warfare China is conducting in the Philippines. However, due to certain limitations, this paper will only look into how China is conducting social engineering and inauthentic amplification to spread disinformation in the Philippines to advance its national interest.

### China's Information Warfare in the Philippines Framework

Figure 1



Source: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/08/four-ways-disinformation-campaigns-are-propagated-online/and> Social Affairs (UNDESA), 2022

## Political Leaders

On July 12, 2016, the Arbitral Tribunal in the South China Sea Arbitration delivered a unanimous and final decision rejecting China's expansive nine-dash line and declaring it as baseless. It ruled that China has no lawful claims to areas covered by the Philippines' EEZ and continental shelf.

The award also ruled that the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) superseded any historic rights, or other sovereign rights or jurisdiction, in excess of the limits imposed by the convention. It also declared the Mischief Reef (Panganiban Reef) and the Second Thomas Shoal (Ayungin Shoal) as part of the Philippines' EEZ and continental shelf.<sup>18</sup>

China, however, refused to recognize the arbitral award. Over the years, the Chinese government released numerous statements claiming parts of the Philippine waters as their own, invoking the expansive and illegal nine-dash line. It continued to occupy many parts of the Philippine territory in the West Philippine Sea, and conducted aggressive and coercive actions to assert its interests.

When the award was released in 2016, then Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte fell short in recognizing the ruling and in asserting the country's national sovereignty. Instead, the arbitral award was met with silence. His behavior was unexpected, especially after his much-lauded statement about invoking the Philippine sovereignty amid China's reclamation in the West Philippine Sea during a 2016 Presidential debate:

*"I will not go to war...I will ask the Navy to bring me to the nearest*

*boundary d'yan sa Spratly, Scarborough. Bababa ako, sasakay ako ng jet ski, dala-dala ko 'yung flag ng Pilipino at pupunta ako doon sa airport nila (China) tapos itanim ko, then I would say, 'This is ours and do what you want with me,'"* – Duterte, April 2016

Instead of fighting for the country's sovereignty, he adopted a friendly stance with China and gave it the upper hand in the West Philippine Sea. Despite China's continued reclamation and coercive actions in the Philippine waters, he continued to treat them with kid gloves.<sup>19</sup>

From the time Duterte won the Presidential elections in May 2016 until several days before the arbitral tribunal released its ruling, Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines Zhao Jinhua paid three courtesy calls to the then President at the Malacañang Palace. During that time, China has occupied several parts of the West Philippine Sea, which prevented Filipino fishermen from entering the Philippine waters.

In a press conference on July 6, 2016, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said *"We hope that the new Philippine government will work in unison with us, veer away from the wrong path taken by the former government, return to the right track of having dialogue and consultation with China, and make tangible efforts to improve and develop China-Philippines relations."*<sup>20</sup>

On October 18-21 of the same year, Duterte went to China for a 4-day state visit. During his trip, he was able to ensure the "full recovery" of the Philippines-China bilateral relations, and agreed with Chinese President Xi Jinping that both countries will exercise self-restraint in conducting activities

in the West Philippine Sea. Duterte claimed that he was able to secure USD 24 billion worth of economic pledges in the form of business-to-business contracts and public financing agreements with China.<sup>21</sup>

By the end of his trip and in front of Chinese businessmen and government officials, Duterte announced his government's military and economic separation from the United States.

*"I announce my separation from the United States, both in military but economics also... I am separated from them so I will be dependent on you for a long time,"* –

Duterte, October 20, 2016

He also made several anti-American statements. He called them, *"loud, sometimes rowdy. Their larynx is not adjusted to civility,"* then emphasized that he prefers the Chinese.

*"Duterte of the Philippines is veering towards China because China has the character of an Oriental. It does not go around insulting people... There are 3 of us against the world – China, Philippines, Russia."* – Duterte, October 20, 2016

Less than two weeks later, the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative of the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies released photos of Chinese boats blocking Filipino fishermen from accessing the Scarborough Shoal (Panatag Shoal), which the 2016 arbitral award declared as a common fishing ground of Filipino, Vietnamese, and Chinese fishermen. Photos showed a Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) vessel, blocking the access of at least 17 Filipino fishing vessels. The report claimed the CCG vessel has been in the area since 2012. In an earlier statement, the Philippine Navy reported that 3 other CCG vessels were



patrolling near the Scarborough Shoal, making it more difficult for Filipino fishermen to approach the area.<sup>22</sup>

On March 13, 2017, Duterte ordered the Philippine military to assert the Philippine sovereignty over Benham rise, where China's survey ships were spotted from July to December 2016, but in a friendly way.

*"My order to the military, you go there and tell them straight that this is ours, but I say it in friendship" – Duterte, March 13, 2017*

Several days later, Duterte said the Philippines cannot stop China's aggressive and coercive actions in the West Philippine Sea. He also downplayed the presence of Chinese vessels inside Philippine territory. By then, China was still reclaiming areas and building facilities in the Scarborough Shoal.<sup>23</sup>

*"We cannot stop China from doing things. What do you want me to do? Declare war against China? I can't. We will lose all our military and policemen tomorrow and we will be a destroyed nation," – Duterte, March 19, 2017*

A year later, Duterte repeated his praises for Xi and defended their actions in the West Philippine Sea.<sup>24</sup>

*"I respect Xi Jinping, they assured us they will not build anything on Scarborough. He (Xi) is a man of honor. They can even make us 'Philippines, province of China,' we will even avail of services for free. If China were a woman, I'd woo her," – Duterte, February 19, 2018.*

He repeated his admiration to Xi again just a month later before leaving the Philippines to attend the Boao Forum for Asia in China. He emphasized the importance of China in ensuring the

success of his flagship infrastructure program, the Build, Build, Build plan.<sup>25</sup>

*"I just simply love Xi Jinping. He understood, he understands my problem and he is willing to help. Of course, China is a very important ingredient there [in Build, Build, Build]. You factor almost everything from a hard start. But... money, but of course it would not really be enough. So, I would say, I need China. More than anybody else at this time of our national life, I need China. I will not say something which is not true," – Duterte, April 9, 2018*

A year later, on May 24, 2018, Reuters reported that China has already built more than 1,600 structures on artificial islands it built in the South China Sea. About 800 of these are located inside Philippine waters.<sup>26</sup>

These statements from Duterte taking on a defeatist stance insofar as defending the Philippine sovereignty was concerned, staying silent on the arbitral award, and singing praises for China due to their supposed economic contributions to the Philippines continued throughout his term.<sup>27</sup>

In September 12, 2019, Duterte said Xi offered him a controlling stake in a joint energy venture in the South China Sea if the Philippine government sets aside the 2016 arbitral ruling in favor of the Philippines.

