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THREATS: CHINA'S MARITIME MILITIA IN THE  
SOUTH CHINA SEA**

van den Bosch, Rudolf A.

Monterey, CA; Naval Postgraduate School

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**THESIS**

**MARITIME ESCALATION AND AMBIGUOUS  
THREATS: CHINA'S MARITIME MILITIA  
IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA**

by

Rudolf A. van den Bosch

June 2024

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<b>REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE</b>			<i>Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188</i>	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instruction, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188) Washington, DC, 20503.				
<b>1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank)</b>		<b>2. REPORT DATE</b> June 2024	<b>3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED</b> Master's thesis	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> MARITIME ESCALATION AND AMBIGUOUS THREATS: CHINA'S MARITIME MILITIA IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA			<b>5. FUNDING NUMBERS</b>	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b> Rudolf A. van den Bosch				
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943-5000			<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b>	
<b>9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> N/A			<b>10. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER</b>	
<b>11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b> The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.				
<b>12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Distribution Statement A. Approved for public release: Distribution is unlimited.			<b>12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE</b> A	
<b>13. ABSTRACT (maximum 200 words)</b>  This study explores the relationship between the escalation process and coercive effects achieved by the Chinese Maritime Militia (CMM) in the People's Republic of China's (PRC) maritime irregular warfare campaign. Using qualitative research analysis, a comparative case study examined two cases in the South China Sea (SCS) in 2023: the Second Thomas Shoal blockade and the Iroquois Reef transformation. The case study data was mainly collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with subject matter experts during field research in Japan and the Philippines in September 2023. The findings indicate that the interaction between local escalation at sea and strategic escalation with the national tools of state power is a key element that influences the coercive effects of irregular threats in the maritime domain. The relationship between escalation and coercion is illustrated in a conceptual model that shows how intervention in the escalation process can reduce the effectiveness of maritime ambiguous threats. Extrapolating the findings, Western nations or allies could potentially reduce similar non-military maritime threats in other geographic regions, thereby improving the Western position in long-term competition with adversaries in the maritime domain.				
<b>14. SUBJECT TERMS</b> Chinese Maritime Militia, maritime irregular warfare, ambiguous threats, escalation, coercion			<b>15. NUMBER OF PAGES</b> 167	
			<b>16. PRICE CODE</b>	
<b>17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT</b> Unclassified	<b>18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE</b> Unclassified	<b>19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT</b> Unclassified	<b>20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b> UU	

NSN 7540-01-280-5500

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 2-89)  
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**MARITIME ESCALATION AND AMBIGUOUS THREATS: CHINA'S  
MARITIME MILITIA IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA**

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Major, Netherlands Marine Corps  
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF SCIENCE IN DEFENSE ANALYSIS  
(IRREGULAR WARFARE)**

from the

**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL  
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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between the escalation process and coercive effects achieved by the Chinese Maritime Militia (CMM) in the People's Republic of China's (PRC) maritime irregular warfare campaign. Using qualitative research analysis, a comparative case study examined two cases in the South China Sea (SCS) in 2023: the Second Thomas Shoal blockade and the Iroquois Reef transformation. The case study data was mainly collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with subject matter experts during field research in Japan and the Philippines in September 2023. The findings indicate that the interaction between local escalation at sea and strategic escalation with the national tools of state power is a key element that influences the coercive effects of irregular threats in the maritime domain. The relationship between escalation and coercion is illustrated in a conceptual model that shows how intervention in the escalation process can reduce the effectiveness of maritime ambiguous threats. Extrapolating the findings, Western nations or allies could potentially reduce similar non-military maritime threats in other geographic regions, thereby improving the Western position in long-term competition with adversaries in the maritime domain.



