The Golden Age of White Hulls: Deciphering the Philippines' Maritime Diplomatic Strategies in the South China Sea

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Abstract: The Philippines is facing increased assertiveness by China in the South China Sea. By constantly deploying maritime constabulary forces, China continues to showcase its effective occupancy over disputed waters at sea. Surprisingly, unlike the Philippines' previous president, Duterte, who tilted to China and lacked a clear South China Sea policy, Marcos seems strong-willed to adopt a decisive stance against China in areas that overlap with the Philippines' waters through the utilization of coast guards (white hulls). This article questions why the Marcos administration decided to empower the Philippines coast guard and investigates how it is strategically utilized in disputed waters. The study is an empirical explanatory research utilizing secondary data attained from the Asian Maritime Transparency Initiative between 2021 and 2023, with the following findings: (1) the Philippines empowered white hulls to function as 'mini-navies' and (2) rapprochement to the US and Japan as precautionary measures to possible future conflicts. The strategic advantage of using coast guards as an alternative to navies is twofold: (1) the capacity to generate limited coercive effects yet maintain a decisive stance, and (2) tactical flexibility that allows it to produce non-escalatory outcomes.

Keywords: coast guards; white hulls; maritime diplomacy; Philippines; South China Sea

1. Introduction

The contentious South China Sea continues to disrupt bilateral relations between China and the Philippines. For centuries, the Philippines, as a claimant state to the South China Sea, struggled to respond to China's assertive maneuvers to defend its historical rights over the Nine-Dash Line. The Philippines has struggled to protect its claims in the features of the Spratly archipelago, Scarborough Shoal, and Second Thomas Shoal (Chubb 2022) (details of the overlapping claims can be seen in Figure 1). Unlike the other Southeast Asian claimant states to the South China Sea, the Philippines is the only country that took matters to the Arbitral Tribunal, set up under Annex VII of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. The 2016 ruling favored the Philippines, but China decided to reject the tribunal's ruling (Yu 2016; Pemmaraju 2016). The challenges to the Philippines' overlapping Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claims with China in South China have escalated in the past two years.

On 6 February 2023, China added another case of assertive action to its list of assertive conduct within the nine-dash line overlapping the Philippines' EEZ. A Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) was accused by the Philippines Coast Guard (PCG) of using a military-grade laser that temporarily blinded a PCG patrol vessel approaching the Second Thomas Shoal (Masih 2023). In spite of Chinese officers having invaded the Philippine EEZ hundreds of times before, the recent incident with lasers was the first, causing the PCG personnel physical harm. After a relatively quiet development in the Philippines–China faceoff in the South China Sea during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2022 seemed to be the start of sea power projection re-emergence in the South China Sea. One can also refer to the changes in the Philippines' presidencies and the recent US–Philippines decision to extend the 2014

Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (Strangjo 2023). China seems uneasy about not having a pro-China leader leading the Philippines, causing great unease and uncertainty regarding contemporary Manila–Beijing relations.

Figure 1. Overlapping claims of the Philippines Exclusive Economic Zone and China's Nine Dash Line. Source: Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI 2023b).

Manila has exhausted all possible measures to counter China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. Bilaterally, it needs to be cautious about its actions towards China. The tribunal ruling that Chinese officials ignored shows that peaceful diplomatic and conflict resolution measures will lead to a stalemate (Yu 2016; Laksmana 2016). Regionally, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has yet to conclude the long-awaited Code of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (COC), being stuck with the 2002 Declaration of the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) (Odgaard 2003; Storey 2018). Efforts to deal directly with China's aggression at sea were also not an option that Marcos could bet on, as any maneuvers made by the Philippines navy could be responded to with enhanced aggression by Beijing. It would also be wise not to exaggerate responses to China's assertive maneuvers at sea, considering China was still the Philippines' largest trading partner from 2015 to 2021 and remains so (GT 2023).

The Philippines' solution to address China's increasing assertiveness at sea has been to empower its 'white hulls' (coast guards). Empowerment includes capacity-building measures, increasing personnel, intensifying relations with counterparts, and upgrading PCG fleets. The Philippines' response to China's assertiveness in the South China Sea is to mandate the non-military fleets to carry out maritime law enforcement and diplomatic missions. As explained in the following sections, Southeast Asian states have shown significant interest in advancing their maritime constabulary forces, including coast guards. In the case of the Philippines, however, this constitutes an empirical puzzle, as the Philippines' past maritime diplomatic strategy has been through judicial measures (such as the 2013 tribunal) and cooperation (Duterte's favoring of discussions and joint development).

This article identifies three trends in tensions between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea. First, the emergence of China's maritime constabulary forces, including CCG and Chinese surveillance and research fleets, as a means to project power in the overlapping EEZ with the Philippines (De Castro 2022; Chang 2018; AMTI 2023a). Second,

the CCG and other Chinese civilian fleets have increased their assertiveness, with a recent incident of the CCG using military-grade lasers to disrupt the Philippines' sea operations and cause physical damage (Masih 2023; De Guzman 2023). Third, this article observes that assertiveness increased after Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr. assumed office, replacing the pro-China Duterte Rodrigo (De Castro 2017, 2019, 2020). A consistent trend seen in the Philippines' strategy has been to utilize its coast guard to counter China's power projections at sea.