*"Set aside the arbitral ruling. Set aside your claim. Then allow everybody connected with the Chinese companies. They want to explore. If there is something, they said, we will be gracious enough to give you 60%, only 40% will be theirs. That is the promise of Xi Jinping," – Duterte, September 12, 2019.*

On May 6, 2021, Duterte belittled the

arbitral award and compared it to a piece of paper that he can easily dispose of.<sup>28</sup>

*"Iyang papel sa totoong buhay between nations, iyang papel wala 'yan. Kung sino 'yong tigas, United States, Britain 'yan, pagka ginusto nilang ganyan gawin. Tayo nanalo. Ngayon pagdating ko ang barko nandiyan sa West Philippine Sea, China boat, ship, tayo wala na... Sa usapang bugoy, sabihin ko sa iyo ibigay mo sa'kin, sabihin ko sa'yo putang ina, papel lang 'yan. Itatapon ko 'yan sa wastebasket," – Duterte, May 6, 2021*

As the Chief Architect of country's foreign policy, Duterte's statements, whether factual or misinformed, and whether it contained benevolent aspirations or had malign intentions, were considered policy by his government and the rest of the country.

A credible source from the military<sup>29</sup> said that they had to stand down from releasing information about and taking actions against Chinese activities in the West Philippine Sea during the Duterte administration. He said that from 2016-2022, the swarming of Chinese vessels in different parts of the West Philippine Sea was consistently happening. He noted that there were about 200 to 300 Chinese vessels that were sometimes in stationary position (dead in the water) or anchored in one position. Sometimes, they would change positions or go to another area in the West Philippine Sea.

The source said the presence of these Chinese vessels prohibited many Filipino fishermen from fishing in the West Philippine Sea. Those that tried to enter were blocked, threatened, or even chased away by the Chinese vessels. Worse, some of these Chinese vessels abused and destroyed

the marine life in the area by poaching corals, giant clams, and other natural resources.

The source said they wanted to act against the swarming of Chinese vessels and the threats and aggressive actions against Filipino fishermen, but they were held back by the pronouncements made by Duterte. As the chief architect of foreign policy and as the commander in chief of the Philippine military, he said they had no choice but to follow his direction. They said his statements about his and the country's relationship with China and Xi, notwithstanding their truthfulness and intent, had the same effect--the military was silenced and could not take any action.

There was, however, one exception when the military pushed back and spoke up against China's aggression. On June 9, 2019, Chinese vessel Yuemaobinyu 42212 rammed the Filipino fishing vessel Gem-ver, near Recto Bank, which is within Philippines' EEZ.

It was a hit and run. All 22 Filipino boat crew were abandoned at sea for about two hours. Fortunately, a Vietnamese fishing boat passed by and rescued them. The source said that after that happened, they could no longer just quietly tolerate China's actions. They felt the need to stand up and defend their countrymen against China's aggressive actions. At that point, many members of the military were already feeling angry and had low morale for not being able to do anything against China's aggression.

Carpio<sup>30</sup> said Duterte's statements undermined the Philippine position. He said it was wrong for Duterte to say that China is a friend while it is invading the maritime zone and island territories in the West Philippine Sea. In fact, Carpio noted that the Philippines lost its territory to China in 2018.

In a statement issued by former Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert Del Rosario on June 4, 2018,<sup>31</sup> he said that China seized control of Sandy Cay, a sandbar near Pag-asa Island (Thitu Island), in the late 2017. Under the baselines law, Pag-asa is part of the Philippine territory.

A month before del Rosario's statement, on May 15, 2018, Duterte said Xi promised to protect him from plans of coup d'état against him, insinuating that the Chinese presence in the West Philippine Sea was meant to secure his position.

*"The assurances of Xi Jinping were very encouraging. 'We will not---' e nandiyan naman sila. 'We will not allow you to be taken out from your office, and we will not allow the Philippines to go to the dogs,'" Duterte, May 15, 2018*

Carpio said China's promise to safeguard Duterte's political post and the billions-worth of pledges could have induced the former President to take China's side, to the detriment of his own nation. The former Senior Associate Justice said Duterte's statements and actions could be considered as violation of the Constitution and betrayal of public trust, and could be tantamount to an impeachable offense. However, being a popular President, neither the Senate nor the House of Representatives held him accountable for his statements.

“Threats and aggressive actions against Filipino fishermen and the brazen intrusion into the maritime zone and island territories in the West Philippine Sea were emboldened by Duterte's pro-China foreign policy and the Philippine military was silenced and suppressed in taking the necessary actions...”

Furthermore, Duterte also played a big role in the fulfillment of China's goal of decoupling the Philippines from one of its strongest ally, the United States. In two separate instances in 2016, Duterte announced the end of the supposed joint patrols in the Philippines' EEZ and the yearly Balikatan exercises (shoulder-to-shoulder) with the US. In both instances, he cited China as the primary reason.<sup>32</sup>

*"I will visit China. I will open the door for everyone. I will go to Russia. I'm serving notice now to the U.S.: I will maintain the alliance but I will establish new alliances. I serve notice to you now that this will be the last joint military exercise with U.S." – Duterte, September 28, 2016*

Ong<sup>33</sup> said that the measure of success of China's information warfare in a country is whether or not it was able to change or influence public policy. In this case, Duterte's "disturbing" public pronouncements about China had a big effect in shaping public policy in the Philippines.

During the Duterte administration, China was able to successfully proliferate its narrative and agenda, with no less than the chief architect of the Philippine foreign policy and military commander-in-chief taking part, intentionally or not, in its information warfare. It was during his term that the Philippine government loosened, if not entirely cut, its ties with one of its strongest ally, the United States, and pivoted to China. PRC was also able to seize parts of the Philippine waters and island territories and continuously build structures on artificial islands in the West Philippine Sea. China was also able to paint a benevolent image of itself, despite its continuous coercive and aggressive actions in the West Philippine Sea, through its billions-worth of economic pledges, which eventually failed to materialize.

## Media

The Presidency was and is not the only one that China tried and is trying to influence as part of its disinformation campaign in the Philippines. Malaya<sup>34</sup> said China is also using journalists and news agencies as proxies in its information warfare in the Philippines. Like political leaders, they are used to spread disinformation and conduct social engineering to shape public opinion or public policy in favor of CCP's interest.

The Freedom House Report on Beijing's Global Media Influence noted that PRC's influence on Philippine media is high. Beijing's efforts to influence Philippine media got a score of 41 on a scale of 0 (least influence) to 85 (most influence). Consequently, the report also showed that despite China's immense influence operations, the resilience of the Philippines and its response to these activities also scored high at 50 out of 85.<sup>35</sup>

Over the years, China did not only intensify its coercive activities in the West Philippine Sea; it also reinforced its assertive and aggressive influence operations involving the Philippine media. At the height of the friendly relations between Beijing and Manila during the Duterte administration, Duterte and Xi signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on media exchange and cooperation between the two countries on May 15, 2017. Under the MOU, China would provide training to personnel of state-run media agencies such as the Radyo ng Bayan, PTV4, and the Philippine News Agency (PNA). The objective was to strengthen the Philippine state-owned media agency to enable it to become more effective in disseminating information about the programs of the Duterte administration. Prior to the signing of the MOU, the PRC has already been inviting and sponsoring trips and trainings for Filipino journalists to China.<sup>36</sup>

In April 2018, the Chinese government pledged PHP 140.8 million worth of aid to the Philippine government to boost the capacity of the Philippine state media. The following month, several journalists from the PNA, PTV4, and the Presidential Communications Operations Office and other private mainstream media outlets went to China for a sponsored media training. This was, however, just one of the several batches of journalists sent to China for supposed educational trips. These seminars were supposed to promote alternative approaches to journalism and even news administration that goes beyond the traditional democratic principles such as "socialist journalism with Chinese characteristics."<sup>37</sup>

Insofar as influence operations involving the media is concerned, Ong<sup>38</sup> said China's strategy is usually mass targeting rather than going after individuals. They will invite about a hundred journalists to go on an educational trip, media training, or leisure/exposure trip. China does not expect all 100 to be co-opted. Rather, they are content with just having 1-3 people, who they can fully influence to reinforce their narrative, when he/she comes back to the Philippines. As for the rest of the participants, although they are not fully co-opted, they will still have a favorable opinion of China after having a pleasant experience during the trip.