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>I.</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>A.</b>	<b>PROBLEM .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>B.</b>	<b>RESEARCH QUESTION .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>C.</b>	<b>LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>D.</b>	<b>RESEARCH APPROACH.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>E.</b>	<b>ROADMAP.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>II.</b>	<b>LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>A.</b>	<b>THREAT.....</b>	<b>7</b>
1.	Perspectives on the CMM Threat.....	8
2.	Sub-Conclusion .....	10
<b>B.</b>	<b>MARITIME IRREGULAR WARFARE.....</b>	<b>12</b>
1.	Irregular Warfare.....	12
2.	Maritime Irregular Warfare.....	14
3.	Strategic Interaction .....	15
4.	Sub-Conclusion .....	16
<b>C.</b>	<b>ESCALATION .....</b>	<b>17</b>
1.	Escalation Theory .....	17
2.	Maritime Escalation.....	19
3.	PRC Escalation.....	19
4.	Sub-Conclusion .....	20
<b>D.</b>	<b>COERCIVE EFFECTS .....</b>	<b>21</b>
1.	Coercion.....	21
2.	Effects.....	23
<b>E.</b>	<b>THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>III.</b>	<b>CONCEPTUAL MODEL .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>A.</b>	<b>THE ESCALATION-COERCION MODEL .....</b>	<b>25</b>
1.	The Model Explained.....	26
2.	Local and Strategic Escalation .....	27
3.	Coercive Effects.....	28
4.	Application of the Model.....	29
<b>B.</b>	<b>STRATEGIC CONCEPTS .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>C.</b>	<b>RESEARCH FOCUS.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>IV.</b>	<b>RESEARCH DESIGN.....</b>	<b>33</b>

A.	<b>CASE STUDY STRATEGY .....</b>	<b>33</b>
B.	<b>DATA COLLECTION .....</b>	<b>34</b>
C.	<b>DATA ANALYSIS .....</b>	<b>35</b>
1.	<b>Coding .....</b>	<b>36</b>
2.	<b>Interrelating Themes and Descriptions .....</b>	<b>36</b>
3.	<b>Interpreting the Meaning .....</b>	<b>37</b>
D.	<b>VALIDATION.....</b>	<b>37</b>
1.	<b>Reliability, Validity, and Generalization .....</b>	<b>37</b>
2.	<b>Researcher’s Role.....</b>	<b>38</b>
V.	<b>CASE STUDY BACKGROUND.....</b>	<b>41</b>
A.	<b>THE CHINESE MARITIME MILITIA.....</b>	<b>41</b>
1.	<b>Militia Origins and Organization .....</b>	<b>41</b>
2.	<b>Irregular Threat.....</b>	<b>43</b>
3.	<b>Conventional Threat.....</b>	<b>44</b>
B.	<b>THE SOUTH CHINA SEA .....</b>	<b>46</b>
1.	<b>Importance of the South China Sea .....</b>	<b>46</b>
2.	<b>The PRC’s SCS policy .....</b>	<b>48</b>
3.	<b>SCS Disputes .....</b>	<b>49</b>
C.	<b>CONCERNS .....</b>	<b>53</b>
VI.	<b>LOCAL AND STRATEGIC ESCALATION IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA .....</b>	<b>55</b>
A.	<b>LOCAL ESCALATION.....</b>	<b>55</b>
1.	<b>Threat: The CMM .....</b>	<b>56</b>
2.	<b>Response: The Philippines .....</b>	<b>62</b>
3.	<b>Response: External Support .....</b>	<b>68</b>
B.	<b>STRATEGIC ESCALATION .....</b>	<b>71</b>
1.	<b>Diplomatic.....</b>	<b>72</b>
2.	<b>Information.....</b>	<b>75</b>
3.	<b>Military .....</b>	<b>78</b>
4.	<b>Economic.....</b>	<b>79</b>
C.	<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>80</b>
VII.	<b>CASE STUDIES ANALYSIS .....</b>	<b>83</b>
A.	<b>SECOND THOMAS SHOAL .....</b>	<b>85</b>
1.	<b>Background .....</b>	<b>85</b>
2.	<b>Local Escalation: Threat and Response.....</b>	<b>87</b>
3.	<b>Strategic Escalation: DIME .....</b>	<b>91</b>

4.	Effects.....	94
5.	Sub-Conclusion .....	96
B.	IROQUOIS REEF .....	97
1.	Background .....	98
2.	Local Escalation: Threat and Response.....	100
3.	Strategic Escalation: DIME .....	102
4.	Effects.....	106
5.	Sub-Conclusion .....	107
C.	CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS.....	108
1.	Second Thomas Shoal and Iroquois Reef .....	108
2.	South China Sea .....	111
VIII.	CONCLUSION .....	113
A.	KEY FINDINGS .....	113
B.	IMPLICATIONS .....	115
C.	LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH .....	118
APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL .....		119
APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW REPORT EXAMPLE.....		121
APPENDIX C. CODING EXAMPLE.....		125
LIST OF REFERENCES .....		129
INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST .....		143

