



RIPS Webinar

*Unity of efforts to enhance the rules-based
maritime order in East Asia*

Talking Points

January 2026

Research Institute for Peace and Security

China's gray zone tactics in the East and South China Seas

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Unity of efforts to enhance the ruled-based maritime order in East Asia

① Chronological/Current Situational Assessment

- Due to clear difference among regional East Asian nations' strategic and economic relations with China, establishing real functioning unified/integrated maritime policy and strategy is extremely difficult.
- China is trying to introduce new types of maritime orders that are different from existing international maritime norms.
- China's attempts over this position sometimes generate serious gaps from other nations' position over long-familiarized international maritime order.
- However, China will be determined to keep challenging historically established internal norms.
- There seems few rooms to reach an agreement between China's school nations and rest of international community on current maritime issues.
- One specific nature of China remembered is the fact that China is very keen on concluding an agreement with other nations, but no intent to follow the agreement. Or sometimes, China makes a crafty claim that current out of an agreement maneuver is not cover by the agreement, so there should be no problem.

② Our responses and issues

- Even in above mentioned situation, it is still important to establish cooperative posture, such as institutionalized multinational conferences against China's self-righteous and crafty maneuvers.
- Especially, bi/multi-lateral naval exercises in NWPAC and E/SCS are key to show our determination to China,
- Building all-hands-participated maritime domain awareness system/mechanism will be another key.

③ Thoughts on real nature of China

It is the time to have non-illusory view over China that is clearly stated by the U.S. Secretary of States, Mike Pompeo at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library on July 23, 2020.

“What do the American people have to show now 50 years on from engagement with China?” Pompeo said. “Did the theories of our leaders that proposed China’s evolution toward freedom and democracy prove to be true? Is this China’s definition of a win-win situation? And indeed, centrally from the Secretary of State perspective, is America safer?”

“We imagined engagement with China would produce a future with bright promises of comity and cooperation,” Pompeo said. “But today we’re all still wearing masks and watching the pandemic’s body count rise because the CCP failed in its promises to the world.”

“We, the freedom loving nations of the world, must induce China to change, just as President Nixon wanted,”

“We must induce China to change in more creative and assertive ways, because Beijing’s actions threaten our people and our prosperity.”

Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific and China's Use of Grey-Zone Tactics for psychological warfare

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Introduction: Grey-Zone Tactics and Systemic Maritime Security

Maritime security in the Indo-Pacific has become a critical component of the contemporary international security environment. China's increasing reliance on grey-zone tactics—defined as coercive actions designed to remain below the threshold of open armed conflict—raises important questions for regional stability, the integrity of international law, and the resilience of political systems. These practices are not confined to bilateral disputes; they have broader implications for the functioning of the rules-based maritime order.

From a European analytical standpoint, including that of France, the relevance of these developments lies not in geographic proximity alone but in their systemic effects. European states are economically, politically, and normatively invested in the stability of Indo-Pacific sea lanes and in the preservation of international maritime norms. Awareness of grey-zone dynamics, and support for partners most directly exposed—such as Japan—thus forms part of a broader concern for international order.

Grey-Zone Tactics as a Structural Feature of Chinese Maritime Strategy

China's maritime conduct reflects a strategic preference for incrementalism. Grey-zone tactics enable Beijing to advance political and territorial objectives while managing escalation and avoiding direct military confrontation. These actions are carried out through a diverse set of instruments, including coast guard operations, maritime militia activities, naval and air deployments, and are reinforced by legal, economic, and diplomatic measures.

Rather than representing ad hoc responses to specific incidents, these practices constitute a structural and enduring element of China's maritime strategy. Their effectiveness lies precisely in their ambiguity, which complicates attribution, response calibration, and collective action.

Strategic Objectives: Sovereignty, Deterrence and Political Influence

The assertion of sovereignty in contested maritime areas—particularly in the South China Sea and the East China Sea—remains a central objective of China's grey-zone strategy. However, the scope of this approach extends beyond territorial claims.