A 2020 report of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) noted that there's a consensus in the media community that these Chinese-sponsored trainings have favorable impact to PRC. A journalist was quoted as saying that after the training, the manner of writing of these Filipino journalists suddenly reflected the



writing style and content of Xinhua, a China state-run media agency, which is “normally propaganda”. Another journalist said that the trainings were teaching state control, rather than insights on journalism. But ultimately, one journalist said, China’s end goal may not necessarily be to just influence the local media, but rather to influence the entire government.<sup>39</sup>

In August 2017, the Philippine government-run news agency PNA published an opinion article sourced from Xinhua, which discredited the 2016 arbitral award and painted China in a good light, amid its continued reclamation and building of structures in the West Philippine Sea at that time.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, a journalist said that if the government media could not filter the its content, then it’s been co-opted by China.<sup>41</sup>

*“More than one year after an ill-founded award at South China Sea arbitration was unilaterally delivered by an ad hoc tribunal in The Hague, the situation in the South China Sea has stabilized and improved thanks to the wisdom and sincerity of China and the parties concerned,” – Xinhua as published in Philippine News Agency, August 6, 2017*

On June 13, 2018, state-run PTV4 announced that it will start airing Filipino-dubbed Chinese TV series, movies, cartoons, and documentaries to allow Filipinos to “better understand” China’s history, culture, daily lives, and even dreams. It is important to note that while all these were happening, Chinese incursions in the West Philippine Sea were still happening, including the deployment of missiles and the landing of bomber planes on the artificial islands in the Philippine EEZ.<sup>42</sup>

Several Filipino senators opposed the

plan to air Filipino-dubbed Chinese shows on state-run PTV4. The senators noted that doing so poses the danger of spreading government-sanctioned Chinese propaganda through official media stations and that it might inculcate among Filipinos the authoritarian, anti-democratic, and atheist ideologies and principles of the CCP. The senators believed that this showed the “clear and present danger of Chinese domination in the Philippines, short of an invasion.” They noted that it is the government’s responsibility to protect Filipinos from any form of “intrusive and invasive foreign agenda of domination, control, and brainwashing of the Filipino people.”<sup>43</sup>

China’s influence operations on Philippine media is not limited to state-run news agencies. It also has network within private media companies in the Philippines. The 2020 IFJ report noted the close links between the Chinese embassy and national dailies such as the Manila Bulletin and the Manila Times. Journalists noted that the embassy’s vigorous level of activity, including the frequent press releases and invitation of local journalists to events, was concerning.<sup>44</sup>

From 2019 to 2021, Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines Huang Xilian had at least 10 published opinion articles in news dailies such as the Manila Times, Manila Bulletin and the Daily Tribune. The Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI) also published content from China Daily during the same period, as a result of both news agencies’ participation in the Asia News Network. The Manila Bulletin and Philippine Star also re-published weekly stories on China, which were originally printed by Chinese state media such as the People’s Daily and Xinhua. Online, the Manila Times and Manila Bulletin also

featured stories originally published by Xinhua and Global Times, a tabloid controlled by CCP.<sup>45</sup>

Fast forward to 2022. The change in administration also saw a change in Philippine foreign policy and China had to act accordingly. With the current administration and, subsequently, the state-run news agencies no longer heavily favoring China, China is now focusing its influence operations on private news companies and even individual Filipino journalists. The strategy now is to publish news content that echoes the Chinese narrative but in a more discreet way. By using private media agencies and journalists with established credibility, the news stories are also legitimized. Malaya refused to identify the names of the news organizations and journalists but said that they are continuously monitoring the actions of these agencies and people.

Malaya<sup>46</sup> noted that currently, there are some reporters who accept the statements of the Chinese embassy and some Chinese officials hook, line, and sinker, and publish them verbatim as if they are facts. There is no attribution to the source of the quote or statement qualifiers such as the words ‘allege or claim’. By doing these, Malaya said these Filipino journalists are propagating China’s false narrative.

Furthermore, he also warned about foreign media wires that write Chinese-leaning stories, which Philippine news agencies republish verbatim, regardless of content. He appealed to Filipino journalists to practice editorial judgment especially amid the current information warfare happening in the country.

In August 2023, Chinese vessels fired water cannons at Philippine vessels that

were on a resupply mission going to Ayungin Shoal (Second Thomas Shoal). Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) Spokesperson Jay Tarriela, however, noted that following the incident, there were some Filipinos who acted as “mouthpieces of the Chinese government”, made excuses for China’s aggressive behavior, and peddled disinformation online about what really transpired during the resupply mission. He said this caused confusion among Filipinos.<sup>47</sup>

In a Senate inquiry the following month, Tarriela said the Chinese government could be involved in a disinformation campaign that has been downplaying the coercive and aggressive activities of Chinese vessels in the West Philippine Sea. He explained that such information operation will not happen unless it’s supported by a state actor. Tarriela noted that some journalists informed him about receiving e-mails that divert the attention of Filipinos away from the Chinese activities in the West Philippine Sea.

To address the disinformation concerns, Malaya said the government is conducting a series of media trainings that would help strengthen the reportage of Filipino journalists when it comes to the West Philippine Sea, and protect them from Chinese influence operations. Among the topics being discussed are the history of the conflict in the West Philippine Sea and the importance of the UNCLOS. They have also been allowing reporters to join the Philippine Coast Guard in its activities in the West Philippine Sea, where journalists get to see and experience first-hand the coercive and aggressive activities of China