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## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.	Thesis Organization .....	6
Figure 2.	Escalation and Coercion Matrix.....	26
Figure 3.	Escalation Ladder.....	27
Figure 4.	Strategic Concepts .....	30
Figure 5.	Data Analysis in Qualitative Research .....	35
Figure 6.	Escalation Components.....	55
Figure 7.	Local Escalation.....	56
Figure 8.	Escalation Ladder.....	66
Figure 9.	Strategic Escalation.....	72
Figure 10.	Map of Spratly Islands .....	84
Figure 11.	Map of Second Thomas Shoal and Surroundings.....	88
Figure 12.	Second Thomas Shoal Escalation and Coercion Matrix.....	96
Figure 13.	Map of Iroquois Reef.....	98
Figure 14.	Escalation Ladder at Iroquois Reef.....	102
Figure 15.	Iroquois Reef Escalation and Coercion Matrix.....	107
Figure 16.	Second Thomas Shoal vs. Iroquois Reef Escalation and Coercion Matrix.....	109
Figure 17.	SCS Short- and Long-Term Escalation and Coercion Matrix .....	111
Figure 18.	Combined Second Thomas Shoal, Iroquois Reef, and SCS Short- and Long-Term Escalation and Coercion Matrix .....	114
Figure 19.	Strategic Concepts .....	115

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## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.	Theoretical Framework.....	24
Table 2.	Second Thomas Shoal Timeline, 2023 .....	87
Table 3.	Iroquois Reef Timeline, 2023 .....	99



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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AFP WESCOM	Armed Forces of the Philippines' Western Command
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CCG	Chinese Coast Guard
CCGV	Chinese Coast Guard Vessel
CCMV	Chinese Maritime Militia Vessel
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CMM	Chinese Maritime Militia
DIME	Diplomacy, Information, Military, and Economy
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance
IW	Irregular Warfare
PCA	Permanent Court of Arbitration
PCG	Philippine Coast Guard
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PRC	People's Republic of China
NM	Nautical Miles
SCS	South China Sea
TAC	Treaty of Amity and Cooperation
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2023, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) continued its coercive maritime irregular warfare campaign with a wide range of non-military strategies to compete for control over the South China Sea (SCS). At the Second Thomas Shoal blockade and the Iroquois Reef transformation, the Chinese Maritime Militia (CMM)—organized within the largest fishing fleet in the world—played a key role. Thousands of civilian crews are officially part of the PRC’s militia system and trained to support the PRC’s maritime interests. The CMM exploited the other SCS actor’s lack of effective countermeasures below the threshold of armed conflict by utilizing its vast numbers and ambiguous character.

This thesis argues that the PRC’s maritime coercive strategy is effective because the CMM generally, and over the long term, encounters no significant local escalation (the interaction of tactical actions between the threat and response locally at sea) and thus no strategic escalation (the application of the national tools of state power). The net result is a relatively unhampered, successful militia campaign that allows the PRC to achieve strategic effects at low costs, gradually realizing its political objectives.

Within the escalation process, the interaction between local and strategic escalation is a key element that influences the coercive effects of maritime irregular threats. Local escalation can lead to strategic escalation. Subsequently, strategic escalation can provide tactical sea level actions with a strategic effect. Local escalation thus seems to form a vital link between maritime escalation and coercion. The relationship between escalation and coercion is illustrated in the conceptual model (Figure 1).

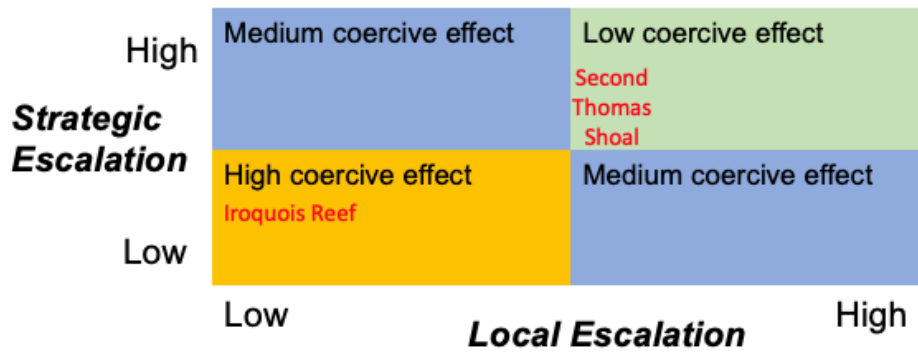


Figure 1. Escalation–Coercion Matrix

The thesis used the methodology of qualitative research design with comparative (or multiple) case study to identify the differences and similarities between the CMM actions. Data collection included desk research (i.e., literature review, websites, government publications) and field research in Japan and the Philippines (i.e., semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with subject matter experts). The field research offered a unique opportunity to collect data about recent CMM activities from primary sources. All the data was processed using qualitative research analysis.

