

SOUTH CHINA SEA AND TAIWAN: TWO REGIONAL FLASHPOINTS OVERLAP

by

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With the war of words back between the Philippines and China owing to the simultaneous outbreak of tensions in Second Thomas Shoal and Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea, another regional flashpoint, Taiwan, appears to be spilling over into the bilateral relations of both countries. The Philippines' One China Policy was once again in the spotlight when Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. directly [congratulated](#) Dr. Lai Ching-te of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in a post on X (formerly Twitter) for winning Taiwan's 2024 presidential election in January. The gesture was warmly welcomed in Taiwan but condemned by China as a violation of the One China Policy enshrined in the Joint Communiqué when the Philippines and China normalized ties in 1975. As per the communiqué, reinforced by a presidential [executive order](#) (1987) and [memorandum circular](#) (1992), the Philippines recognizes that the People's Republic of China is the sole government of all China.

Yet, the establishment of formal diplomatic relations with China did not mean an abandonment of economic and cultural relations with Taiwan, which is why Taiwanese economic and cultural centers continue to exist globally. The [construction](#) of the One China Policy by the Philippine government has occasionally hit setbacks and has at times pleased China, and on other times, displeased Taiwan, and vice-versa. In fact, the interpretation of the One China Principle is also a sore point between China vis-à-vis the U.S., Japan and other Western countries. For instance, Washington's interactions with Taipei such as high-level visits, military engagements, arms sales, congressional visits, and the expansion of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) sites with the Philippines near Taiwan, have been viewed by Beijing as political activities with geopolitical undertones.

For its part, Taiwan had expressed dismay when the Duterte Administration – during the COVID-19 pandemic – imposed a blanket travel ban from China that included Taiwan. Chinese President Xi Jinping has repeatedly said that Taiwan must be reunified with the Mainland – peacefully or otherwise if necessary. While the U.S. and other Western powers abide by the One China Policy, they qualify that the settlement of the Taiwan question should be resolved peacefully.

Marcos' Action Sparks Debate on One China Policy

Marcos' congratulatory post to Lai is unprecedented because it is the first time that a sitting Philippine president has congratulated an elected Taiwanese president, which coincided with the fact that Lai belongs to the pro-independence DPP which Beijing abhors. But despite the DPP envisioning an independent Taiwan in its Charter, Lai in his victory speech was conciliatory and desirous of stable cross-strait relations, as he had intimated that he is open to having exchanges with Beijing and that the status quo should be maintained as Taiwan is already independent. This sentiment seems shared across the political spectrum in Taiwan because even the presidential candidate of the China-friendly Kuomintang, Hou Yu-ih, though welcoming of deepened engagements with Beijing, had steered clear of having a One Country Two Systems Model.

Countries such as Australia, Japan, Singapore, U.S. and the UK also [congratulated](#) Lai, but it was done at the ministerial level. Moreover, the congratulatory message, which prompted China to summon the Philippine Ambassador for the first time, seems to be the president's own agency which created an impression of him playing the Taiwan card on China as it comes against the backdrop of the rising tussle between Manila and Beijing in the South China Sea. This is because bureaucratic actors such as the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) had, upon Lai's victory, [issued](#) a statement that the Philippines continues to adhere to the One China Policy. And previously, Philippine Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro Jr. had ruled out a possibility of defense cooperation with Taiwan citing that



the country has no official relations with the self-ruled democratic island. As a result of the rift, some Filipino politicians, led by Senator Risa Hontiveros – who had once met with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen – have called for a review of the country's One China Policy, calling out China's disregard for Philippine rights and interests in the South China Sea.

The Importance of Bashi Channel

Most recently, the Philippine Defense Secretary and Armed Forces Chief of Staff [visited](#) the Batanes Islands, the Philippines' northern-most islands nearest to Taiwan which straddles the Bashi Channel, and had announced that the Philippines will [intensify](#) its military presence in the region as part of the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept (CADC). The Bashi Channel, besides being a hub for submarine cables and maritime shipping, is a crucial sea lane of communication (SLOC) and major chokepoint as it can both provide and deny access to military power projection and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) activities. Control of the waterway is key to configuring the balance of threat and having the upper hand in diplomatic bargaining by way of aerial and naval supremacy including submarine warfare – and, by extension, nuclear warfare.

For the Philippines, the Batanes Islands could serve as the nearest evacuation zone for Filipinos and other nationalities in the event of a war over Taiwan, and a monitoring station for military assets that transit the channel during peacetime. Last year, Philippines-US *Balikatan* military exercises were held in [Batanes](#) for the first time and included activities such as aerial assaults and deployment of advanced missile systems. Another iteration is said to take place in Batanes in April this year. Also, last year, the US military had commenced [talks](#) on developing a port in Batanes and a Philippines-U.S. Maritime Cooperation Activity (MCA), constituting joint air and sea patrols, was [held](#) in the area. These activities follow through on the creation of a fishermen's shelter in 2019 to deter [poachers](#) and the inauguration of a naval detachment in Mavulis Island in Batanes last year which is said to be a priority forward operating base as per the

Philippine Navy's Strategic Basing Plan 2040. These suggest that Batanes can assume a supporting role to U.S. military operations and military operations other than war (MOOTW), and be a Philippine defense perimeter in the north for any contingency. During the Duterte Administration, Philippine maritime security concerns had gone beyond the South China Sea and expanded to the northeastern frontier due to China's frequent marine scientific research (MSR) operations in the Philippine (Benham) Rise.

In Event of a Taiwan Contingency

For great powers like the U.S. and China, the Bashi Channel is pivotal to the assault, containment or defense of Taiwan, and in gaining first or second-strike advantage in the event of a full-blown war – not just in Taiwan but even on other geopolitical flashpoints like the South China Sea. This means that Batanes could be a dual-use forward operating base as it sits astride two theaters of operation, particularly the South China Sea and the western Pacific. China has been [conducting](#) its own [air-sea exercises](#) in the area for years. Ingress into the western Pacific will make U.S. territories more within reach of Chinese aircraft carriers and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and the same is true for U.S. military assets being closer to China by navigating through the South China Sea.

It should, therefore, not be surprising that [several war games](#) in the U.S. have factored in the [possible role](#) of the Philippines [in the event of a war](#) over Taiwan. As such, the Philippines' unilateral territorial defense posture in the context of the China challenge in the South China Sea is finding greater convergence with the U.S.' alliance interest of overall regional security. Going forward, it remains to be seen if Batanes will be an EDCA site or if the Philippines will go to great lengths to adopt Japan's seeming offset strategy in the Ryukyu Islands, specifically in Ishigaki, Amami Oshima, and Miyakojima, of deploying anti-ship and surface-to-air missiles for anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) purposes.

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