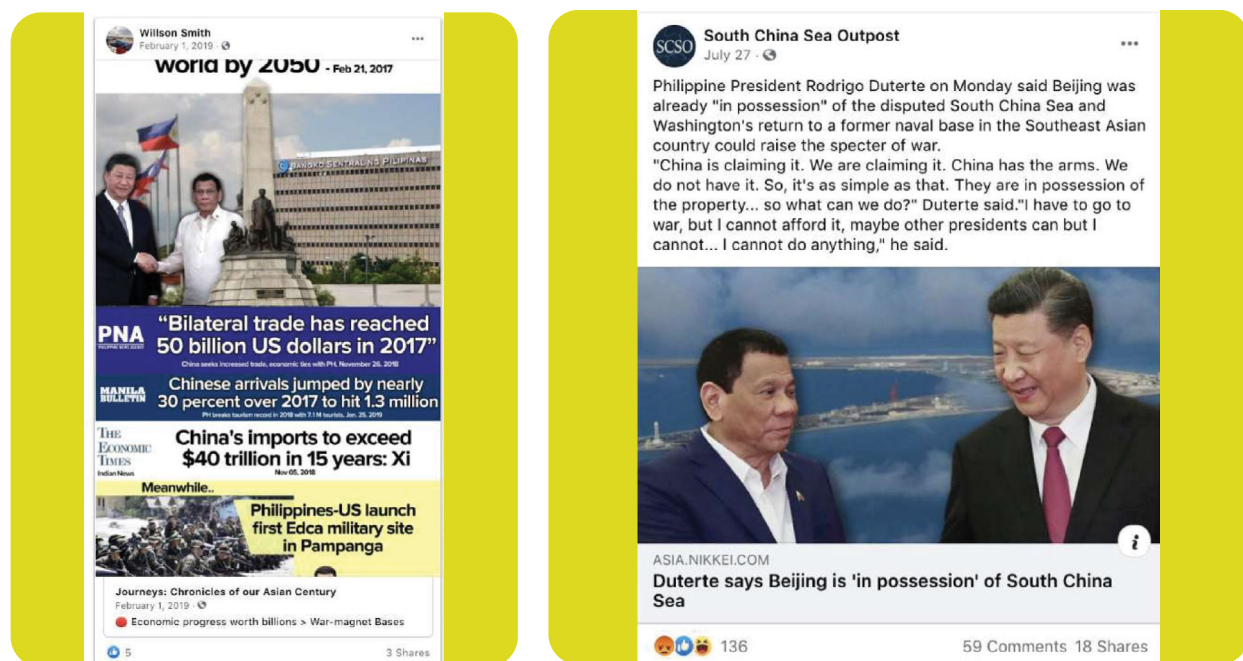
inside the Philippine EEZ. Malaya said the trainings and exposure coverage have proven effective and have significantly improved the journalists’ understanding and, consequently, their reportage on the West Philippine Sea conflict. He said the reports and video footage of China’s dangerous activities this year have helped destroy China’s false narratives.<sup>48</sup>

## Inauthentic Amplification

Inauthentic amplification is the process of spreading disinformation or false content with malign intent. It happens when wrong or fake information is amplified by inauthentic personalities or those who are pretending to be someone they are not, fake accounts or paid trolls on social media platforms, and fake experts and sensational influencers, who are compensated to echo the interest of their benefactor to their followers.

### Sample Posts from Operation Naval Gazing

Figure 2



*Posts on the South China Sea and the Philippines’ relationship with China and the United States; note the contrast on the left between Chinese ‘economic progress worth billions’ and American ‘war-magnet bases’*

Source: <https://graphika.com/reports/operation-naval-gazing>

## Troll Armies

To amplify a disinformation campaign, one critical component is having coordinated inauthentic behavior. This refers to groups of pages or people working together online to mislead people about who they are or what they are doing. This behavior was first observed in the Philippines starting late 2016, when a cluster of fake accounts on Facebook and Instagram started posting content pushing the Chinese narrative. Network analysis firm Graphika called this Operation Naval Gazing because the fake accounts showed specific interest in maritime security especially about issues in the South China Sea and the achievements of the Chinese navy.<sup>49</sup>

Graphika noted that the operation started in the Philippines in March 2018 and expanded in 2019 to 2020. The fake individual accounts and pages primarily posted content about the Philippines expressing support for then President Duterte and his family, particularly his daughter, then Davao City Mayor Sara Duterte, and even her political ally, Senator Imee Marcos, daughter of former President and late dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr., and the critics of the Duterte administration. Some of these fake accounts and pages also focused on China. They posted content that praised China, highlighting the benefits of trading with them, their generosity in providing vaccines during the coronavirus pandemic, and the advantages of the Duterte administration's pro-China stance in the West Philippine Sea.

In creating the fake accounts, some were using pictures from real individuals as their primary photos while some used AI-generated profile pictures. Accounts were set up in small numbers over a few days and were linked by certain features such as their choice of profile photo or the location where they are from. The private accounts did not have a lot of friends on Facebook but some pages eventually got a lot of following, including two pages, which

attracted 57,000 to 40,000 followers. There was also a page about the South China Sea with 16,000 followers. Facebook took down these accounts and a number of other fake accounts in 2019<sup>50</sup> and then again in 2020.

A 2023 Rappler investigative report<sup>51</sup> found that there is a pro-China community on Facebook that has been propagating propaganda and disinformation supporting China since the Duterte administration. It noted that the Duterte administration's pivot to China fueled pro-China posts online being seeded within "hyperpartisan communities, led by vitriolic pro-Duterte bloggers" who were eventually appointed into different government positions during the same administration. The report, however, did not specify whether or not inauthentic accounts were also being used by these communities to propagate pro-China posts.

Many of these posts parroted the claims of the Chinese government and state media. Examples of pro-China content that proliferated online include those that downplayed China's coercive and aggressive actions in the West Philippine Sea and the Philippine victory in the arbitral tribunal in 2016. They also supported Chinese offers to conduct joint exploration in the Philippine EEZ but heavily opposed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement with the United States and the opening of more US military bases in the Philippines.

A deeper look into various disinformation campaigns in the Philippines and in other parts of the world showed that the campaign primarily starts with the strategic political operators which specialize in social engineering. In the case of China's information warfare in the Philippines, this may include Chinese political leaders and groups, who then connect with Filipino political leaders, media operators, and key opinion leaders to propagate their messaging. The message is then further sent to both authentic and inauthentic social media followers and network, which further amplify the narrative, until it reaches the general public, who, the operators hope, would voluntarily proliferate the message they started.

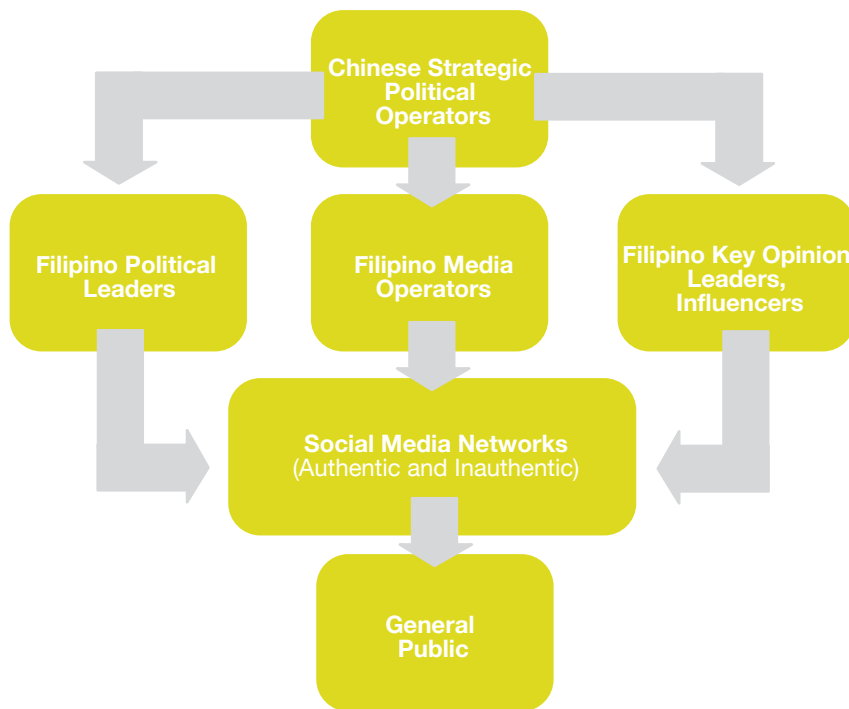
Filipinos' addiction to social media made it easy for operators to infiltrate the Philippine public discourse. A 2019 We are Social and Hootsuite study showed that Filipinos spend 10 hours and 2 minutes online daily, the highest time recorded in the world.<sup>52</sup> This number increased in 2022, with Filipinos spending 10 hours and 56 minutes a day online. Furthermore, Filipinos used YouTube the most, with Facebook and Whatsapp coming on second and third place.<sup>53</sup>