Applying the conceptual model to two case studies in the SCS in 2023, the Second Thomas Shoal blockade and the Iroquois Reef transformation, proved that the conceptual model is a suitable theoretical representation of the complex reality of escalation and coercion. The case study results largely align with the presumed relationship between local escalation, strategic escalation, and coercive effects (see Figure).

The findings suggest that local escalation can lead to strategic escalation, which consequently can reinforce tactical actions to gain strategic meaning. More specifically, there is a strong indication that moderate local escalation is mainly beneficial for enabling sufficient strategic escalation. At the Second Thomas Shoal crisis, Philippine captains’ local resistance was supported by strategic informational and diplomatic escalation, thereby reinforcing the Philippine tactical actions at sea. Conversely, low local escalation seems insufficient to trigger strategic escalation. At Iroquois Reef, the Philippines accepted increased PRC force presence and coral reef destruction. This absence of tactical action

implied an absence of occasions to exploit at the strategic level. Although the Philippines attempted diplomatic and informational strategic escalation, it failed to gain momentum and achieve a strategic effect.

The findings also provide insights into potential strategic response options within the intervention in the escalation process to reduce the effectiveness of the PRC's maritime coercive campaign. The Iroquois Reef analysis showed that isolated strategic escalation (i.e., applying the diplomatic and informational instruments of state power without any tactical actions at sea level) will likely not reduce coercive effects. The Second Thomas Shoal findings revealed that strategic escalation is optimally executed by persistent and moderate local escalation with small steps between accepting and escalating, combined with a high strategic escalation in the information domain to accelerate diplomatic, public, and military support. At the Second Thomas Shoal crisis, Philippine auxiliary vessel captains escalated locally with small steps by resisting PRC water cannons and outmaneuvering PRC attempts to cause collisions. The Philippine authorities achieved high strategic escalation by revealing PRC aggression to the domestic and international public while simultaneously escalating diplomatically by garnering support from allies and isolating the PRC in their territorial claims.

In other words, when confronted with coercion at sea, strategists and practitioners should consider combining two options: local escalation with small steps and strategic escalation. Just as the adversary can threaten below the threshold, so can the threatened actor respond below the threshold. Doing nothing or only choosing one escalation form will probably not achieve the optimal results.

Extrapolating the findings, Western nations or their allies could potentially reduce similar non-military maritime threats in other geographic regions, such as the North Sea, the Baltic Sea, or the Arctic, thereby strengthening the Western position in long-term competition with adversaries in the maritime domain. The melting Arctic icecap could soon provide the conditions for other territorial grabs, including resource-rich areas, where states may avoid military escalation by competing below the threshold of armed conflict using ambiguous maritime threats at the sea level combined with the instruments of state power at the strategic level.

To counter these future ambiguous maritime threats, Western countries should prepare the capability to conduct local escalation with small steps and high strategic escalation. Local escalation with small steps requires capabilities that can stay below the threshold of armed conflict—not by accepting or conceding, but by actions such as resistance or a similar tit-for-tat response. In other words, Western nations should develop a scalable maritime response model. For example, resilient commercial vessels should be able to resist foreign coercive actions. Likewise, non-escalatory units, such as coast guards (or perhaps even newly designed ambiguous governmental maritime assistance vessels), should be able to support national interests at sea. These new capabilities will fill the current response gap between doing nothing and escalating.