Grey-zone tactics also serve to:

- Deter countervailing actions by raising the political and operational costs of resistance,
- Introduce legal and strategic ambiguity into crisis management,
- Influence domestic political debates and policy choices in neighbouring states.

In this sense, grey-zone activities target not only physical control of space but also the decision-making environment of other actors.

Naval Exercises as Instruments of Coercive Signalling

Among the most visible components of China's grey-zone strategy is the increasing frequency and complexity of naval and air exercises. These activities perform several interrelated functions:

- They reinforce diplomatic and economic pressure by adding a credible military dimension.
- They operate as signalling mechanisms aimed at political elites, public opinion, and external stakeholders.
- They contribute to the gradual normalisation of military presence in sensitive maritime areas.

Analytically, such exercises should not be interpreted solely through a war-preparation lens. Instead, they function as coercive signalling instruments, designed to constrain policy choices and shape perceptions while remaining below the threshold of armed conflict.

Historical Reference: The 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis

China's contemporary use of military signalling has clear historical antecedents. During the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, Beijing employed missile tests and large-scale military exercises with the explicit aim of influencing Taiwan's first direct presidential election. The objective was to intimidate the electorate and weaken political support for President Lee Teng-hui.

Although the attempt failed to alter the electoral outcome, it demonstrated the potential utility of military activity as a tool of political coercion. This episode established an operational and conceptual framework that continues to inform China's approach to grey-zone pressure.

Japan and the East China Sea: A Case of Sustained Grey-Zone Pressure

Japan currently represents one of the most salient cases of sustained grey-zone pressure, particularly in the vicinity of the Senkaku Islands. This pressure manifests through:

- Persistent coast guard and maritime militia operations,

- Regular and increasingly complex naval and air exercises in the East China Sea,
- Occasional coordination with Russia, which introduces an additional strategic variable.

These activities are not episodic but cumulative. Their objective is to test Japan's crisis management capabilities, create strategic fatigue, and incrementally raise the political cost of maintaining a firm and consistent policy stance.

The Multidimensional Nature of Grey-Zone Coercion

China's grey-zone strategy is inherently multidimensional. Military activities are embedded within a broader framework that includes:

- Legal warfare, involving selective interpretation and instrumental use of international law,
- Economic pressure, through trade restrictions and informal sanctions,
- Psychological pressure, aimed at shaping perceptions and risk assessments,
- And symbolic measures, such as the suspension of panda diplomacy.

Naval exercises and joint manoeuvres are central to this architecture, serving as visible and recurrent signals within a wider campaign of political influence.

European Perspectives: Analytical Relevance and Strategic Consistency

From a European perspective, including that of France, the primary issue is one of analytical clarity and strategic consistency. Grey-zone tactics challenge the norms and legal principles that European states publicly endorse. Ignoring or underestimating these practices risks weakening the credibility of those commitments.

European engagement can take the form of:

- Improved analytical recognition of grey-zone coercion as a distinct strategic phenomenon,
- Political and diplomatic support for partners such as Japan,
- And selective operational presence consistent with international law.

Such engagement does not imply confrontation but reflects a concern for stability, predictability, and normative coherence.

Conclusion: Grey-Zone Tactics and the Long-Term Security Environment

China's use of grey-zone tactics in the maritime domain constitutes a long-term strategic challenge characterised by incrementalism, ambiguity, and multidimensional coercion. For Japan,

this challenge is immediate and operational. For European actors, it raises broader questions about the resilience of the international maritime order.

Analysing grey-zone activities as a form of sustained political and strategic pressure—rather than as isolated incidents or precursors to conflict—provides a more accurate framework for understanding their implications. Enhanced analytical coordination and mutual awareness between Japan and its partners, including European states, contribute to maintaining stability and managing competition in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain.