The empirical puzzle raised in this article is why the Philippines engages in the South China Sea confrontations by utilizing coast guards compared to the more common use of navies to project power at sea. It thus tests past assumptions in the literature of maritime diplomacy such as that raised by Le Miere in 2014, arguing that non-military fleets (coast guards, paramilitaries, surveillance fleets) contain distinct diplomatic functions to pressure adversaries by less coercive power projections at sea. This article thus extends Fang's opinion, arguing that coast guards, commonly termed 'white hulls' in contrast to the 'grey hulls' (navies), can exert strategic diplomatic roles of projecting power at sea by asserting a state's sovereign jurisdiction (Fang 2018).

In comprehending the Philippines' maritime diplomatic strategies through its white hulls, this research implements empirical explanatory research, analyzed under the interpretative paradigm. It aims to interpret contemporary developments in the Philippines' South China Sea conflict through the secondary data gained from the Asian Maritime Transparency Initiative between 2021 and 2023. The justification for this timeframe is that the Marcos administration assumed office in mid-2022, and Duterte officially announced his retirement in late 2021. Thus, the timeframe limitation of 2021–2023 allows us to understand the changes in China's assertiveness and how the Philippines responded to the developing crisis during the pre-and post-administration transitions.

2. White Hulls in the Discourse of Maritime Diplomacy: A Literature Review

Existing maritime diplomacy studies do not extensively cover coast guards as a diplomatic tool. As Le Miere suggests, maritime diplomacy is the management of international relations at sea (Le Mière 2014). In the past, a state's hard power assets were usually tasked to carry out this diplomatic function, thereby gaining most of the academic coverage in maritime diplomatic studies. However, recent trends in the use of coast guards have generated more academic debate within this field.

Discussions on maritime diplomacy and maritime law enforcement have been dissimilar. Maritime diplomacy was connected to the capacity to influence others through maritime diplomatic assets. Meanwhile, law enforcement undertakes safety and security missions, upholding state law at sea, and other maritime missions. One of the institutions tasked with maritime law enforcement functions comprises coast guards. Nevertheless, discussions of its political functions only emerged in the past decade after scholars focused the white hull discourses on countering law enforcement issues such as non-traditional security (He 2009). Kim, for example, discussed the importance of maintaining state coast guards to tackle non-traditional security threats, such as transnational crime, and counter traditional maritime-based security threats, such as violations of territorial claims (Kim 2018). Besides discussions on how coast guards are utilized in law enforcement, recent studies have explored the connection between coast guards and the construction of cooperative norms among states. Studying how coast guards within the same geopolitical environment cooperate to tackle maritime threats, Greenwood and Miletello argued that cooperative norms would be generated among states advancing capacity-building measures (Greenwood and Miletello 2022). In another study, Kelly found that cooperative norms are most evident in areas prone to traditional maritime threats, such as the Indo-Pacific region (Kelly 2014). White hulls have discreet functions for states. Still, as existing discourses have shown, their political potential is a novelty that needs to be covered in maritime diplomacy.

Le Miere attempted to connect coast guard discourses to its maritime diplomatic function. He termed it 'paragunboat diplomacy,' defined as the combination of paramilitaries as

stakeholders in diplomacy and gunboat diplomacy (coercive maritime diplomacy) to coerce and compel enemies (Le Mière 2014). Le Miere argued that the current conduct of maritime diplomacy most dominant in contemporary times is paragunboat diplomacy, operated by 'maritime constabulary forces.' Maritime constabulary forces represent a categorization of actors who are non-military in the task of conducting maritime diplomacy (Le Mière 2011). These include coast guards, civilian fleets, maritime paramilitary agencies, and other similar fleets. In times of limited maritime border tensions, these maritime constabulary forces are utilized to crowd the waters and solidify one's claims over a contested sea through effective occupancy and coercing other ships not to operate in those waters (Putra and Cangara 2022). In connection to discussions on the white hull, we now conclude the possibility of state actors intentionally using their coast guards to conduct paragunboat diplomatic roles to compel adversaries in contested waters, a strategy that this article argues is how the Philippines conducts its maritime diplomacy in the South China Sea.

Discussions on the use of coast guards in a coercive manner expand the century-long discussion on how states use maritime forces to compel adversaries. The common term in the past was 'gunboat diplomacy' or 'naval diplomacy,' defined as the use of navies to project power at sea with the aim of coercing actors (Till 2018; Cable 1994). As several scholars have contended, naval diplomacy was heavily utilized in the past (pre-Cold War period) due to its political function to project power and compel adversaries (McConnell and Kelly 1973; Rowlands 2018; Davidson 2008). Past connections to the political functions of operating navies can be traced to earlier works of Alfred Thayer Mahan. Mahan argued that navies are unique state assets that protect states' national interests (Mahan 1898). Thus, earlier scholars in the maritime diplomacy study concluded that navies' functions could not be confined to a threat-countering function alone. Maritime diplomatic discourses should expand to political and diplomatic duties, which were previously defined as coercive means. As Llewelyn asserts, naval vessels are commonly associated with power projection and territorial expansion, exposing states to coerciveness (Llewelyn 2016).