Besides the response capability at sea, Western countries should enhance their interoperability between the local and strategic levels. States should be able to respond adequately with the diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments of power to support tactical events at sea. This requires established protocols, procedures, and networks to respond swiftly. Furthermore, these measures should be scalable to switch from low to high strategic escalation. Lastly, these measures should be fully interoperable with the tactical actions at sea, requiring high interoperability between public and private authorities. Only when local and strategic escalation form a calibrated interaction can threatened actors at sea resist and, in *optima forma*, exploit local events or crises at sea.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the Department of Defense Analysis professors for providing the academic building blocks that finally resulted in this thesis. I am especially thankful to Dr. Ben Gans for offering this unique research opportunity and his excellent supervision. I also thank Dr. Tommy Jamison for supporting this research and challenging current thoughts.

Most importantly, I am grateful to my wife and daughters, who joined me on this family adventure and supported me in the academic challenges. I hope this period in California has also brought you experiences to further build on in life.



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# I. INTRODUCTION

## A. PROBLEM

On March 7, 2021, around 220 Chinese fishing vessels anchored at the Whitsun Reef, a sizeable shallow coral region within the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The ships remained there for several weeks. Manila interpreted the presence as “threatening” to Philippine territory but did not escalate locally with tactical actions to remove the vessels.<sup>1</sup> The People’s Republic of China (PRC) justified the fishing vessels as “simply escaping rough seas.”<sup>2</sup> During the diplomatic escalation that followed, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan “underscored that the United States stands with our Philippine allies in upholding the rules-based international maritime order.”<sup>3</sup> Chinese presence fluctuated after the initial anchoring; however, concerns still existed about ensuing PRC strategic intentions of another “territorial grab.”<sup>4</sup> Despite the absence of escalation at sea, the heightened tensions, including the involvement of the United States, and the ensuing concerns show the destabilizing risk of these types of ambiguous PRC threats. Although the Whitsun Reef incident is not a classic territorial seizure, it exemplifies how the PRC uses maritime coercion to accept its political territorial claims in the South China Sea (SCS). Either way, it comes with the same escalation risks and coercive effects.

As the example illustrates, the PRC is increasing its maritime dominance with a wide range of military and non-military strategies, utilizing all instruments of national power. Within this comprehensive approach, the Chinese Maritime Militia (CMM)—

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<sup>1</sup> Brad Lendon, “Beijing Has a Navy It Doesn’t Even Admit Exists, Experts Say. And It’s Swarming Parts of the South China Sea,” CNN, April 13, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/12/china/china-maritime-militia-explainer-intl-hnk-ml-dst/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Lendon.

<sup>3</sup> The White House, “Statement by National Security Council Spokesperson Emily Horne on National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan’s Call with National Security Advisor Hermogenes Esperon of the Philippines,” April 1, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/31/statement-by-national-security-council-spokesperson-emily-horne-on-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivans-call-with-national-security-advisor-hermogenes-esperon-of-the-philippines/>.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Heijmans, “China Accused of Fresh Territorial Grab in South China Sea,” Bloomberg, December 20, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-12-20/china-accused-of-building-on-unoccupied-reefs-in-south-china-sea>.

organized within the largest fishing fleet in the world—plays a key role. The CMM, also known as the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM), is structured and directed by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).<sup>5</sup> Over the last decade, the maritime militia was involved in several territorial disputes in the SCS and East China Sea (ECS), such as those in the Spratly and Senkaku Islands. In 2021, the U.S. Department of Defense reported to Congress: “The PAFMM has played significant roles in a number of military campaigns and coercive incidents over the years.”<sup>6</sup> In sum, China uses the CMM to improve its position in the competition for maritime dominance.

Currently, the PRC exploits a gap in Western response options. In 1999, Liang Qiao and Xiangsui Wang, two PLA colonels, provided a unique insight into the PRC’s way of thinking in their book, *Unrestricted Warfare*.<sup>7</sup> The authors highlighted how to avoid Western military superiority and armed conflict.<sup>8</sup> In the following two decades, Qiao and Wang’s operational concepts proliferated in the Indo-Pacific. The PRC used the maritime militia as one of its primary tools in the maritime domain, exploiting its long tradition of militarizing civilian actors.<sup>9</sup> The CMM thereby took advantage of the exposed gap between PRC and Western differences in military and nonmilitary capabilities.

This thesis aims to bridge this gap by improving the understanding of the CMM’s role in escalation and coercion and by developing a theoretical model showing where practitioners can influence the relationship between maritime escalation and coercion. Extrapolating these findings, Western nations or allies could potentially reduce similar

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<sup>5</sup> Conor M. Kennedy and Andrew S. Erickson, *China’s Third Sea Force, the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia: Tethered to the PLA*, China Maritime Report 1 (Newport, RI: China Maritime Studies Institute, U.S. Naval War College, 2017), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2021* (Washington, DC: Federal Information & News Dispatch, 2021), 94, ProQuest.