While Filipinos are very active online, the poor digital infrastructure in the Philippines means that not everyone has access to unlimited and fast internet connection. Some Facebook users do not have enough bandwidth to read the entire content of an article or watch an entire video. This digital reality was utilized by operators by deliberately creating misleading and click-bait titles in their articles and videos to further sow disinformation. This means that many social media users only get to read the misleading title or caption, but are not able to see or watch the entire content of the social media post.



## Disinformation Campaign Framework

Figure 3



Source: Author's data management

Furthermore, during the Duterte administration, a vicious attack against legitimate journalists in the Philippines was launched, questioning and eventually destroying the credibility of traditional media in the country. In 2020, the broadcasting franchise of media giant ABS-CBN was terminated allegedly on orders of the former President while online news agency Rappler was ordered to shut down in 2018 after the same President accused it of being owned by foreigners. The demonization of the traditional media by the previous administration affected the behavior of the general public, which persisted until the next administration. By 2022, a survey by the Ateneo School of Government showed that 78.8% of Filipinos get their news from Facebook.<sup>54</sup>

Similarly, a 2023 Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ) report also showed that distrust in traditional media

continues to persist.<sup>55</sup> This decline of trust in traditional media and the social media-savvy character of Filipinos made the Philippines more permeable to disinformation.

A Rappler investigative report noted that Duterte bloggers formed a distinct pro-China network in 2018, where they promoted the former President's pro-China stance in a coordinated manner. This eventually expanded and included pro-Marcos bloggers or die-hard supporters of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. and his son President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.<sup>56</sup>

However, the change in administration in 2022 brought with it massive changes in the country's foreign policy. By 2023, Marcos Jr. started to push a different foreign policy from Duterte, highlighted by his decision to rekindle the Philippines'

ties with the US. This led to his supporters also leaving the pro-China communities, and these communities now have a smaller reach.

## False Experts and Sensational Influencers

From Duterte's pivot to China, the Marcos Jr. administration has redirected the wheels of foreign policy into a rules-based multipolar world. In the first year of the Marcos administration, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the United States was reinvigorated and joint military exercises came back in full swing. He has also been boosting security ties with Japan, Australia, and other like-minded states.

With the President and even the media now more difficult to reach and influence, China had to pivot and look for other ways to influence public policy and public opinion. It seems the tables have turned as Chinese officials are now going on the defensive and are repeatedly claiming that it is the Philippine government that has been spreading false information insofar as the West Philippine Sea is concerned. Having weaker connections within the current administration and even in the media industry, China needed to further boost its inauthentic amplification with the help of false experts and sensational influencers.

On August 18, 2023, Malaya said China is using "political operators", who echo and reinforce PRC's claims in the West Philippine Sea are undermining the Philippines' position against China's maritime claims. He did not identify who these operators are. However, he did say that this is part of China's

cognitive warfare to influence and sway public opinion in favor of Chinese interests.<sup>57</sup>

Malaya said China is using foreign policy experts and journalists as proxies or propagandists, who spread false narratives in the Philippines. A cognitive warfare is a multi-pronged propaganda campaign, which utilizes psychological operations and cyber operations through social media to sow doubts, introduce conflicting narratives, polarize public opinions, and radicalize groups in the Philippines.<sup>58</sup>

Malaya said the National Security Council first became fully aware of the cognitive warfare after the August 5, 2023 incident, when a Chinese Coast Guard ship used water cannons and dangerous maneuvers against Philippines' BRP Cabra, BRP Malabrigo, and two other Filipino vessels. The Philippine ships were on their way to Ayungin shoal to deliver supplies to the Marine outpost on the grounded BRP Sierra Madre.<sup>59</sup>

Beijing claimed that the Philippines violated China's laws during the conduct of its resupply mission when it intruded into the Ayungin Shoal, which China insists is part of its territory. Ayungin Shoal is located 105.77 nautical miles from the Philippine province of Palawan. Thus, it is part of the Philippines' 200-nautical mile continental shelf, as provided under UNCLOS.<sup>60</sup>

China also claimed that the Philippines promised several times to remove the grounded BRP Sierra Madre on Ayungin Shoal. The ship has been on Ayungin Shoal since 1999 and has become the symbol of Philippine sovereignty in the area. It is currently being manned by more than a dozen Marines and sailors.<sup>61</sup>

Several days later, the Philippine Coast

Guard (PCG) called out the actions of some "unpatriotic" and "traitor" Filipinos who parroted the Chinese narrative on the issue and defended and made excuses for the coercive and aggressive behavior from China. PCG Spokesman for the West Philippine Sea Jay Tarriela said given the current developments in the West Philippine Sea, it is important to show loyalty to the country.<sup>62</sup>

Tarriela did not identify who he was referring to. However, Malaya confirmed in a Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism report that the think tanks Integrated Development Studies Institute (IDSI) led by Filipino tycoon George Siy, and the Asian Century Philippines Strategic Studies Institute (ACPSSI) led by journalist Herman Tiu Laurel, political analyst Adolfo Quizon Paglinawan, and political science Professor Anna Malindog-Uy, as among the Facebook pages that caught the government's attention.<sup>63</sup>

Four days after the water cannon incident, IDSI posted a drone video of the water cannon incident, calling it "mind conditioning or future false flag to bring US war to Asia after Ukraine." The PCIJ noted that the drone video was originally posted by the Chinese Coast Guard on Chinese social media platform Weibo the day before. For its part, IDSI argued that it is not pro-China but pro-Philippines and pro-peace. They also claimed that they also participated in activities critical of China but failed to identify what these are.

A Rappler Investigative report also identified prominent pro-Duterte blogger Sass Sasot as among IDSI's supposed "thinkers" or thought leader.<sup>64</sup> Sasot had been flagged several times before for spreading disinformation online.<sup>65</sup> The report noted that Sasot's pro-China content were funneled and propagated into hyperpartisan pro-China Facebook groups. These are the Facebook group

of IDSI and the Philippines-China Friendship Club (PCFC). They, however, argue that they are only advocating for stronger relations with China because they believe it would be beneficial for the Philippines.