The coercive functions of a state's maritime diplomatic assets have expanded to maritime constabulary forces such as coast guards. White hulls and navies have distinct features, with navies perceived as a militarized approach to protecting national interests at sea. Nonetheless, coast guards are heavily associated with a civil service that is military-trained but not included in a state's military. As Kearsley argued in the past, using warships to perform patrol functions wastes its true capabilities and can generate the wrong impression of militarizing an issue (Kearsley 1992). As a result, we now witness the changing nature of maritime operations as naval and civilian actors' operations become increasingly blurred (Bowers and Koh 2019). This trend has been captured by several academics in the past, arguing that the contemporary geostrategic environment at sea challenges the traditional roles allocated to the navies and maritime law enforcement agencies due to the similar roles they undergo (Buerger and Edmunds 2017). This grey zone in its categorization is what this article perceives as the reason why states in Southeast Asia are currently expanding their coast guards, as it does not carry the same consequences for the navy's capacity-building. It suggests that maritime law enforcement agencies, including coast guards, are now present on the frontlines of interstate disputes at sea.

In the context of Indo-Pacific geopolitics, coast guards are becoming increasingly useful. As Godbold and other scholars argue, the trend of white hulls has been noticeable since the early 2000s, especially among secondary Asian states (Godbold 2019; Brewster 2016). One of the distinct features of coast guards argued by Morris was that amid the rising tensions in the national defense of maritime borders, states are starting to use their respective coast guards to ram other state coast guards and fishing vessels, blurring the function of law enforcement and national defense for white hulls (Morris 2017). Most discussions of coast guard utilization have taken China as the empirical case, showing how China was inspired by Japanese Coast Guard power projection strategies in the Senkaku Islands dispute and decided to adopt a similar strategy in the South China Sea (Lansing 2018; AMTI 2023a). Thus, a second discourse that this article attempts to contribute to is

the empirical discussions of smaller states in Southeast Asia, in this case, the Philippines. It discusses why the Philippines chose to utilize a similar strategy against China's power projections in the South China Sea.

Secondary states such as the Philippines, like most Southeast Asian states, face the dilemma of aligning with or against China (Goh 2006; Kuik and Rozman 2015). The use of the Philippines' white hull as a diplomatic tool is less provocative than the use of navies. The following sections will argue twofold; how the Philippines have utilized its coast guards as a maritime diplomatic tool in the South China Sea disputes by highlighting the white hull trend in Southeast Asia and coast guards' distinct power projection functions; and the strategic utility of using coast guards in disputed waters.

3. The Indo-Pacific Coastguard Age and the Philippines' White Hull Maritime Diplomacy

Coast guards are becoming increasingly relevant as diplomatic tools for states. This is especially evident in the context of the highly contested waters in the Indo-Pacific, which consists of tens of strategic chokepoints, vital sea-based trade routes, and centers of contestation in waters such as the South China Sea. Unfortunately, as tensions flare between states in these waters, using hard power assets such as navies is not a plausible solution, considering it could be viewed as an attempt to militarize the dispute. Coast guards are becoming more prominent. As Parameswaran and Till observed in their studies, maritime constabulary forces are on the rise in disputed waters (Parameswaran 2019; Till 2022). As shown earlier, coast guards, for example, have attracted strong interest among Southeast Asian policymakers. This is due to the positive diplomatic effects it generates from the effective occupancy of the sea.

The diplomatic functions associated with using white hulls in contested waters have now become an advantage strategically utilized by secondary states in Southeast Asia. Unlike in the past, where Japan and China represented the two major powers developing strategic diplomatic features for the use of coast guards, we now witness the rise of Southeast Asian states such as Indonesia and Vietnam (Putra 2022, 2023; Darwis and Putra 2022), following the policies crafted by the Indo-Pacific great powers. For states such as Indonesia, it is common to see this form of diplomatic strategy emerge due to its strategic chokepoints. Indonesia needs, for example, to secure the highly valuable Malacca Straits. Indonesia naturally gravitates toward enhancing maritime governance and law enforcement at sea. The Philippines is following the steps of its Southeast Asian counterparts. It is considering its position as a claimant state in the South China Sea and the need to respond to China's growing assertiveness in troubled waters. Compared to its ASEAN neighbors, the Philippines established its coast guards a century ago as it perceived the importance of sea-based law enforcement earlier (De Castro 2022).