<sup>7</sup> Liang Qiao and Xiangsui Wang, *Un-Restricted Warfare* (Brattleboro, VT: Echo Point Books & Media, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Qiao and Wang, xxi–xxii, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Philip A. Kuhn, *Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China: Militarization and Social Structure, 1796–1864*, Harvard East Asian Series 49 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 190–92; Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments*, 34.

non-military maritime threats in other geographic regions, thereby improving the Western position in long-term competition with adversaries in the maritime domain.

## **B. RESEARCH QUESTION**

The central problem is that the PRC's maritime coercive strategy is effective due to its use of the CMM below the threshold of armed conflict. Furthermore, because there is no significant local escalation, and thereby no strategic escalation, the PRC achieves strategic effects at low costs, gradually realizing its political objectives. The result is a relatively unhampered, successful coercive militia campaign. Against this background, the main research question in this study is:

*How can the relationship between the escalation process and coercive effects achieved by the CMM in the PRC's irregular maritime campaign be explained?*

This thesis indicates that the interaction between local escalation at sea and strategic escalation with the national tools of state power is a key element that influences the coercive effects of irregular threats in the maritime domain. Within this interaction, local escalation can lead to strategic escalation. Subsequently, strategic escalation can provide tactical actions with a strategic effect. Local escalation seems to form a vital link between maritime escalation and coercion.

## **C. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Chapter II provides an in-depth review of the scholarly literature, but the major findings are presented in this section. Two groups of authors can be identified in the existing literature on the PRC's maritime militia: those focused on the CMM threat and those focused on the risk of escalation. Both groups are comprised of academics, military, and security experts.

The first group focused mainly on the threat as a capability and less on the intention and credibility requirements.<sup>10</sup> This results in an incomplete understanding of the actual threat. The authors also focused mainly on conventional policy recommendations and less on irregular warfare or special operations. Additionally, there is a time gap from 2019 onward. The second group of authors examined the PRC's strategic concepts of escalation and risk avoidance.<sup>11</sup> However, they did not review the low technological, ambiguous threats within the broader escalation strategy. This is remarkable because PRC doctrine states that escalation or "war control" focuses "on comprehensive victory in multiple fields, and coordinate [s] and support [s] military and political, economic, diplomatic, and public opinion struggles."<sup>12</sup> The West seemingly competes with an adversary who coordinates

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<sup>10</sup> Jeff Himmelman, "A Game of Shark and Minnow," *New York Times*, October 24, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/newsgraphics/2013/10/27/south-china-sea/index.html>; Andrew S. Erickson and Ryan D. Martinson, eds., *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019); Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy*, 2nd ed. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018); Michael A. McDevitt, *China as a Twenty-First-Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2020); Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments*; Austin Carson and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "Covert Communication: The Intelligibility and Credibility of Signalling in Secret," *Security Studies* 26, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 124–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1243921>; Jane Vaynman and Tristan A. Volpe, "Dual Use Deception: How Technology Shapes Cooperation in International Relations," *International Organization* 77, no. 3 (June 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Department of Defense, *Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2022), <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Oct/02/2002510472/-1/-1/0/Irregular-Warfare-Annex-to-the-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.PDF>; Molly Dunigan et al., *Characterizing and Exploring the Implications of Maritime Irregular Warfare* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2012), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg1127navy.9>; David Knoll, Kevin Pollpeter, and Sam Plapinger, "China's Irregular Approach to War: The Myth of a Purely Conventional Future Fight," *Modern War Institute*, April 27, 2021, <https://mwi.usma.edu/chinas-irregular-approach-to-war-the-myth-of-a-purely-conventional-future-fight/>; Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, Veritas Paperbacks (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300253481>; Alison A. Kaufman and Daniel M. Hartnett, *Managing Conflict: Examining Recent PLA Writings on Escalation Control* (Arlington, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, 2016), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/AD1005033>; Forrest E. Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, July 8, 2008), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG614.html>; David Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Seth G. Jones, *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021); Ian Bowers, "Escalation at Sea: Stability and Instability in Maritime East Asia," *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 4 (2018): 45–66, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26607089>; James Black et al., *Multi-Domain Integration in Defence: Conceptual Approaches and Lessons from Russia, China, Iran and North Korea* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2022), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA528-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA528-1.html).