Malaya<sup>66</sup> also noted that the ACPSSI, through the Pandesal Forum, a civic project of Kamuning Bakery Café owned by Wilson Lee Flores, is utilizing statistics and data to mislead. In a position paper released on October 12, 2023 and subsequent forum on October 14, 2023, the ACPSSII downplayed the 2016 arbitral ruling and claimed that:<sup>67</sup>

*"The Filipino nation has been subjected to ten years of "arbitration tension" and ten months of recent "Ayungin" and "Panatag" shoal tension since BBM's February 2023 pivot back to U.S. mendicancy. Both these exercises have produced nothing for the Filipino nation – not one inch of additional territory or EEZ control, not one additional grain of rice nor one dollar discount for fuel." – ACPSSII Position Paper, October 12, 2023*

*"In June 2023 Pulse Asia Survey released in findings and found only 6% of Filipinos are concerned about "Defending the Integrity of Philippine territory against foreigners", this rose to only 7% in September despite massive anti-China Ayungin and Scarborough Shoal PCG and PN goading. 93% of Filipinos are concerned about inflation, food, transportation, crime and economy. Yet, the administration is whipping up more and more SCS "cry wolf" scare stories." – ACPSSII Position Paper, October 12, 2023*

A Pulse Asia Survey conducted on September 10 to 14, 2023 asked Filipinos to identify the most urgent

national concerns. Results show that 74% of Filipinos believe that controlling inflation is the most urgent concern while only 7% said defending the integrity of Philippine territory against foreigners is among the most urgent concerns.<sup>68</sup> The ACPSSII took this to mean that only 7% of Filipinos are concerned about defending the Philippine territory. Malaya said this is a false narrative that is taken out of context. That 93% of Filipinos do not find the issue urgent does not mean they are not concerned about it.

Malaya pointed out that there are several other surveys, which show that a vast majority of Filipinos support the government’s efforts in the West Philippine Sea.

A June 2023 Pulse Asia survey, commissioned by international think tank Stratbase ADR Institute, shows that 80% of Filipinos agree that the government should form alliances and strengthen its relationship with like-minded countries to defend the territorial and economic rights of the Philippines in the West Philippine Sea.<sup>69</sup>

The same survey shows that 72% of Filipinos believe that Marcos Jr. administration should prioritize the strengthening of the military capability of the Philippines, especially the Navy, Coast Guard, and the Air Force to effectively address issues in the West Philippine Sea. Furthermore, 64% believe Philippines should conduct maritime patrols and military exercises with allied countries.

In a statement released by the ACPSSII, they claimed that there is a “US information warfare being waged on the Filipino mind right now”. They explained that the objective is to push US’ strategy of tension “for eventual war of conquest and profit for its war industries”. They also claimed that the US is conducting

Pulse Asia Survey on June 2023

Table 1

AGREEMENT/DISAGREEMENT WITH TEST STATEMENT: “Alliances should be formed and relationships strengthened with countries that have similar beliefs to the Philippines to defend the territorial and economic rights of the Philippines in the West Philippine Sea and protect international order.” June 19 - 23, 2023 (in Percent)								
Base: Total Interviews, 100%								
How much do you agree or disagree with this statement? Would you say you...	RP	LOCATION				CLASS		
		NCR	BL	VIS	MIN	ABC	D	E
<b>AGREE</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>83</b>
Strongly agree	26	24	19	37	32	24	25	31
Somewhat agree	54	54	61	42	48	63	54	42
<b>CANNOT SAY AGREE OR DISAGREE</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>DISAGREE</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>
Somewhat disagree	3	2	4	3	1	2	3	2
Strongly disagree	0.1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>UNAIDED</b>								
I don’t have enough knowledge to give an opinion	1	2	0	0	1	0	1	1

Source: Pulse Asia Research, Inc

Pulse Asia Survey on September 2023

Table 2

Base: Total Interviews, 100%								
President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. said that economic security is national security.								
Among the following countries or organizations, with whom should the Marcos administration strengthen its economic relations? You may choose up to three.	RP	LOCATION				CLASS		
		NCR	BL	VIS	MIN	ABC	D	E
United States	74	77	75	87	58	76	74	73
Japan	55	65	59	38	55	54	57	43
Australia	46	46	46	51	43	45	46	50
Canada	40	34	43	35	40	38	39	48
European Union (EU)	26	23	30	21	25	29	27	19
Great Britain/United Kingdom (UK)	21	24	21	28	14	30	19	27
China	19	12	12	29	27	18	19	14
India	4	3	1	5	10	1	4	4
<b>UNAIDED</b>								
I don’t have enough knowledge to give an opinion	2	4	0	1	6	2	2	5
None of those mentioned	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	1

Source: Pulse Asia Research, Inc



## Level of Confidence on China Contributing to Global Peace, Security, Prosperity, and Governance

Table 3

CONFIDENCE ON CHINA:  
“How confident are you that China will “do the right thing”  
to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance?”

Country	No confidence		Little confidence		No comment		Confident		Very confident	
	2021	2022	2021	2022	2021	2022	2021	2022	2021	2022
<b>ASEAN</b>	<b>22.0%</b>	<b>24.8</b>	<b>37.6</b>	<b>33.3</b>	<b>21.4</b>	<b>15.1</b>	<b>17.2</b>	<b>20.1</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>6.7</b>
Brunei	6.1%	7.5	39.4	60.4	30.3	15.1	24.2	17.0	0.0	0.0
Cambodia	7.7%	8.6	34.6	8.6	30.8	8.6	23.1	44.4	3.8	29.6
Indonesia	23.3%	12.2	37.2	38.9	23.3	19.8	15.5	21.4	0.8	7.6
Laos	15.0%	4.5	32.5	36.4	22.5	34.1	27.5	22.7	2.5	2.3
Malaysia	16.2%	20.0	41.9	31.1	16.2	11.9	22.2	28.9	3.4	8.1
Myanmar	26.3%	77.1	33.3	11.7	28.2	9.4	11.5	1.7	0.6	0.0
Philippines	34.3%	31.5	47.8	50.5	7.5	9.3	7.5	8.8	3.0	0.0
Singapore	12.7%	35.6	44.3	34.2	19.6	14.0	21.5	14.9	1.9	1.4
Thailand	26.7%	21.4	41.2	26.5	16.0	17.9	14.5	24.8	1.5	9.4
Vietnam	51.4%	29.9	24.0	34.7	20.0	11.1	4.6	16.0	0.0	8.3

Source: ISEAS-Yusof Shak Institute. (2022). The State of Southeast Asia 2022 Survey Report

the information warfare by controlling the Philippine oligarchs, which then controls the Philippine mainstream media. It also claimed that the US is using academic groups and think tanks. They also identified the PCIJ report earlier mentioned in this paper<sup>70</sup> as part of the propaganda of those they called “pro-US, pro-War positioning of the Philippine government and its security apparatuses, including the PCG, AFP, and NSA.”<sup>71</sup>

