

Chartering a course for peace: EU-Philippines maritime security cooperation

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The two-day [state visit](#) of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to Manila in July 2023 is a clear indication of ever-closer cooperation between the European Union (EU) and the Philippines. The visit was a historic first in almost six decades of diplomatic relations between Manila and Brussels, and covered an ambitious agenda of enhanced trade relations and exports, efforts to address climate change, and increased investments in the digital economy, connectivity, and infrastructure.

Equally notable is that the visit came at a time of heightened tensions between Manila and Beijing amid continued Chinese aggression in Philippine waters. This led many to scrutinise the present and future role of the EU in the highly volatile South China Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

For the longest time, the EU has taken a relatively neutral stance toward the Indo-Pacific, especially on maritime disputes in the South China Sea. In a break from tradition, the EU released its [Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific](#) in September 2021. The Strategy presents a new approach to enhancing the EU's presence — cognisant of the region's growing geopolitical significance and the intensifying competition between Beijing and Washington.

The EU's shift from reactive to proactive

However, it was Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine that concretely demonstrated the interconnected nature of the global geopolitical landscape. The Russian invasion resulted in thousands of deaths and sent the global economy spiralling from inflation driven by food, energy, and security concerns. Even Europe, as a relatively stable economy, was not spared due to its reliance over the years on cheap Russian oil and gas. Against this backdrop, it is worth noting that as much as [40 per cent](#) of European foreign trade passes through the South China Sea. Therefore, conflict in this region would have equally disastrous political and economic ramifications.

In light of these significant geopolitical challenges, the shift in the EU's security perspective on the Indo-Pacific region from reactive to proactive is a welcome development. This outcome also comes at an opportune time for three reasons. First, it is clear that Manila intends to increase its maritime security cooperation with the EU. Second, relations between Manila and Brussels under Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr. have significantly improved, in stark contrast to relations under his pro-China predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte. Finally, the two actors have a platform to discuss and ramp up initiatives, with the Philippines acting as the ASEAN Coordinator for Dialogue Relations with the EU from 2021 to 2024.

Maritime security cooperation is still in its infancy

The EU has neither the ambition nor the capabilities to become a prime security provider to the region.

That being said, the EU surely can and should play its part in contributing to stability in the Indo-Pacific, given its significance for prosperity and security worldwide. Therefore, the emphasis on scaling up security cooperation in the maritime security domain to complement its economic engagement is highly welcome.

Currently, the cooperation between the Philippines and the EU in terms of maritime security is only in its infancy, with a few initiatives beginning to take shape driven primarily by the Philippines. After the third EU-Philippines Joint Committee Meeting in June this year, the two actors announced the establishment of a [new subcommittee](#) solely dedicated to maritime cooperation. This significant step stresses how relevant the maritime domain has become in the relationship between the EU and the Philippines.

Although the subcommittee will cover a wide range of maritime issues, from ocean governance to the blue economy, security will be among the more prominent topics. With the first subcommittee meeting taking place in Brussels this month, this significant step stresses how relevant the maritime domain has become in the relationship between the EU and the Philippines. Given the subcommittee's prime focus on maritime topics, the annual meeting can potentially become an important driver for future cooperation.

Another EU initiative is [CRIMARIO](#) (Critical Maritime Routes Indian Ocean). This capacity building initiative aims to increase maritime domain awareness, particularly through information sharing and training. With the expansion of CRIMARIO to include the Philippines, the EU is starting to cooperate with different Philippine actors, such as the Navy, Coast Guard, and the National Coast Watch Council Center (following a successful trial phase).

The Philippines is the first ASEAN country to be included in CRIMARIO. Through the Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing Platform (IORIS), the different Philippine maritime agencies can establish better inter-agency collaboration for maritime topics. According to EU officials, the hope is that pulling together limited resources

and increasing interoperability between different Philippine agencies will boost maritime awareness and joint action.

In addition to CRIMARIO, [Enhancing Security Cooperation In and With Asia](#) (ESIWA) is another capacity building EU initiative, which was expanded to involve the Philippines. Through ESIWA, high-ranking Philippine officials are invited to take part in trainings on maritime security.

Mutually beneficial partnership

These initiatives for EU-Philippine maritime security cooperation can benefit both sides and contribute to regional peace and order. For the EU, it is an opportunity to prove its reliability and consistency as a partner to the Philippines and the region — despite the EU's current preoccupation with the conflict near its borders. By enhancing its maritime security cooperation with the Philippines, the EU reaffirms the values, principles, and interests that both sides share, such as multilateralism, dialogue, and the rules-based order. Moreover, by establishing closer cooperation with the Philippines and its other partners, the EU can diversify its trade and economic relationships and build and strengthen new partnerships.

The Philippines can benefit from a maritime security partnership with the EU by gaining more sources of support, especially on South China Sea challenges. In addition, the country can use the EU's backing to deal with China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, without provoking China's usually defensive (and subsequently, aggressive) reactions that commonly follow when the US shows support for the Philippines. The EU's support of the Philippines demonstrates both sides' commitment to multilateralism and to engaging in dialogue, without triggering China's hostility.

For example, on 11 July 2023 — the day before the seventh anniversary of the Arbitral Ruling which invalidated China's nine-dash line claim — the US State Department spokesperson [stated](#) that the Arbitral Ruling was final and binding for both China and the Philippines and that China must respect international law and stop violating other states' rights to natural resources. The spokesperson also urged China to stop interfering with navigation and flight freedoms in the region. China [reacted](#) on 12 July 2023, accusing the US of pushing its allies to raise the South China Sea issue every year on the anniversary, calling the ruling 'illegal' and 'a plot against China'. China also claimed that the US



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was behind the arbitration.

In contrast, on 11 July 2023, the EU Delegation in Manila and the embassies of 16 EU member states in the Philippines [highlighted](#) the fundamental importance of freedoms, rights, and duties, as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). And during her visit to Manila, von der Leyen [confirmed](#) that the EU recognised the decision by the arbitral tribunal. China most likely responded seriously to these, particularly inside diplomatic circles. However, unlike its reply to the US, it did not give a comparable publicised response.

The EU's support is crucial

The Philippines could use the EU's support to its advantage, possibly resulting in a less aggressive response from China (unlike with the US) and perhaps encouraging more constructive action. This most likely stems from China's view of the US as a regional and global rival, while the EU is perceived as a bloc that is neither a threat nor a challenge to China, the region, and beyond.

Consequently, the EU's support for the Philippines' position on the South China Sea is crucial. The EU may not be able to provide the same level of military and defence assistance to the Philippines as the US, Japan, and even Australia, but perhaps it can offer other forms of cooperation beyond the status quo. These include conducting threat assessments, building the Philippine Coast Guard's capacity, or extending the [EU-coordinated maritime presence](#) to the South China Sea. But given the expected change in leadership in Brussels following the European elections in 2024, it remains to be seen whether the EU will broaden its maritime security support for the Philippines.

Increasing EU-Philippine maritime security cooperation is a positive development that reflects both actors' mutual interests and values, as well as their willingness to engage with each other and other Indo-Pacific actors. By strengthening their maritime security cooperation, the EU and the Philippines are joining and reinforcing regional and global efforts to ensure a free, open, and inclusive maritime order.

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