The rising prominence of white hulls in Southeast Asia coincides with growing assertiveness in the South China Sea and China's ascendancy. Southeast Asian states lack an answer to China's aggressiveness within its claimed Nine-Dash Line. In the absence of the COC, ASEAN members, especially the claimant states to the South China Sea, must act diplomatically to counter China's assertiveness. The Philippines' position and dilemmas mimic that of Vietnam, in which academics have argued that the two have been hedging to offset possible risks from alignment to one great power (US or China) (Ciorciari and Haacke 2019; Cheng Chwee Kuik 2021). Besides the apparent undermining of state sovereignty, China's power asymmetry is also a problem. The dilemma posed in the Philippines' territorial waters is worsened by the fact that in the past, Duterte was highly attracted by China's Belt Road Initiative (BRI) (De Castro 2017, 2020). Marcos' only solution is thus to tread lightly, aware of the dilemmas of maintaining a coercive posture in maritime power projections. He also balances the need to be decisive to avoid future losses to the Philippines' maritime territory.

This suggests that using the Philippine coast guards is Marcos' non-coercive yet decisive diplomatic approach to project power at sea. As argued by Fang and Le Miere

in the past, using maritime constabulary forces had the advantage of not being coercive but generating effective diplomatic results to achieve diplomatic aims (Le Mière 2014; Fang 2018). In the past, Parameswaran observed a similar function of white hulls in Southeast Asia (Parameswaran 2019). He argues that deploying coast guards is a non-military alternative for these smaller states and is a great alternative to navies, as it does not produce provocative signals to adversaries.

One aspect that has defined the evolving strategic use of white hulls in the Philippines and among Indo-Pacific states is the flexibility of mandates attached to institutions. In the past, coast guards performed law enforcement functions at sea, especially to counter transnational crimes (Tarriela 2022). In Southeast Asia, seeing the limitations of diplomatic options that can be taken, policymakers are expanding white hull mandates to include the protection of a state's sovereign jurisdiction, a 'mini-navy.'

The PCG case represents the growing trend of the unique utility of white hulls in the context of disputed waters. The PCG is the country's oldest and only armed humanitarian service (PCG 2023a). It was established approximately a century ago and under the Philippine Navy's command. Nevertheless, seeing the non-military and civilian nature of coast guard functions, the Philippine Congress decided to separate the PCG from navy control and formed it under the Philippines Department of Transportation and Communication in 1998 through the Philippine Executive Order 477 (PCG 2023a). Separation of the PCG from the state's military authority and allowing it to have civilian features as the Philippine coast guard made it feasible for better cooperation between the PCG and allied countries. This was without producing a provocative signal that would have been the case in navies. The PCG functions do not differ from most coast guards in the region, which is a mandate to conduct maritime-based operations in the realm of security, environmental protection, law enforcement, safety, and search and rescue (PCG 2023b).

PCG maritime security mandates provide a solid foundation for understanding the coast guard's contemporary diplomatic roles. The PCG envisions being a 'world-class guardian of the sea' by 2028, and further states that it commits to 'secure maritime jurisdiction' (PCG 2023b). On the point of PCG's maritime security functions, they have made it clear that it operates to maintain good order at sea. They have also made it clear that the importance of freedom of navigation would be upheld by the Philippines' white hulls (PCG 2023c). The PCG's vision and maritime security mandates align with the Philippines National Security Strategy. This is the Philippines' principal document that outlines threats and priorities to address defense issues. Maritime security is one of the 12 national security priorities for the Philippines between 2017–2022 and continued by the Marcos administration (NSC 2017). As the second largest archipelagic state, the Philippines cannot take its maritime security threats lightly, and it is imperative that the state mobilizes relevant resources to ensure its holistic security.