Talking Points for Professor James Kraska*

Professor James Kraska

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Session 1: “China’s Gray Zone Tactics at Sea in East Asia”

Session 2: “Imperative of Unity of Effort to Uphold the Rules-Based Maritime Order”

The Nature and Evolution of China’s Gray Zone Campaign in East Asia

China’s maritime gray zone strategy is neither accidental nor ad hoc; it is a deliberate, centrally directed campaign designed to achieve de facto control of strategic maritime space without crossing the threshold of acts that would trigger Article 5 collective defense obligations or large-scale kinetic conflict. The operational template is remarkably consistent across theaters:

- Employment of irregular forces (People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia – PAFMM) operating in concert with regular forces (China Coast Guard – CCG and PLAN).
- Systematic violation of COLREGS through dangerous maneuvers, water cannon, and military-grade lasers.
- Weaponization of domestic law (2021 China Coast Guard Law) to assert extraterritorial jurisdiction inside the EEZs of neighboring states.
- Incremental encroachment followed by *fait accompli* construction and militarization (a pattern first perfected in the South China Sea and now replicated in the East China Sea).

The Senkaku Islands is the Central Front

The Senkaku theater is the most dangerous gray zone flashpoint in East Asia for three reasons:

(a) Legal clarity: The islands are indisputably under Japanese administration; UNCLOS and the 1972 Okinawa Reversion Agreement place them within Japan’s contiguous zone and EEZ. China’s “historic rights” claim has no standing under modern international law and was explicitly rejected in the 2016 *Philippines v. China* Arbitration (Annex VII, UNCLOS).

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(b) Strategic stakes: Control of the Senkaku Islands would push Japan's defensive perimeter 300 nm eastward, fracture the First Island Chain, and place PLAN SSBN bastions in the Philippine Sea under direct observation. This erodes the "wall" of U.S.-Japan strategic security, rolling back American security to the second island chain.

(c) Escalatory dynamics: Since 2012, China has maintained near-continuous CCG presence inside the 24-nm contiguous zone, often with embedded PAFMM vessels. In 2024–2025 there was a qualitative escalation: CCG vessels of 10,000+ tons now routinely enter the 12-nm territorial sea, and PLAN intelligence-collection ships (AGI) operate just outside while PLA aircraft stage record numbers of incursions across the median line into Japan's ADIZ. This constitutes a slow-motion invasion by bureaucratic means.

The Broader East Asian Pattern

The same playbook is farther South:

- Second Thomas Shoal: CCG and PAFMM blockade and ramming of Philippine resupply missions in blatant violation of the 2016 Arbitral Award.
- Vanguard Bank and Natuna Besar: CCG harassment of Vietnamese and Indonesian hydrocarbon exploration inside undisputed EEZs.
- Taiwan's outlying islands (Kinmen, Matsu, Pratas): Increasingly frequent CCG "law enforcement" patrols inside restricted waters combined with large-scale PLAN amphibious exercises explicitly rehearsing seizure scenarios. The objective is salami-slicing: to normalize Chinese administrative control over maritime space that is legally the sovereign right of littoral states.

Why Gray Zone Tactics Work (and Why They Are Winning)

- Asymmetry of political will: Democratic states are constrained by rule-of-law norms and domestic audiences; the CCP is not.
- Threshold manipulation: Each incident is calibrated to fall below the level that would trigger U.S. treaty obligations (the 1951 U.S.–Japan, 1954 U.S.–Philippines MDT, or the Taiwan Relations Act).
- Narrative dominance: China's "Three Warfares" (public opinion, psychological, legal) portrays its victims as provocateurs and itself as defender of "historic rights."
- Erosion of deterrence credibility: Repeated non-response trains Beijing that escalation costs are near zero.

Preserving the Rules-Based Order: The Imperative of Unity of Effort

A fragmented response guarantees continued Chinese gains. The minimum winning coalition must include Japan, the United States, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Vietnam, with Australia, India, and key European maritime powers (the UK, France, the Netherlands, and Germany) in supporting roles.

Concrete lines of effort include:

(a) Operational Coordination

- Establish a standing Combined Maritime Task Force (Japan–U.S.–Philippines–Australia) with real-time common operational picture sharing.
- Conduct regular multilateral freedom-of-navigation and presence operations inside the Philippine EEZ (Second Thomas Shoal, Scarborough) and Japanese contiguous zone (Senkakus).
- Extend Japan’s bilateral MCS (maritime domain awareness) agreements with Vietnam and the Philippines into trilateral frameworks.

