

As ASEAN meets, manufactured confrontations in the South China Sea

John Malvar
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Chinese and Philippine forces clashed three times in the South China Sea on July 20, 23, and 24, marking a week of confrontations that coincided exactly with the week-long Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Foreign Ministers' summit. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio arriving in Manila for the summit seized on the incidents to denounce Beijing and justify further militarization of the region.

The timing of the three incidents follows a longstanding pattern of manufactured confrontations, engineered in Manila under Washington's direction, and furnished the pretext for the summit's real business: the further entrenchment of US military and economic domination over Southeast Asia.

The 59th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting ran from July 18 to 24 and published a Joint Communiqué that struck a note of diplomatic calm entirely at odds with the escalating conflict. It declared that the ministers were "pleased with the sustained positive momentum" in negotiations for a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea and setting an ASEAN target of concluding the Code of Conduct by the end of 2026.

The Philippine navy in 1999 deliberately ran aground a decrepit World War II-era transport ship, BRP Sierra Madre, to assert a permanent occupation of the disputed Second Thomas Shoal. The rusting hulk has been garrisoned by a rotating handful of marines ever since, resupplied by periodic missions that have become one of the dispute's most contested flashpoints. In July 2024, after an earlier violent clash, Beijing and Manila reached a "provisional arrangement" allowing the Philippines to send humanitarian resupply missions to the grounded ship, with China permitted to conduct on-site checks to ensure that no construction materials would be shipped to reinforce the decaying hull.

On July 20 a single Chinese Coast Guard rigid-hull inflatable was carrying out a routine patrol near the shoal, drawing close to the Sierra Madre to photograph and film it, well within the pattern of surveillance China had conducted for years without incident. Rather than allow the patrol boat to pass, Philippine navy personnel launched two rubber dinghies from the wreck to drive it off. Footage taken by both sides reveals a handful of sailors in small boats whacking at each other with oars. It would be comical were the geopolitical stakes not so high. One of the eight Chinese personnel hit a Filipino sailor over the

head, who suffered a laceration that later required four stitches.

Three days later, the confrontation shifted to the contested Scarborough Shoal which has been under China's de facto control since a tense standoff in 2012. Two Philippine government vessels sailed through the waters of the Scarborough shoal on a recurring mission to resupply Filipino fishermen in the region. Chinese Coast Guard vessels fired a water cannon at the ships, which managed to complete their mission. The next day, the Philippines deployed a 10-vessel flotilla with an embedded media crew from CNN, fully anticipating another confrontation. As expected, they were accosted by Chinese vessels, who ordered them to depart and fired water cannons, striking several ships.

The resupply missions in the area of the Scarborough shoal are conducted by the Philippine government every 45 days or so. The back-to-back deployments, including a global media team, has no innocent explanation, nor does the decision to accost the routine Chinese patrol at the Second Thomas Shoal. They were staged to coincide with the ASEAN summit.

Rubio arrived in Manila as the Second Thomas Shoal clash was breaking and framed his response to it in the military language of the 1951 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty, calling the incident "escalatory" and declared "we're the only treaty partner the Philippines has. We intend to live up to our treaty obligations." Rubio published an op-ed in most of the major Philippine daily papers on the eve of the summit, in which he warned that should the South China Sea "fall under the control of a power willing to use commerce as a geopolitical weapon," the region would face "dire new threats to their sovereignty, security, and economic futures."

The Trump administration is waging a global tariff war against every trading partner on earth, ally and adversary alike. Representing US imperialism on the world stage, which has launched a murderous, criminal war against Iran, and threatens the national sovereignty of country after country, Rubio hypocritically presented American "backing" as the guarantor of regional self-determination and accused Beijing of weaponizing commerce. Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong followed Rubio's lead. Speaking from the deck of a Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) vessel, she denounced China's "destabilising and dangerous conduct in the South China Sea,

some of which the Philippines Coast Guard knows too well.”

