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10 YEARS AFTER THE ARBITRAL AWARD:

FROM LEGAL TRIUMPH
TO CREDIBLE DETERRENCE
THROUGH MULTI-DOMAIN
MODERNIZATION

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10 YEARS AFTER THE ARBITRAL AWARD: FROM LEGAL TRIUMPH TO CREDIBLE DETERRENCE THROUGH MULTI-DOMAIN MODERNIZATION

Ten years after the landmark 2016 Arbitral Award, the Philippines faces a defining strategic challenge: how to ensure that its legal victory is backed by credible deterrence.

The Award affirmed the country's sovereign rights and maritime entitlements in the West Philippine Sea (WPS) and strengthened the rules-based international order (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). It provided the Philippines with a firm legal foundation for asserting its rights and demonstrated the enduring value of international law in resolving maritime disputes. However, legal legitimacy alone cannot secure maritime rights or deter coercive actions. As gray-zone activities intensify and security threats increasingly extend into cyber, information, and other emerging domains, the Philippines must ensure that its legal gains are matched by the capabilities needed to defend them. (PCA, 2016; Manhit, 2022)

This challenge comes at a time of profound change in the regional security environment. The persistence of coercive actions in the WPS, combined with lessons from conflicts elsewhere, underscores the need for a modern, integrated, and multi-domain defense posture. More than ever, the Philippines requires a defense establishment capable of deterring aggression, responding across multiple domains, and protecting national interests in an increasingly contested strategic environment.

Against this backdrop, there is growing recognition among policymakers, defense leaders, and the public that the Philippines must accelerate the modernization of its Armed Forces. Modernization is no longer simply about acquiring new military platforms. It is about building an integrated, adaptive, and technologically capable force that can operate effectively across land, maritime, air, cyber, and information domains (Brawner, 2026). Credible deterrence requires not only modern equipment, but also readiness, interoperability, innovation, and the ability to respond to evolving threats. (De Castro, 2026; Ong, 2026)

This strategic direction enjoys strong public support. Surveys consistently show that Filipinos support the defense of the country's maritime rights and favor deeper cooperation with like-minded states in upholding a rules-based order and strengthening national security. Public sentiment reflects a growing understanding that defending the WPS requires both stronger national capabilities and closer cooperation with trusted partners.

This paper examines the strategic imperatives for multi-domain modernization in the decade following the Arbitral Award. It analyzes the role of defense partnerships in strengthening the country's modernization efforts, identifies the policy, organizational, and capability gaps that continue to constrain progress, and offers recommendations for building a more credible deterrent posture. Ultimately, the paper argues that the Philippines must move beyond asserting its rights in the WPS and focus on developing the capabilities necessary to defend them.

Strategic Imperatives for Multi-Domain Modernization

Building on the gains of the 2016 Arbitral Award, the Philippines now faces a more consequential task: ensuring that legal victory is reinforced by credible deterrence. The Award affirmed the country's sovereign rights and maritime entitlements in the WPS and strengthened its position under international law. Yet the strategic value of that achievement ultimately depends on the country's ability to defend the rights it affirmed.

In today's security environment, legal legitimacy and defense capability can no longer be treated as separate considerations. The Philippines' legal standing provides an indispensable foundation for its maritime claims, but safeguarding national interests requires more than legal recognition. It requires the capabilities, readiness, and partnerships necessary to deter coercion and respond effectively to evolving threats.

Viewed from this perspective, the Arbitral Award is more than a legal

milestone. It serves as the strategic anchor for a broader defense modernization agenda, one aimed at translating legal gains into enduring strategic advantage. The challenge before the Philippines is no longer proving the legitimacy of its claims. It is ensuring that those claims are supported by credible capabilities and a defense posture capable of protecting them.

The need for modernization is also driven by the changing character of security threats. The Philippines can no longer rely on a defense posture designed mainly for internal security. Historically, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) focused on counterinsurgency and other domestic security concerns. Today, the strategic environment requires a stronger external defense posture, particularly in protecting the country's maritime rights and deterring coercive actions in the West Philippine Sea (Ong, 2026; De Castro, 2026). This shift demands new doctrines, equipment, training, and operational concepts that allow the AFP to act as an integrated force rather than as separate services responding within their own domains. As AFP Chief of Staff General Romeo Brawner Jr. emphasized, credible deterrence cannot be symbolic; it must be operational, rooted in readiness, interoperability, and the ability to respond across all domains.