Ong said it proved difficult for the propagandists to sell a positive pro-China campaign. This was seen in surveys that show only a smaller percentage of Filipinos want the Philippines to strengthen its relationship with China as compared to the United States and Japan.<sup>72</sup>

A 2022 survey by the Singaporean ISEAS-Yusof Shak Institute also showed that 50.5% of Filipinos had little confidence while 31.5% had no confidence that China will do “the right thing” to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity and

governance. Among these people, 70.7% said that they distrust China because “China’s economic and military power could be used to threaten my country’s interests and sovereignty.”<sup>73</sup>

More recently, an October 2023 survey by Oculum Research and Analytics showed that 51% of Filipinos disapproved of China due to its continued aggression over the West Philippine Sea.<sup>74</sup>

Because of the poor confidence of Filipinos on China, Ong<sup>75</sup> said a “group of Filipino propagandists for China”, who he did not identify, met and discussed the need to shift their narrative from a positive pro-China messaging to negative anti-war messaging, which they believe would appeal to the emotions of Filipinos more. They agreed to the push the narrative that the West Philippine Sea issue is brought about by the US-China

power struggle, and that getting involved in such conflict would only force our country to go to war against China.

Ong said the Filipino propagandists’ use of “illogical” and “hysterical” arguments is a sign of desperation because they are losing the propaganda war. He noted the positive reaction of Filipinos on the current actions being taken by the government in publicizing China’s coercive and aggressive actions in the West Philippine Sea, the Filipino public’s low enthusiasm towards strengthening its relationship with China, and their support on government efforts to defend our sovereignty as reasons why the Chinese narrative is proving difficult to advance under the current administration.

The Marcos Jr. government’s current policy of publicizing the maritime incidents in the West Philippine Sea started early this year. In February 13, 2023, the PCG released a statement with photos and accused the Chinese

Coast Guard of pointing a military-grade laser at its vessel near the Ayungin Shoal last February 6, which resulted to the temporary blinding of its crew. The PCG also said that the Chinese vessel made dangerous maneuvers, which put at risk the lives of those in the Filipino ship. The news report received not just local, but massive international news coverage.<sup>76</sup>

In the same month, Tarriela announced that the PCG will now make publicly available all maritime incidents happening in the West Philippine Sea to ensure “awareness among the Filipino people, among the media practitioners. And the international community is also aware of what the Chinese has been doing.” These incidences include all of China’s bullying behavior, harassment of Filipino fishermen, destruction of marine environment, and other gray zone activities, which the PCG can document.<sup>77</sup>

Prior to the government’s transparency initiative in the West Philippine Sea, several private groups have also been working to address the disinformation being propagated by pro-China experts, influencers, and online networks.

In January 2023, Project Myoushu of Stanford’s Gordian Knot Center for National Security Innovation, released an unreported encounter between the Philippine Navy and Chinese Coast Guard vessels near Scarborough Shoal during a forum organized by the Stratbase ADR Institute, a Manila-based international think tank. The media immediately picked up the report, showing massive interest in legitimate information about Chinese activities in the West Philippine Sea. Since then, Project Myoushu has been sharing information on social media about the activities of China in the West Philippine Sea, which they are able to acquire through open-source intelligence.<sup>78</sup>

As expected, China had a counter-statement for most, if not all, of the releases the PCG made. The statement would usually be made by the Chinese Foreign Minister or the Ambassador of China to the Philippines. The statements always invoked China’s claims in the West Philippine Sea based on the nine-dash line. It also repeatedly downplayed the 2016 arbitral ruling, which favored the Philippines. Many of the so-called Chinese propagandists would then parrot their statements and propagate them into their networks as part of China’s information warfare in the Philippines.

To address the massive disinformation campaign, several academic institutions, think tanks, and national security, foreign affairs, and geopolitical experts also stepped up their campaign to counter China’s false narratives. Among them is the Stratbase ADR Institute, which conducted a series of town hall discussions exposing China’s gray zone activities in the West Philippine Sea.

As China’s coercive and aggressive actions in the Philippine waters became more exposed, the clamor for a rules-based international order in a multi-polar world also became stronger. Furthermore, the support of the international community also proved crucial as the Philippines continued to assert its national sovereignty and territorial integrity in the West Philippine Sea.

In a historic moment on July 12, 2023, on the 7<sup>th</sup> year of the arbitral victory, the Stratbase ADR Institute held a town hall discussion, which gathered government officials, scholars, policy experts, and a number of foreign envoys to the Philippines. During the event, the ambassadors of Australia, United States, Japan, Delegation of the European Union, France, United Kingdom, and India delivered statements supporting

the 2016 arbitral award favoring the Philippines and defending the rules-based international order and the Philippine sovereignty in the West Philippine Sea. Also on the same day, in a joint statement, 16 of the 27 member countries of the European Union reaffirmed their support for the 2016 Arbitral ruling and the importance of upholding the freedoms, rights, and duties established in UNCLOS. These member countries include Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Austria, Romania, Slovakia (non-resident), Finland, and Sweden.<sup>79</sup>

Project Myoushu Head retired US Air Force Col. Raymond Powell explained that the Marcos Jr. administration’s decision to pivot from its “disjointed series of reactive bureaucratic government responses” into a “highly focused and proactive information operations campaign” is brilliant and has proven very effective. The Philippine’s assertive transparency policy, which used compelling videos and images of the reality in the West Philippine Sea, allowed Filipinos, and eventually the whole world, to see the full extent of China’s gray zone activities. This gave the Philippine government the political latitude to push back against China’s coercive and aggressive activities. As a result, Powell believes the Philippine government has successfully routed China’s sophisticated information warfare, not just in the Philippines, but on the international stage as well.<sup>80</sup>

## Conclusion and Recommendation

Reports show that China has been spending billions of funds to finance

its information warfare all over the world, including the Philippines. During the Duterte Administration from 2016 to 2022, the disinformation campaign primarily proliferated through social engineering and inauthentic amplification. With the help of political leaders, particularly former President Duterte, co-opted media networks and journalists, pro-Duterte and pro-China bloggers, and troll armies, China was able to successfully advance its agenda in the Philippines. The information warfare was able to influence and skew the Philippine foreign affairs, military, and economic policies in favor of China. It was also able to propagate a benevolent image in the country amid continuous aggressive and coercive actions in the West Philippine Sea.

The change in political leadership in 2023, however, saw a significant change in the Philippine foreign policy. President Marcos Jr.'s pivot to a multi-polar world forced China to also adjust its disinformation campaign in the Philippines and turn heavily to inauthentic amplification with the help of Filipinos, who serve as Chinese proxies, propagandists, or political operators. Authorities said these personalities present themselves as credible foreign policy and national security experts and even legitimate journalists. China also continues to proliferate its messaging online through the Facebook pages of pro-China think tanks and influencers, and further propagated in various pro-China Facebook groups.