The words arrived with money attached. Rubio announced \$100 million in new US military for 2026, including a \$9 million expansion of a PCG pier in Palawan. Another \$2.5 billion in broader “strategic investments” across Southeast Asia was explicitly framed as competition with Chinese regional influence. Australia doubled its own maritime assistance to the Philippines to \$18 million over four years, including \$10 million for drone technology, atop a further \$160 million over 10 years for regional maritime cooperation.

None of this was improvised: ten days before the first clash, 14 governments including the US, Australia, Japan, Canada and the UK issued a coordinated joint statement marking the tenth anniversary of the 2016 UNCLOS arbitral ruling, condemning the use of “coast guard, military, and maritime militia forces to harass, obstruct, or intimidate” in language ready to be activated the moment new incidents occurred. In other words, the script existed before the confrontations that would trigger it.

The confrontation over the Scarborough Shoal exposes a sinister mechanism for engineering confrontations with China. The fishermen at the center of these machinations are not defending a longstanding livelihood so much as being paid to occupy contested water on the state’s behalf, with Washington underwriting the apparatus that sends them there.

The missions disrupted by China’s coast guard on July 23 and 24 belong to the Kadiwa ng Bagong Bayaning Mangangisda (KBBM, Shared Spirit of the New Fisher Heroes) program. The PCG and Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) send a government vessel roughly every 40 to 45 days to buy catch directly from fishermen at the Scarborough and distribute fuel and supplies allowing them to remain there. Officials described the purpose of KBBM in remarkably open language. PCG spokesperson Jay Tarriela has said its explicit goal is “to encourage fisherfolks to venture beyond the territorial sea, thereby enhancing our presence.” The BFAR’s own materials call the program “more than an economic intervention... a statement of support,” casting fishermen as “defenders of our maritime domain.”

This is not, as officially presented, a restoration of a historic fishing practice disrupted by Chinese aggression. A 2017 investigation found that of Masinloc’s more than 3,000 registered fishermen, only 20 to 30 percent had ever historically made a voyage to Scarborough, and those who did used larger commercial-grade vessels; the small outrigger boats, known as bangka, distributed by the BFAR to the town’s fishermen are seaworthy only within 15 kilometers of shore, nowhere near the roughly 220-kilometer journey to the shoal.

The KBBM subsidy program is manufacturing new economic incentive for a broader population of poor, small-craft fishermen, who would never otherwise station themselves for extended periods in a militarized confrontation zone. Fishermen, in small outrigger boats, now live semi-permanently aboard their vessels at the shoal, where they are supplied and

paid by the government, providing substance to a territorial claim and a pretext for confrontations that can be scheduled when geopolitically useful.

The program does not rest on Philippine resources alone. In October 2025, Washington and Manila launched a three-year, \$2.5 million maritime security package explicitly directed at the Philippine Coast Guard, funding 110 training courses and placements for Philippine personnel at US Coast Guard centers alongside dozens of courses conducted inside the Philippines by American advisers. The agreement was announced jointly by PCG Commandant Admiral Ronnie Gil Gavan and the departing US Ambassador, and covers precisely the doctrine, procedures, and personnel readiness that underpin missions like KBBM. The fishermen sent to Scarborough Shoal, in other words, are the visible, human face of a program whose command structure, training, and financing are substantially American.

The honorific “bagong bayani / new hero” has been long applied to Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW), the remittances from whose poverty wages sustain much of the Philippine economy. With KBBM, the Philippine state, backed by American money and training, has created a form of internal OFW, subsidizing impoverished fishing families to remain semi-permanently at a militarized flashpoint. Their households are sustained by periodic government fuel handouts and fish purchases whose settlement mechanics are never disclosed, in exchange for maintaining a “presence” whose sole strategic value is to generate the recurring friction that Washington and Canberra can invoke, on cue, as so-called unprovoked Chinese aggression.



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