The shift toward an integrated and externally oriented defense posture is best reflected in the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept (CADC), arguably the most significant evolution in Philippine defense thinking in recent decades. At its core, CADC recognizes that an archipelagic state cannot effectively defend its maritime interests through service-specific modernization alone. Deterrence requires the integration of land, maritime, and air capabilities into a unified operational framework capable of projecting presence and protecting the country's vast maritime domain.

By linking the capabilities of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, CADC moves the AFP beyond a traditionally fragmented approach toward a genuinely joint force. This not only enhances operational flexibility but also strengthens the country's ability to respond to increasingly complex security challenges across its exclusive economic zone and surrounding waters (De Castro, 2025; De Castro, 2026).

Challenges in the cyber and information domains further show why modernization must go beyond traditional platforms. Cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns have become tools for weakening institutions, shaping public opinion, and undermining national resilience (Manhit, 2026; Ona, 2026). For the Philippines, defending the West Philippine Sea therefore requires not only ships, aircraft, and missiles, but also stronger cyber defenses, intelligence platforms, public-private cooperation, and the ability to counter information manipulation. A modern defense posture must be able to protect both physical territory and the digital and cognitive spaces where national security is increasingly tested.

FEATURES

ON THE COVER

Cover, title page, contents page, and page 8: afp.mil.ph/news/ph-jpn-us-advance-west-philippine-sea-cooperation-in-second-mmca-of-february; afp.mil.ph/news/afp-usindopacom-conduct-joint-maritime-cooperative-activity; journaldailynewsonline.com.ph/index.php/2025/03/29/ph-japan-us-conduct-multilateral-maritime-cooperative-activity-in-west-ph-sea; afp.mil.ph; and afp.mil.ph/news/afp-usindopacom-holds-3rd-maritime-cooperative-activity-affirm-commitment-to-free-and-open-indo-pacific

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Since he founded The Stratbase Group and the Stratbase Institute for Strategic and International Studies in 2004, Victor Andres "Dindo" C. Manhit has provided top-level strategic analysis and thought leadership on global issues in the Philippines. He has identified investment and business opportunities, gathered critical intelligence to overcome regulatory challenges, and developed deep relationships in key departments and agencies. With his extensive experience, he continues to advise the private sector and the diplomatic community on the interplay between business and government and the impact of legislative, regulatory, and geopolitics on their strategies.

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STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES FOR MULTI-DOMAIN MODERNIZATION

Building on the 2016 Arbitral Award, the Philippines must reinforce legal gains with credible deterrence through integrated, multi-domain modernization—linking land, maritime, air, cyber, and information capabilities to defend national interests

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CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN ACHIEVING CREDIBLE DETERRENCE

Despite progress, outdated legal frameworks, rigid procurement, and organizational silos hinder modernization. Addressing these gaps—through agile policies, joint force development, and skilled personnel—offers opportunities for credible deterrence

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THE PATH FORWARD IN DEFENDING THE WEST PHILIPPINE SEA

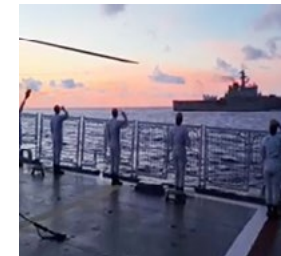
A comprehensive strategy for defending the West Philippine Sea centers on modernizing defense capabilities, deepening partnerships through joint exercises, and aligning with like-minded nations—reflecting strong public support for credible deterrence



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CONCLUSION

The Arbitral Award secured legal rights, but lasting security demands credible deterrence. Sustained modernization, institutional reform, and deeper partnerships will transform legal gains into enduring strategic strength for the Philippines



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strategic imperatives

This strategic direction is supported by strong public sentiment. The Filipino public does not merely recognize the importance of the WPS. It also supports concrete action to defend it. A Pulse Asia Research Inc. survey commissioned by the Stratbase Institute and conducted from May 3 to 7, 2026 shows overwhelming support for the government’s stance on defending the WPS with like-minded countries in accordance with the 2016 Arbitral Award. Nationally, 86% of respondents agree with this position, including 56% who strongly agree. Only 3% disagree, while 11% remain undecided.

Defending the West Philippine Sea

May 3 – May 7, 2026 / In Percent: Philippines

Table 1

AGREEMENT/DISAGREEMENT WITH TEST STATEMENT:

“The Philippine government should defend the West Philippine Sea with like-minded countries in accordance with the 2016 Arbitral Award.”