China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea concerns the PCG now. As shown in the previous sections, an empirical trend witnessed in the contested waters is the use of military-grade lasers to cause physical damage and the rise of civilian maritime power projection presence of the CCG in areas the Nine-Dash line area that overlaps with the Philippines EEZ. As shown in Figure 2 below, CCG has ramped up its daily patrols in the South China Sea throughout 2022 by maintaining a day-to-day presence. Furthermore, in June 2022, CCG continued to assert its dominance by forcing the Philippines maritime constabulary agencies to alter their course. As seen in Figure 3. The *BRP Sierre Madre* was heading to the Second Thomas Shoal. The cases shown in the following figures are only a small portion of the daily intrusions conducted by Chinese maritime constabulary forces in the Philippines' EEZ.
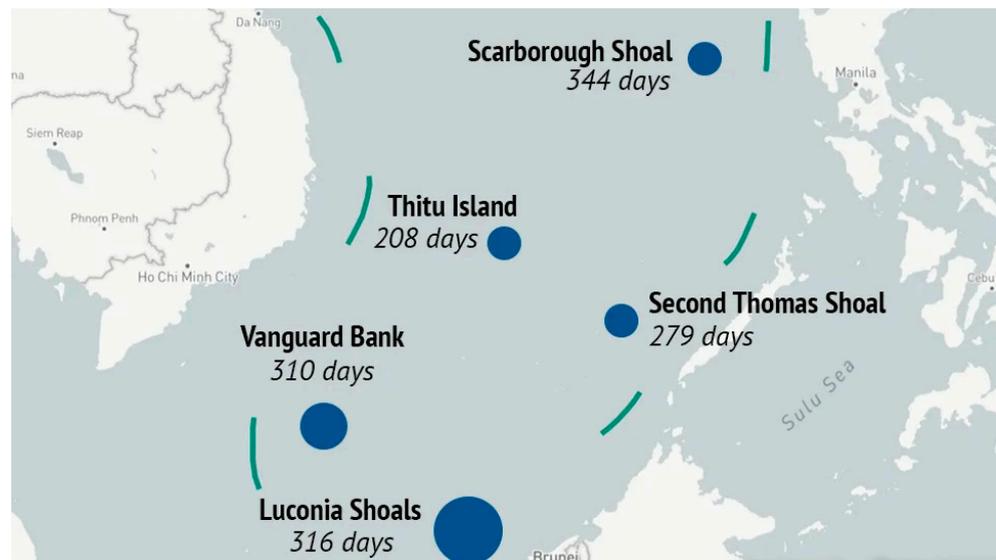
Figure 2. Days patrolled by the CCG throughout 2022. Source: Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI 2023a).
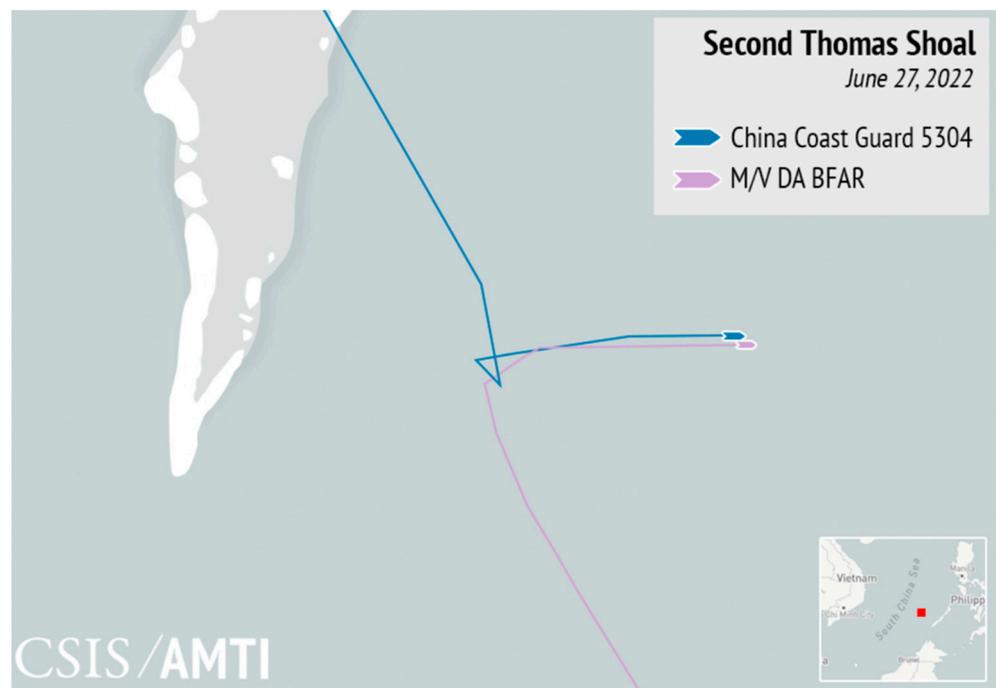
Figure 3. CCG intrusions in June 2022 forced the Philippine Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources vessel to alter routes. Source: Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI 2022).

The changes to the Philippines' administration have led to China's rising presence in the disputed waters. With the recent maneuvers taken by China's maritime militia in the South China Sea, some have observed that this is a form of 'squatting,' which under Anglo-American property law is understood as the act of obtaining legal possession of an estate by simply (illegally) occupying a property for a long period of time (Ralby 2023). As the PCG Chief Admiral Artemio Abu asserts, the growing maritime power projections at sea that China is showcasing have led the PCG to deploy additional vessels to protect the Philippines' sovereign jurisdiction (Strangjo 2023). Abu rightfully argues that the increasing trend negatively impacted local Philippine fishermen. Thus, Abu plans to intensify the coast guard presence to display effective occupancy of the seas (Strangjo 2023).

Marcos plans to project the Philippines' power at sea in a number of ways, including through coast guards. White Hulls are deployed with similar intentions: to demonstrate effective occupancy and provide a limited coercive effect to adversaries. Several trends identified in this article support the claim that the Philippines is starting to operate its coastguards to generate distinctive diplomatic effects for its South China Sea claims. The trends identified include updates on PCG vessels, crew members, and partnerships with great power allies.

Efforts to upgrade PCG fleets began approaching the end of Duterte's administration. In 2018, despite limitations to its budget, Duterte pledged USD 6.7 billion to the PCG, allowing it to update several of its fleets and attempt to acquire vessels beyond the 1000-ton weight (Parameswaran 2019). As asserted by a leading scholar in gunboat diplomacy, James Cable, when it comes to navies, pure size matters (Cable 1994). The struggles faced by the Philippines in the past couple of years were due to unreliable PCG fleets that could not compete with the numbers and size of the CCG. To counter this deficiency, the Philippines procured larger vessels so that the PCG could avoid being 'bullied' at sea by other coast guards, as in past confrontations with China. Discussions about upgrading the PCG vessels also occurred in 2018, when the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) approved the Philippines a loan to construct 40 m Multi Role vessels after being overpowered by the CCG in a Scarborough Shoal confrontation (Tarriela 2017).