<sup>12</sup> China Aerospace Studies Institute, *Science of Military Strategy (2020)*, trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute (Montgomery, AL: Air University, 2022), 248.

escalation with the instruments of national power, but it does not have a thorough theory for understanding this interaction.

Overall, the literature does not provide a clear understanding of the entire escalation process, starting with the initial threat and followed by local escalation, the role of external support in the escalation, and finally, the strategic escalation on a national level. In other words, the literature reveals a need for a deeper understanding of the relationship between local and strategic escalation.

#### **D. RESEARCH APPROACH**

The thesis used the methodology of qualitative research design with comparative (or multiple) case study to identify the differences and similarities between the CMM actions.<sup>13</sup> Chapter IV provides a detailed description of this specific research methodology, but the key aspects of the research are outlined here.

Data collection included desk research (i.e., literature review, websites, government publications) and field research (i.e., interviews). The literature review provided the theoretical framework to understand all key aspects of the relationship between escalation and coercion. Field research in Japan and the Philippines offered a unique opportunity to collect data from primary sources about recent CMM activities. This data was used to understand escalation and the recent incidents in the SCS. Finally, further desk research completed the case studies by analyzing several incidents in the SCS. All of the data was processed using qualitative research analysis.

The research examined the CMM under diverse conditions and variables to compare the cases. The study initially focused on the recent period of 2020–2023 (refer to the identified gaps in the Literature Review) but narrowed the scope to just 2023 during the research. The case studies were selected based on differences in local escalation, strategic escalation, and coercive effects. Variation in local escalation was ensured by selecting incidents with both low and high tactical responses toward the initial threat. Differences in strategic escalation were guaranteed by selecting cases with significantly

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<sup>13</sup> Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 5th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014), 46.

different responses to the instruments of national power. Lastly, a further distinction was made by selecting cases with different outcomes or coercive effects. All variables and various outcomes eventually ensured appropriate conditions to analyze their causal relationship.

## E. ROADMAP

The remainder of this thesis is organized as follows: After this introduction, Chapter II introduces the theoretical framework to understand the aspects of the relationship between escalation and coercion. Chapter III presents the conceptual model and explains how to interpret and apply the model to analyze the escalation process and the coercive effects. Chapter IV describes the research methodology, including an overview of the field research and the data collection, analysis, and interpretation steps. Chapter V provides the background information about the CMM and the SCS necessary to understand the case study. Chapter VI explains local and strategic escalation between the Philippines and the PRC in the SCS. Chapter VII applies the conceptual model and presents the case studies of the Second Thomas Shoal and Iroquois Reef crises, including a cross-case analysis. Finally, Chapter VIII concludes with the key findings and recommendations. Figure 1 provides an overview of the thesis roadmap.

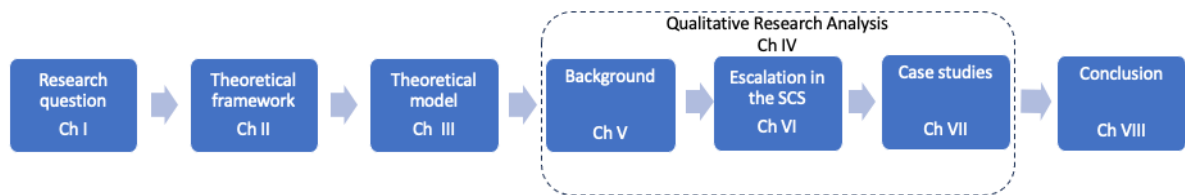


Figure 1. Thesis Organization

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a literature review of the key themes surrounding the PRC’s coercive maritime militia campaign and provides the theoretical framework for the conceptual escalation–coercion model. The literature review shows how the CMM threat is a form of maritime irregular warfare and part of the escalation process that leads to coercive effects.

The literature review follows the four elements or constructs of the theoretical model: a) threat, b) maritime irregular warfare, c) escalation, and d) coercive effects. Section A argues that a threat not only consists of capability but must also be understood in combination with intent and credibility. Section B shows that the CMM threat is part of the larger phenomenon of maritime irregular warfare. Section C reveals that escalation is well understood on the strategic level but less on the tactical level, where the CMM forms the initial threat. Section D explains that a tactical threat can lead to a strategic effect in coercion. Overall, each section presents the necessary knowledge of each construct and shows how this thesis contributes to the existing literature. Finally, the closing section offers the theoretical framework showing each construct’s key components and utility.