Base: Total Interviews, 100%

How much do you agree or disagree with this statement? <i>"The Philippine government should defend the West Philippine Sea with like-minded countries in accordance with the 2016 Arbitral Award."</i>	RP	LOCATION				CLASS		
		NCR	BL	VIS	MIN	ABC	D	E
AGREE	86	90	82	86	91	88	87	75
Strongly agree	56	64	48	61	63	64	56	45
Somewhat agree	30	25	34	25	28	23	31	30
CANNOT SAY AGREE OR DISAGREE	11	8	14	11	5	8	10	19
DISAGREE	3	2	4	2	4	4	3	6
Somewhat disagree	2	2	3	0	2	2	2	3
Strongly disagree	1	0	1	2	2	2	1	3

Source: Pulse Asia Research Inc.

The survey results show that modernization is not only a strategic requirement but also a public mandate. Filipinos understand that defending the WPS requires more than legal arguments and diplomatic statements. It requires credible capabilities, stronger partnerships, and a defense establishment prepared to respond to threats across multiple domains. In this context, multi-domain modernization becomes essential to ensuring that the gains of the Arbitral Award are protected, that national interests are defended, and that the Philippines can stand with confidence in an increasingly complex security environment.

“

Modernization should not be measured simply by the number of platforms acquired, but by whether these investments contribute to broader defense outcomes...

”

Challenges and Opportunities in Achieving Credible Deterrence

The challenge confronting the Philippines is no longer identifying the capabilities it needs. The country's defense priorities are increasingly clear. The more difficult task is developing those capabilities at the speed required by a rapidly evolving security environment.

Despite important progress in recent years, significant policy, organizational, and capability gaps continue to slow the modernization effort. These constraints affect how the country plans, funds, procures, operates, and sustains defense capabilities. Unless addressed, they risk widening the gap between the Philippines' strategic requirements and its ability to respond effectively to emerging threats.

Among the most pressing obstacles are outdated legal frameworks, rigid procurement processes, and institutional procedures that were not designed for today's security environment. At a time when threats evolve rapidly and technology cycles move faster than traditional acquisition systems can accommodate, modernization requires a more agile and responsive policy framework.

Organizational and structural gaps also remain a major barrier to effective modernization. Persistent financial constraints and a fragmented, procurement-driven approach have limited the development of integrated capabilities. The traditional service-centric mindset within the AFP has also contributed to operational silos, making it difficult to build a truly joint and multi-domain force. As threats increasingly cut across land, sea, air, cyber, and information domains, the AFP must be able to plan and operate as one integrated force.

To address this, the Philippines must shift toward capability-based planning. Modernization should not be measured simply by the number of platforms acquired, but by whether these investments contribute to broader defense outcomes. Every peso spent must support interoperability, readiness, joint operations, and deterrence. Institutionalizing joint force development, establishing integrated command structures, and conducting regular joint exercises will be essential to building a more agile and responsive defense establishment.

Human capital, logistics, and sustainment are equally important. Modern platforms and technologies will not be effective without skilled personnel, reliable maintenance systems, and resilient supply chains. The defense sector continues to face shortages in specialized skills, particularly in cyber and information operations. Weaknesses in logistics and sustainment also risk

undermining modernization by making it difficult to operate and maintain newly acquired capabilities over the long term.

Recognizing these challenges, the Philippine defense establishment has begun pursuing reforms aimed at improving institutional responsiveness, strengthening long-term planning, and accelerating capability development. Central to these efforts is the proposed Department of National Defense (DND) Transformation Act, which seeks to reorganize and strengthen the DND, establish a progressive defense spending target of up to 2% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and introduce more flexible procurement and financing mechanisms, including multi-year contracts and innovative funding arrangements. These reforms also support the creation of a specialized cyber workforce and a shift toward needs-based modernization planning rather than rigid, time-bound acquisition frameworks.

Another key development is the inclusion of a Foreign and Domestic Financing Arrangements provision in the 2026 General Appropriations Act, which expands access to foreign and local financing to support the acquisition and sustainment of advanced defense capabilities. In parallel, the Marcos Jr. administration has placed renewed priority on strengthening the country's self-reliance through the Self-Reliant Defense Posture (SRDP) program, recognizing

that modernization cannot rely solely on external procurement. Rather, long-term security requires domestic defense industrial capacity, sustainment and maintenance capabilities, and resilient defense supply chains developed in partnership with trusted strategic partners.