According to recent reports, an increase in PCG personnel is also expected. As reported by the PCG spokesperson, Jay Tarriela, the PCG plans to add 4000 personnel to have an accumulated total of 30,000 personnel under the PCG (Argosino 2023). This is the second time Marcos decided to empower the PCG with more personnel, having done the same thing in the first few months of his presidency. It was also noted in a speech in early 2023, in which Marcos plans to empower the PCG and relevant stakeholders to manage geopolitical tensions and enhance the capacities of the Philippines to respond to emerging crises that occurred daily (NN 2023).

The Philippines' white hull developments can also be associated with recent diplomatic efforts to strengthen its partnership with great regional powers. This highlights the Philippines' priority over multilateral efforts in resolving international issues. For example, US relations with the Philippines intensified after the presidential changes in 2022. The basis for a growing alignment of the Philippines is based on the recently upgraded Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement between the Philippines and the US in early 2023, which grants the US additional access to four military bases in the Philippines (De Castro 2021). Specifically, in the case of white hulls, the Philippines will continue to enjoy the transfer of equipment sent in mid-2022 (Lariosa 2023). Tarriela also hinted that Washington and Manila are currently discussing conducting the anticipated US and the Philippines joint coast guard patrol in contested waters (Strangjo 2023).

US support for the PCG is therefore more represented by the alignment of interests and the benefits of the Philippines' rapprochement with the US. The Philippines have supported AUKUS since 2021, a trilateral security pact between Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom for the Indo-Pacific region. As Teodoro Locsin argues, the Philippines supported AUKUS based on the existing great power imbalance evident in the Southeast Asian region and the need for more significant influence to balance China (De Castro 2022; Lariosa 2023). Since 2021, the Philippines has started to shift its stance to being more decisive and cautious toward alignment with China. It has held a pragmatic view towards the limitations of ASEAN in addressing tensions in the troubled waters of the South China Sea. Another result of the rapprochement is the integration of the US into the Quad's Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness, receiving critical streams of data related to maritime security (Lariosa 2023). As Bradford argued early this year, US policymakers are orienting their Southeast Asian states' foreign policy to empower coast guard presence through advising, training, and capacity-building measures (Bradford 2023).

PCG's most important ally, however, is Japan, as its partnership directly matches the PCG's maritime security mission and vision. It has primarily been through JICA, where support for the PCG has been channeled. The impact of Japan's cooperation with PCG is most evident with the procurement of the *Parola* and *Teresa-Magbanua* multi-role response vessels from Japan. This allows for a stronger capacity for the PCG to protect its sovereign jurisdiction at sea on top of the existing Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project (Lariosa 2023). Procurements made through the JICA support have allowed the Philippines' white hulls to take a frontline role in its maritime security quest of protecting the Philippines' seas.