(b) Legal and Diplomatic Synchronization

- Collective diplomatic recognition that China’s “nine/ten-dash line” and “four sha” claims are extinguished as a matter of law post-2016 Arbitration.
- Coordinated submissions to the UN Secretary-General under Article 310 UNCLOS rejecting China’s baselines and maritime claims.
- Public attribution and naming-and-shaming of CCG and PAFMM vessels engaged in unlawful activities (publish hull numbers, commanders, and chain-of-command linkages to the CMC).
- Insistence on conditions for normal relations to include a Copenhagen-document-like agreement:
 - The Copenhagen Document (Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE) was adopted on 29 June 1990 by the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE, later renamed OSCE in 1994). It is widely regarded as one of the most important and far-reaching political declarations that marked the peaceful end of the Cold War in Europe.
 - **Democracy and rule of law**
 - Free and fair elections at regular intervals
 - Pluralistic multi-party systems
 - Separation of party and state

- The will of the people, freely expressed through periodic elections, is the basis of governmental authority
 - **Human rights and fundamental freedoms** (detailed and non-derogable)
 - Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief
 - Freedom of expression (including media freedom)
 - Freedom of association and peaceful assembly
 - Right to peaceful protest
 - **Protection of minorities**
 - One of the first international documents to spell out detailed minority-rights protections (language, culture, education, etc.) – crucial for the post-communist transitions in the Baltics, Balkans, and Central Europe.
 - **Independent judiciary and due process**
 - No one can be deprived of liberty except by law
 - Right to a fair and public hearing by an independent tribunal
 - **Explicit rejection of the Brezhnev Doctrine**
 - Every state reaffirmed the right of all peoples to self-determination and to freely choose their political system without external interference. This was the formal international burial of Moscow’s claim to intervene in socialist countries (Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968, etc.).
- **We need to craft a Copenhagen Document for East Asia, and it should underpin all legal and diplomatic synchronization.**

(c) Capability Transfers and Capacity-Building

- Accelerate transfer of maritime patrol aircraft, unmanned surface vessels, and coastal radar networks to the Philippines and Vietnam under the U.S.–Japan–Australia trilateral framework.
- Operationalize the Japan–Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement (2024) with permanent JASDF and JMSDF liaison elements in Manila and Palawan.

(d) Taiwan is an Indispensable Partner

- Quiet but systematic inclusion of Taiwan Coast Guard and Navy in multilateral exercises (e.g., sensor-to-shooter data links in the Bashi Channel).
- Explicit signaling that any attempt to impose an ADIZ over the Taiwan Strait or to seize Pratas or Kinmen will be treated as a strategic *casus foederis* by the U.S.–Japan alliance.

(e) Economic and Technological Leverage

- Targeted sanctions on CCG and PAFMM parent entities (e.g., Sansha City corporations) and their leadership.
- Coordinated export controls on dual-use maritime surveillance technologies feeding China's "Maritime Great Wall."

Conclusion: We are Late but Conditions are Not Terminal

China's gray-zone strategy succeeds only so long as the target states remain divided, reactive, and reluctant to impose costs. The rules-based order in East Asia will not survive another decade of unilateral accommodation. Unity of effort—operational, legal, and economic—remains the only credible deterrent short of war. As Admiral Yamamoto reportedly observed, "Anyone can fight a war when he is angry; the real professional prepares for war when he is calm." The democracies of the Indo-Pacific must now demonstrate that same cold professionalism—together, consistently, and without further delay.