The Path Forward in Defending the West Philippine Sea

Defending the WPS demands a comprehensive strategy that strengthens the country's own defense capabilities that is reinforced by cooperation with like-minded partners. A survey commissioned by the Stratbase Institute shows that Filipinos see modernization as the top measure for effectively defending the country's rights in the Philippines' seas, particularly through

Measures the Philippines Should Implement to Effectively Defend the Country's Rights in the Philippines' Seas

June 26-30, 2025 / Row Percent / Multiple Response, Up to 3: Philippines

Table 2

Base: Total Interviews, 100%								
Which of the following measures should the Philippines continue to implement to effectively defend the country's rights in the Philippines' seas? Choose three.	RP	LOCATION				CLASS		
		NCR	BL	VIS	MIN	ABC	D	E
Support the modernization of the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippine Coast Guard to acquire assets in line with ensuring our territorial integrity	65	64	69	61	59	71	63	63
Reinforce alliance and elevate partnerships by conducting joint patrols and military exercises with allies, friends, and partners	51	55	57	46	40	62	49	41
Establish defense and security agreements with like-minded partners	33	40	40	22	25	28	35	32
Hold leaders accountable and ensure commitment to defend the Philippines' national interest in its maritime territories	14	22	11	15	16	12	15	16
File diplomatic protests and continue to engage China diplomatically	12	15	9	13	14	13	11	20
I don't have enough knowledge to give an opinion	3	1	2	1	5	2	3	1

Source: Pulse Asia Research Inc.



support for the AFP and the Philippine Coast Guard in acquiring assets needed to protect the country's territorial integrity. This is followed by support for reinforcing alliances through joint patrols and military exercises, and for establishing defense and security agreements with like-minded partners.

In this regard, the Philippines is on the right track. In recent years, there has been a shift toward deepening defense cooperation with like-minded partners through the signing and operationalization of defense agreements and the conduct of joint exercises. Last year, the Philippines conducted the greatest number of maritime exercises in its history. A total of 20 bilateral and multilateral maritime exercises were conducted with like-minded partners, namely the United States, Australia, Japan, Canada, France, New Zealand, and India.

This year, we continue to see the same momentum. The Philippines has sustained and expanded its engagements with like-minded states through more maritime cooperative activities and more complex multilateral exercises such as the recently conducted Balikatan exercises. These engagements are important because modernization cannot be pursued in isolation. There is a need for a modern, multi-domain AFP that can deter, detect, and respond to threats across land, maritime, air, cyber, and other unexplored but crucial domains such as underwater. The modern battlefield is now multi-domain, highly technological, and constantly evolving, demanding faster, more integrated, and more adaptive defense capabilities.

The Philippines cannot achieve this alone. The country needs capable and reliable partners to accelerate the development of its military capabilities. Findings from a recent Pulse Asia Survey commissioned by Stratbase show that Filipinos have a clear preference for working with like-minded states in defending the WPS. When asked which countries or organizations the Philippines should work with, the Filipino public identified like-minded partners as the leading choices. The United States, Japan, Australia, Canada, and South Korea emerged as the top partners, reflecting strong public support for deepening cooperation with states that share the Philippines' interest in upholding

a rules-based order and maintaining peace and stability in the region.

The findings are significant not only because support for these partnerships is high, but because they reveal how Filipinos increasingly view national security. Public opinion strongly favors cooperation with countries that share the Philippines' commitment to a rules-based order, maritime security, and regional stability. This suggests that efforts to deepen defense cooperation with trusted partners are not only strategically necessary but also broadly supported by the public. The survey results provide policymakers with a strong foundation for pursuing

a networked approach to deterrence alongside like-minded states.

The Philippines must continue to modernize its own armed forces while deepening practical cooperation with trusted partners through joint patrols, maritime cooperative activities, military exercises, technology transfer, defense financing, and capacity-building. These efforts should not be seen as separate tracks, but as mutually reinforcing pillars of credible deterrence. A stronger AFP, supported by reliable partnerships, will allow the country to better defend its rights, protect its people, and uphold peace and stability in the WPS.