4. Strategic Utility of the Philippines Coast Guards

The Philippines' turn to white hulls as a diplomatic tool to project power at sea is due to strategic factors. As seen in other claimant states to the South China Sea, coast guards are integrated into the overall strategy to solidify sovereign jurisdictional claims. White Hulls are seen as the frontline defender for the Philippines' claims in the South China Sea, and with the growing power projection at sea by the CCG, it is understandable why Marcos is showing greater attention to advancing the capabilities of its coast guards to defend the divergent island features that are within the Philippines EEZ (as seen in Figure 4). For example, towards the end of 2021, the Philippines-named Julian Felipe Reef was filled by 220 Chinese fishing vessels, accompanied by the CCG (Benecki 2021). Events such as these worrying in the Philippines. In the past, Mischief Reef had been populated by fishermen's shelters in 1994, which, in the years following that, developed into a base. As Pitlo observes, this is a common strategy for China to populate certain waters with fishermen and maritime constabulary forces, which then exerts a 'gradual exclusionary control' over the islands (Pitlo 2021). To counter those possibilities in the future, the Philippines is empowering its white hulls for a number of strategic reasons.
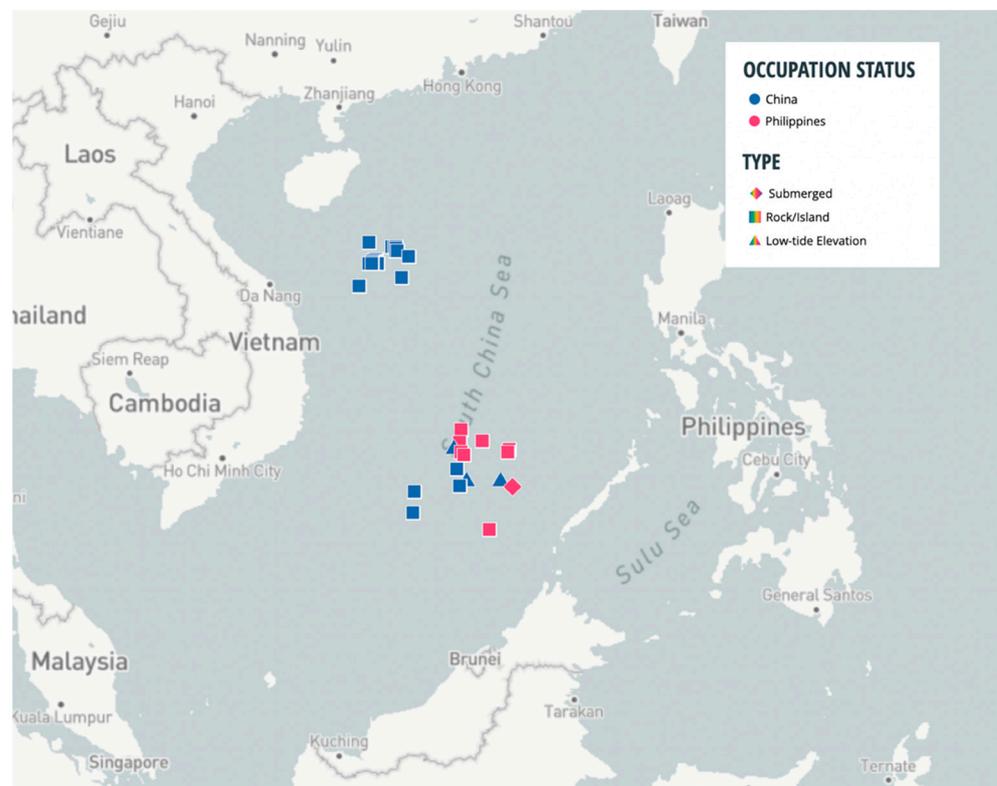
Figure 4. Island features of the South China Sea (China and the Philippines). Source: Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (modified by author) (Scarr et al. 2023).

First, coast guards act as a limited coercive alternative to navies. The problem of mobilizing navies for power-projecting functions is perceived as a provocative maneuver by adversaries. The risks associated with such mobilizations are not worth taking for a country highly dependent upon China's economic markets and trade opportunities, such as the Philippines. By considering its dependence on China, Manila needs to be sure that the trajectory taken in contested waters, a case sensitive for Beijing policymakers, does not aggravate China. Manila struggled to balance these interests, as adopting a decisive South China Sea policy is vital to maintain its sovereign jurisdictional claims. Using white hulls, a non-military stakeholder perceived to enforce the law at sea would be viewed as a limited coercive attempt to safeguard the seas. Thus, empowerment of the PCG would not attract as much attention and concern as, for example, if the Philippines Navy received an upgrade in its military fleets. This was the case in 2012, under Aquino's administration, in which the Philippines' latest warship, *BRP Gregorio del Pilar*, was deployed in Scarborough Shoal and apprehended Chinese fishermen illegally fishing within Philippine waters (Tarriela 2017). China's response since then has been consistent, criticizing the Philippines' militaristic approach to the dispute.

Decisiveness in the Philippines' South China Sea claims is crucial to maintaining sovereign jurisdiction. A decisive policy is needed at sea in contested waters where international law is irrelevant and states project power freely. By empowering the PCG and increasing its presence in areas of the Philippines' EEZ, Marcos is content to protect the Philippines' sovereign jurisdiction in the South China Sea. Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia all share the trouble of adopting a decisive South China Sea policy without aggravating their most critical trading partner. Marcos abandoned the pro-China stance long-held by his predecessor, Duterte, and took all necessary measures to not fall under the trap of eventual 'vanishing claims' in the South China Sea caused by economic dependency such as what occurred in Brunei Darussalam (Putra 2021).

White hulls, as a limited coercive yet decisive alternative to navies, allow for the greater achievement of the Philippines' diplomatic goals in the South China Sea. Le Miere argued in his seminal work on maritime diplomacy that maritime constabulary forces (including coast guards) allow a state to showcase a de facto sovereign jurisdiction in a disputed sea (Le Mière 2014). With the presence of the CCG in the Philippines' EEZ, constantly patrolling the waters, and guarding local fishermen, Marcos achieves a peaceful resolution of effective occupancy. This reinforces the Philippines' international law-backed claims over the South China Sea. The lack of effective occupancy led the Philippines to lose Mischief Reef to Chinese control (Robles and Robles 2021), and showing presence at the seas may counter such a fate in the future.

Navies are perceived as a symbol of state sovereign jurisdiction defenders and can be a source of military provocation. As Brewster suggests, Navies defend the state from threats and represent the intention to counter traditional security threats (Brewster 2016). The signals it generates differ from coast guard signals, in which patrolling and policing the seas is a common feature. As seen in the 2012 standoff in Scarborough Shoal, employing navies risks the use of armed force. Such a diplomatic strategy is not novel, as both Japan and China have employed this strategy to avoid criticisms in the past. Japan, for example, to submit its claims in the Senkaku/Diayou Islands, placed white hulls in those disputed waters to demonstrate effective control and occupancy (Oshige 2023). Learning the unique utilization of coast guards as alternatives to navies, China started to take the development of its coast guards seriously by developing what is now the largest coast guard fleet in the Indo-Pacific (Tarriela 2017).