**TALKING POINTS FOR RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND SECURITY
(RIPS) 6-7 JANUARY 2026 WEBINAR**

**Addressing China's Gray Zone Operations in the West Philippine/South China Sea:
Pursuing a Hard Balancing Policy through the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense
Concept (CADC)**

Professor Renato Cruz De Castro

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Introduction

- 1) During the 2022 presidential elections, most Filipino voters picked Mr. Ferdinand Marcos Jr. as their 17th president. Upon assuming the presidency, he laid out his agenda for a balanced or middle-of-the-road foreign policy. He planned to generate practical benefits from the Philippines' relations with the U.S. and China. He wanted to promote economic cooperation with China while, at the same time, reviving the Philippines' security alliance with the U.S. He designed a foreign policy gambit with an apparent division of labor: a) on the one hand, Beijing providing Manila with the market for the Philippine exports and the public investments for the government's infrastructure projects; and b) On the other hand, Washington extending security guarantee that could balance Manila's close economic ties with Beijing, and deter Chinese coercive behavior in the South China Sea.
- 2) In December 2022, after months of pursuing a balanced relationship between the U.S. and China, President Marcos Jr. announced that his administration would bankroll the expensive Armed Forces of the Philippines' (AFP) shift from its seven decades of focusing all its attention and resources on internal security to external/territorial defense. He made this decision in the face of Chinese coercive actions and expansionist activities against the Philippine Navy (PN), the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), and ordinary Filipino fishermen. China's maritime expansion and coercive actions against the Philippines prompted President Marcos to recognize the need for the AFP to transition from a military focused on constabulary functions to one equipped for territorial defense. Consequently, he approved the funding and implementation of the revised AFP force modernization program, which entered its third horizon or phase from 2023 to 2028.

- 3) The Marcos Administration is aware that the AFP cannot achieve strategic parity with China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) despite its substantial financial investment in the program. This is why President Marcos found it expedient to prioritize the development of dynamic, vibrant, and close security relationships with the Philippines' only formal treaty ally, the U.S. On February 2, 2023, Filipino and U.S. defense officials announced that U.S. forces would be allowed access to four additional Philippine military facilities under the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). These additional four EDCA sites would provide U.S. forces with a strategic vantage point from which they could launch rapid and decisive military operations in the event of an armed confrontation between the U.S. and China over Taiwan, located more than 250 miles north of Luzon or the South China Sea.
- 4) The Marcos administration's renewed hard balancing policy entails building up the Philippine military's external defense capabilities, enhancing its alliance with the U.S. by increasing American strategic presence in the Philippines, and fostering security arrangements with other American allies like South Korea, Japan, and Australia. And, more significantly, formulating and implementing the Philippines' first grand strategy since it became an independent republic in 1946, the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept (CADC).

The Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept (CADC)

- 1) The Marcos Administration's formulation and implementation of CADC resulted from two developments: a) China's maritime expansion in the West Philippine/ South China Sea; and b) the AFP's push for force modernization. The Philippines is an archipelagic Southeast Asian state confronted by China's expansion into its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea. This stems from China's expansionist agenda in the South China Sea, based on its geographic proximity, historical baggage, the implications of the constantly changing dynamics of Chinese comprehensive power and naval power, and clout over maritime Southeast Asia.
- 2) In January 2024, Secretary Teodoro announced a new defense concept of the Philippines called the "Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept (CADC)." The idea is premised on the assumption that, as an archipelagic country, the Philippines' land

security mass is limited while the population is increasing, causing the need for resources to expand exponentially. CADC provides the following measures: a) transforming the country's security paradigm; b) strengthening the AFP's overall military capabilities; and c) leveraging its alliance with its ally, the U.S., and like-minded security partners.

- 3) As the Philippines' first grand strategy, CADC envisioned the AFP projecting its capabilities into [maritime] areas of the Philippines that must be protected and preserved. This would require the Philippine military to boost its maritime domain awareness, connectivity, intelligence capabilities (C41STAR), and area denial and deterrence capabilities in the marine and aerial domains. He underscored that this defense concept is multidimensional, multi-threat, and aims to enable the AFP to develop a credible deterrent force, ensuring that Philippine diplomacy does not become a form of appeasement.
- 4) According to the DND, the CADC aims to address the Philippines' strategic vulnerabilities and enhance the AFP's capability to address national interests through specific long-term plans. The AFP's urgent need is to develop its Maritime and Air Defense (MAD) capabilities, which should be directed and focused on the Philippines' maritime and air domain, where the country has sovereign rights to exploration, extraction, and preservation of the marine environment and resources, as accorded by international law. An adequate and credible Philippine MAD is expected to protect, defend, and secure against foreign intrusion, extraction, and exploitation, and to support law enforcement operations against transnational crimes within the country's 200 nautical miles EEZ and 350 nautical miles continental shelf.
- 5) The AFP can only implement the CADC through Joint Force Development, which entails the synergistic employment of naval, air, and ground forces to establish a credible posture against aggression from foreign and domestic threats. This would require the Philippine Army (PA) and the Philippine Marine Corps (PMC) to acquire short-range, more sophisticated, long-range interceptor missiles to intercept Chinese cruise missiles, advanced bombers, and fighter planes. The PA and PMC could also be armed with mobile launchers and airship cruise missiles to prevent Chinese control within and outside the Philippine archipelago. Ground forces can also be equipped with rocket-based torpedoes to deter submarines operating along the coast and within archipelagic waters.