Entities the Philippines Should Work with in Defending the West Philippine Sea

May 3 – May 7, 2026 / In Percent / Multiple Responses, Up to 3 allowed: Philippines

Table 3

Base: Total Interviews, 100%								
Which of the following countries or organizations should the Philippines work with in defending the West Philippine Sea? You may choose up to three.	RP	LOCATION				CLASS		
		NCR	BL	VIS	MIN	ABC	D	E
United States	84	86	85	79	85	81	84	86
Japan	67	87	68	57	63	76	67	56
Australia	57	64	57	69	46	61	57	55
Canada	51	59	49	61	41	50	51	52
South Korea	44	49	47	43	38	38	46	42
Great Britain / United Kingdom (UK)	32	39	31	36	27	33	33	25
European Union	26	32	28	24	21	27	26	23
Taiwan	23	30	25	14	21	21	23	24
China	18	15	18	14	23	17	20	10
India	9	14	9	8	8	10	9	8
UNAIDED								
Others	0.2	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Can't say / Refused / None	3	2	5	0	0	2	3	2
Can't say	1	0	2	0	0	1	1	0
Refused	0.2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
None	2	0	3	0	0	0	2	2

Source: Pulse Asia Research Inc.

Conclusion

Ten years after the 2016 Arbitral Award, the Philippines no longer needs to prove the legitimacy of its rights in the West Philippine Sea. International law has already affirmed the country's sovereign rights and maritime entitlements and provided a strong legal foundation for its position. What remains unresolved is whether those rights can be effectively defended in an increasingly contested strategic environment.

As China's gray-zone activities continue and security threats expand into cyber, information, and other emerging domains, the challenge confronting the Philippines is no longer one of legal legitimacy, but of strategic capability. Defending the gains of the Arbitral Award requires a modern, integrated, and multi-domain defense posture capable of deterring coercion, protecting national interests, and responding to threats across multiple domains.

Meeting this challenge will require sustained modernization, stronger institutions, capability-based planning, a more resilient defense ecosystem, and deeper cooperation with trusted and like-minded partners. Together, these efforts can help build the credible deterrence necessary to safeguard the country's rights and contribute to regional peace and stability.

The Arbitral Award gave the Philippines legal standing. The next decade must deliver strategic strength. The task now is to ensure that the country's rights are not only recognized under international law, but also protected by the capabilities needed to defend them. Through sustained modernization, institutional reform, and stronger strategic partnerships, the Philippines can transform the gains of its legal victory into lasting security and strategic advantage for the Filipino people.

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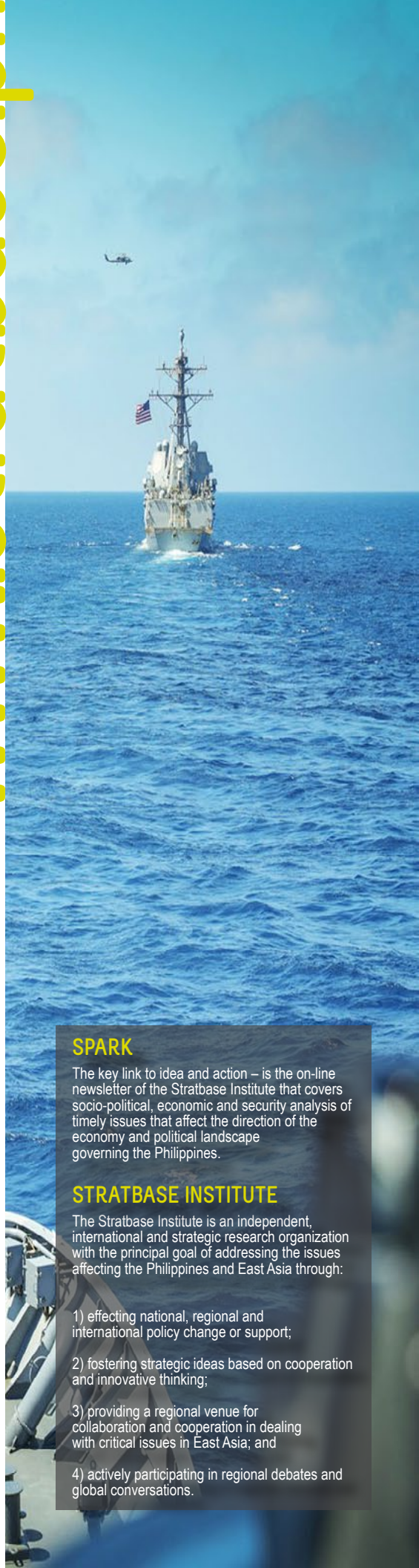
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