Second, white hulls have tactical flexibility, allowing for non-escalatory conditions. As previous scholars explain the utility of naval diplomacy (Till 2018; Luttwak 1974), maritime constabulary forces enjoy the tactical flexibility of operating in vast geographical sites and have a combination of offensive and defensive capabilities. But unlike navies, white hulls can always conceal their true intentions by referring back to their legal mandate of law enforcement at sea. Thus, any skirmishes, minor or large, can easily be disregarded by

referring back to the Philippine government's mandate to the PCG. If navies were involved in skirmishes of any kind, the threat level would likely escalate to a national crisis requiring immediate state mobilization to counter the threat. By employing coast guards, PCGs can showcase a sea-based presence without getting entangled in conflict escalation.

As seen in past incidents between the PCG and CCG, the highest escalatory scenario is ships ramming into one another. Disagreements during a crisis usually lead to verbal exchanges among crews, and the worst-case scenario is the issuance of a diplomatic protest. After his inauguration as the new president of the Philippines, the Philippines lodged a diplomatic protest every day during Marcos' first 70 days leading the country (Strangjo 2023). The Philippines wishes to evade harsh criticism based on its limited coercive turn by using white hulls, considering the high level of sensitivity related to the South China Sea disputes.

It is also imperative to look at other conditions that allowed the Philippines' power projection efforts at sea through white hulls. A combination of several 'windows of opportunities,' both structural and domestic, has made it feasible to adopt the policies taken. Domestically, the shift from Duterte to Marcos opened the way for a decisive South China Sea policy. It was evident that Duterte tilted toward China (De Castro 2017, 2019). With Marcos in power, he vowed to pay better attention to protecting the Philippines' sovereign jurisdiction. One of his strategies to counter China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea was through the empowerment of the PCG. Security concerns during the Duterte administration focused on domestic sources of threat. These included the 'war on drugs,' transnational crime, and the persistence of radical terrorist groups within the Philippines' borders. As those threats are now perceived as part of the overall security concerns of the Philippines, this allowed for the construction of a decisive South China Sea policy.

Nevertheless, the power projection at sea through the Philippines' white hulls came at a time when structural conditions made it permissible. After Marcos took power, the US initiated its rapprochement with the Philippines, vowing to strengthen security ties. As the geopolitical rivalry between the US and China intensified, and with the US making strategic moves such as establishing AUKUS and a continued presence in the Indo-Pacific international waters, maintaining the ongoing support of Southeast Asian states is a pressing need. Consequently, in light of the convergence of national interests between the US and Philippine governments towards the Indo-Pacific, closer ties have developed between the two countries, besides the already formal security ties they have established.

5. Conclusions

The strategic importance of using coast guards is gaining prominence among Southeast Asian policymakers. Claimants to the South China Sea are beginning to understand the need to respond similarly to China's maritime constabulary forces, by equally projecting power at sea through effective occupation. Southeast Asian states such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia, have developed their respective maritime constabulary forces and utilized them in grey-zone areas. The Philippines is another example of a state taking coast guard development and utilization seriously, as can be seen with the recent trends starting in 2021 of the Philippines heavily invested in the empowerment of the PCG to respond to China's growing assertiveness.

This article questions the empirical puzzle surrounding the Philippines' seemingly decisive South China Sea policy, as well as limited coerciveness when it comes to its EEZ claims in the South China Sea. The Philippines are cautious of recent trends in the disputed waters with China. This is due to a growing maritime constabulary force crowding the disputed waters and the recent incidents involving the PCG crew members. It further addresses several key discourses in maritime diplomacy that are lacking in empirical studies, including why coast guards are utilized in disputed waters. How are white hulls used as a diplomatic tool to project power at sea?

Southeast Asian states currently follow the unique deployment of coast guards by great powers in the past, such as China and Japan. The secondary function of white hulls,

beyond its traditional law enforcement tasks at sea, reveals a trend of coast guards acting as 'mini-navies,' stakeholders that protect state sovereignty. As seen in the Philippines, how Manila defined maritime security paved the way for PCGs to actively project power at sea. This was a means for effective occupancy in the South China Sea. Furthermore, recent developments showing an increase in crews, fleets, and cooperation with great powers specifically to empower the PCG reveal Marcos' true intent of using coast guards strategically.

Furthermore, the Philippines' turn to coast guards as the frontline guardians of the Philippine waters is justifiable based on a number of strategic reasons. White hulls act as a limited coercive yet decisive alternative to navies. And second, coast guards have tactical flexibility that allows non-escalatory outcomes. This distinction between the navies and coast guards is crucial in understanding the response to the Philippines' dilemma in facing their main trading partner, China, in the South China Seas.

Funding: This research received funding from Hasanuddin University, grant number: 02277/UN4.1/KEP/2023.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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