For the first time this year, the Philippines launched its transparency governance or assertive transparency campaign, where the government made publicly available all the maritime incidents happening in the West Philippine Sea through statements, videos and photos. This led to a significant awareness among the Filipino public, media practitioners, and

even the international community of the gravity and extent of China's coercive and aggressive actions in the West Philippine Sea. Among the military incidences that have been publicized this year were China's bullying behavior against Filipino vessels, the harassment of Filipino fishermen, the massive destruction of marine environment, and other gray zone activities such as swarming and blockade.

Alongside the government's transparency efforts, legitimate national security and foreign policy experts, including various academic institutions and think tanks, and the diplomatic community have also been working together to defend the rules-based international order and the Philippine sovereignty in the West Philippine Sea.

Various surveys this year showed the Filipino people's low trust in China amid continuous gray zone activities in the West Philippine Sea, and the public's increasing support towards the government's actions to defend our rights in the West Philippine Sea. Majority of the Filipino public also believe that the Philippine government should continue to strengthen its alliances with like-minded states such as the United States, Japan, and Australia, and even support conducting joint patrols with partner nations in the West Philippine Sea.

Experts believe that this desire of Filipinos to continuously defend the country's sovereignty vis-a-vis the declining trust towards China show that the Philippines is winning the information warfare initiated by China in the country.

However, the information warfare is far from over. There are still a lot that needs to be done to ensure that the Philippines will retain the upper hand. China is expected to continue its coercive and aggressive operations in the West Philippine Sea alongside its information warfare in the country.

The Philippine government, with the help and support of the Filipino public, legitimate experts from think tanks and the academe, journalists, the private sector, and civil society organizations, must continue to utilize and proliferate the truth to counter China's false narratives. There is a need to continuously release statements and publicize photos and videos of the Chinese gray zone operations in the West Philippine Sea. The Philippine government must always be in control of the narrative and not allow the PRC and its pro-China networks to flood the market place of ideas with its false narratives.

There is a need to continuously and steadfastly assert our rights in our territory. This includes our rights to exploit the natural resources in the West Philippines, to send Filipino vessels in our EEZ, and even to build military structures for Filipino soldiers, as allowed by the 2016 arbitral award. It also includes publishing a new Philippine standard map, which will determine the extent of the Philippine territory and which will abide by the UNCLOS.

The Philippine government's assertive transparency initiative bolsters not just the awareness of the Filipino public, but of the international community as well on the Chinese gray zone activities in the West Philippine Sea. Recognizing the reality that the Philippines is a smaller country in terms of economic and military capabilities as compared to China, the former needs as much help and support as it can get from like-minded states and allies. Strengthening the alliances and forming partnerships that will help defend the rules-based international order and the Philippine sovereignty in the West Philippine Sea remain to be a significant recommendation.



“Assertive transparency, information warfare policies, social media responsibility, public information and education about disinformation, and the election of right leaders will altogether be the key to defend Philippines’ sovereignty against China’s aggressive expansionism and disinformation warfare...”

There is also a need to legislate and enforce policies that would help protect the Philippine government and its citizens from a foreign information warfare. The Philippines can learn from the United States’ Foreign Agents Registration Act, which requires agents of foreign principals or sponsors, who are engaged in political activities to make a public disclosure of their relationship with their foreign principal, including the extent of their sponsored activities, payments received, and disbursements made in support of the political actions. Having a similar policy in the Philippines will help Filipinos make a more informed decision when listening or reading statements or releases by these agents, who present themselves as credible experts, influencers, or journalists.<sup>81</sup>

Social media pages such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) should also be more stringent in enforcing its policies against troll armies, fake accounts, and propaganda pages or groups. It should be able to protect its legitimate users from attacks and harassments by trolls and propagandists advancing false narratives.

There is also a need to educate the public about the Philippine territory and sovereignty. A bill can be passed to incorporate in the basic education curriculum the significance of the 2016 arbitral award and its importance to Filipinos. This will help instill nationalism and patriotism in Filipinos at a young age, and will prevent them from being controlled and swayed by foreign information warfare.

Lastly, there is a need for Filipinos to vote wisely during elections and support candidates, who are earnest about defending the country’s sovereignty. While it is expected that many candidates will utilize popular issues to get votes, Filipino voters must learn how to be discerning and see beyond the false promises of politicians during the campaign season. This can be done by reading more about the candidates and their political background, including previous statements made, to ascertain the sincerity in their promise.

# endnotes

- 1 D Mangosing, 2023
- 2 Corrales, 2023
- 3 Global Engagement Center, 2023
- 4 Pamment, 2020
- 5 Malaya, 2023
- 6 Gershaneck, 2020
- 7 Wilson, 2017
- 8 Bautista, 2023
- 9 Gershaneck, 2020
- 10 Mosher, 2002
- 11 Phillips, 2017
- 12 Yong, 2018
- 13 Ong, 2023
- 14 Carpio, 2023
- 15 Gershaneck, 2020
- 16 Global Engagement Center, 2023
- 17 Feingold, 2022
- 18 Department of Foreign Affairs, 2023
- 19 Pascual, 2017
- 20 Esmaquel, 2016
- 21 Ranada, 2016
- 22 Esmaquel, 2016
- 23 Agence France Presse, 2017
- 24 Philstar.com, 2018
- 25 Legaspi, 2018
- 26 Scarr, 2018
- 27 Petty, 2019
- 28 Philstar.com, 2021
- 29 Source, 2023
- 30 Carpio, 2023
- 31 Del Rosario, 2018
- 32 ABS-CBN, 2016
- 33 Ong, 2023
- 34 Malaya, 2023
- 35 Han and Elemia, 2022
- 36 Reganit, 2017
- 37 Viray, 2020
- 38 Ong, 2023
- 39 International Federation of Journalists, 2020
- 40 Corrales, 2017
- 41 International Federation of Journalists, 2020
- 42 ABS-CBN News, 20128
- 43 Elemia, 2018
- 44 International Federation of Journalists, 2020
- 45 Han and Elemia, 2022
- 46 Malaya, 2023
- 47 Chi, 2023
- 48 Chi, 2023
- 49 Nimmo, Eib, and Ronzaud, 2020
- 50 Meta, 2019
- 51 Macaraeg, 2023
- 52 Gonzales, 2019
- 53 Licsi, 2022
- 54 Mateo, 2022
- 55 Rappler.com, 2023
- 56 Macaraeg, 2023
- 57 Mangosing, 2023
- 58 Malaya, 2023
- 59 Punongbayan, 2023
- 60 Abrica, 2023
- 61 Locus, 2023
- 62 CNN Philippines Staff, 2023
- 63 Elemia, 2023
- 64 Macaraeg, 2023
- 65 Bolledo, 2023
- 66 Malaya, 2023
- 67 Asian Century Philippines Strategic Studies, 2023
- 68 Pulse Asia Inc., 2023
- 69 Panti, 2023
- 70 Elemia, 2023
- 71 Asian Century Philippines Strategic Studies, 2023
- 72 CNN Philippines, 2023
- 73 ISEAS-Yusof Shak Institute, 2022
- 74 Philstar.com, 2023
- 75 Ong, 2023
- 76 Lendon, 2023
- 77 Patinio and Gita-Carlos, 2023
- 78 Powel and Goirigolzarri, 2023
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# ADR<sup>i</sup>

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