Enhancing the Philippine-U.S. Alliance's Extended Deterrence

- 1) CADC recognizes and emphasizes the urgency of strengthening the Philippines' alliance with the U.S. and its security partnerships with other American allies as vital to the AFP's preparation for deterrence and potential armed conflict. The Philippines is undertaking a major force modernization program and, more significantly, pursuing alliance formation and forming coalitions to constrain Chinese maritime expansion in the South China Sea. The Philippines needs to rely on its superpower ally and several security partners. This would enable the Philippines to leverage against China's pervasive and preponderant economic and military power, which the Philippines, despite the AFP modernization program, cannot possibly match. The CADC urges the Philippines to grant greater American strategic access to its territory and, in the process, to integrate its force modernization into the arrangement.
- 2) It is also imperative that the PN and the PCG conduct periodic Multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activities (MMCA) with American, Japanese, and Australian naval forces to establish a defense posture securing the country's maritime territories, particularly the EEZ. Moreover, with American assistance, the CADC calls for the Philippines to integrate its battle networks and strengthen its air and sea capabilities to offset the PLA's efforts to destabilize the region's military balance.
- 3) This also requires the Philippines to host a rotational deployment of the Littoral U.S. Marine Corps Regiment equipped with drones, Naval Strike Missiles, and the U.S. Army's mid-range Typhon Missile system in Northern Luzon. The two allies aim to develop their Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2/AD) posture to confine China's growing power projection capabilities within the first-island chain. Relying on its strategic location near Taiwan, the Philippines must leverage its alliance with the U.S. to maintain and enhance American integrated deterrence in the face of increasing Chinese military power in the Indo-Pacific region.
- 4) During his first official visit to Manila in late March 2025, U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth impressed upon his Philippine counterpart, Secretary Teodoro, the Trump Administration's urgency in deterring China's irredentist ambitions against Taiwan and other parts of the Indo-Pacific region. Secretary Hegseth observed that the Philippine-U.S. alliance reflects strength in the face of China's aggression in the Indo-Pacific and demonstrates a commitment to peace and security in the Indo-

Pacific region. He then announced that Manila and Washington should collaborate to reestablish military deterrence in the Indo-Pacific region. In his meeting with Secretary Teodoro, he negotiated with his Filipino counterpart to formulate a robust agenda for the Philippine-U.S. alliance, aiming to reestablish strategic deterrence and achieve peace through Strength in the Indo-Pacific region.

Conclusion

- 1) Unsettled by China's expansion, aggressiveness, and gray zone operations in the South China Sea and around Taiwan, the Philippines strengthened its security ties with the US, financed the third horizon of the AFP modernization program, and implemented the CADC, the Philippines' first grand strategy since it became an independent republic in 1946.

- 2) The Philippines' adoption of CADC as a grand strategy in response to China's maritime expansion has two implications. On the one hand, the nine Southeast Asian states are pursuing cost-free diplomatic strategies such as leveraging, hedging, and compensating to avoid costly armed conflict. On the other hand, the Philippines is funding, re-equipping, modernizing, and fostering alliances and security partnerships to help prepare the AFP to be more agile, flexible, and responsive in addressing emerging security challenges confronting the Philippines in a fluid and potentially dangerous Indo-Pacific region.