### A. THREAT

The first construct is the “threat,” which forms the initial building block of the escalation process. The CMM’s ambiguous character leads to different views on this capability. Some authors see the CMM as a part of the PRC’s overall maritime strategy, while others view it based on its specific characteristics. This thesis considers the CMM through the lens of a threat and builds on Schelling’s definition of a threat: to “persuade” someone with “the power to hurt.”<sup>14</sup>

States or actors use the threat of force to influence potential adversaries’ behavior. U.S. doctrine describes two types of warfare, traditional and irregular, and recognizes

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<sup>14</sup> Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 2, 3.



nuclear forces as a deterrent capability.<sup>15</sup> Although warfare must be seen “as a whole,”<sup>16</sup> conventional warfare is characterized as a violent conflict between nation states, and irregular warfare is seen as “indirect, non-attributable, or asymmetric activities” to avoid superior military power.<sup>17</sup> This thesis focuses on the threat posed by irregular forces, specifically the CMM threat.

## 1. Perspectives on the CMM Threat

In 2013, *New York Times* reporter Jeff Himmelman gave a vivid early description of the CMM threat.<sup>18</sup> Himmelman conducted an extensive field visit to some of the outposts in the SCS to research the daily life and experiences of the men at sea, providing insight into how these men experienced the PRC’s “cabbage strategy” of “surrounding a contested area with so many boats — fishermen, fishing administration ships, marine surveillance ships, navy warships.”<sup>19</sup> He also interviewed regional authorities and described their struggle with the CMM threat. Himmelman’s report is valuable because it gives insight into the ground truth. This early media attention also shows that the CMM does not require secrecy; even with attribution, the CMM can remain out of the range of effective countermeasures.

Editors Andrew Erickson and Ryan Martinson provide a more recent and academic analysis of the CMM in *China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations*.<sup>20</sup> This volume presents a collection of expert studies on PRC gray zone strategy and focuses on the PRC’s two main para-naval forces: the maritime militia and the coast guard. The authors explain the organization, mission, and force structure of these forces and their role in “peacetime and

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<sup>15</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, JP 1 (Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2017), I–11, <https://www.jcs.mil/Doctrine/Joint-Doctrine-Pubs/>.

<sup>16</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, I–5, I–6.

<sup>17</sup> Catherine A. Theohary, *Defense Primer: What Is Irregular Warfare?*, CRS Report No. IF12565 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2024), <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/IF12565.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Himmelman, “A Game of Shark.”

<sup>19</sup> Himmelman.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew S Erickson, *Maritime Gray Zone Operations: Challenges and Countermeasures in the Indo-Pacific*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003310723>.

wartime contingencies.”<sup>21</sup> Michael Mazarr’s contribution to *China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations* is particularly valuable because he proposes options for deterring PRC coercion.<sup>22</sup> The volume concludes with more policy challenges in which the editors recommend “a more direct role for American sea power ... to prevent China from advancing in the gray zone” and countermeasures, such as more escorts, joint exercises and support arrests.<sup>23</sup> To my knowledge, this book offers one of the most detailed descriptions of the CMM.

Other broad examinations of PRC maritime ambitions and capabilities are given by Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes in *Red Star over the Pacific*<sup>24</sup> and Michael McDevitt in *China as a Twenty-First-Century Naval Power*.<sup>25</sup> Both explore the rise of the PRC’s maritime power and explain President Xi’s determination to become a “world-class navy”<sup>26</sup> and “what the Chinese Dream means for Chinese maritime strategy.”<sup>27</sup> McDevitt considers PRC naval power to be the sum of “comprehensive maritime power—navy, coast guard, militia, merchant marine, port infrastructure, shipbuilding, fishing.”<sup>28</sup> Yoshihara and Holmes describe the maritime militia as part of “Beijing’s holistic approach to nautical affairs.”<sup>29</sup> Although these authors mainly focus on classical naval power, they recognize the role of the CMM in PRC maritime strategy, not as a singular, independent phenomenon. They show that the CMM is an element of the PRC’s wide-ranging maritime power.

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<sup>21</sup> Erickson and Martinson, *China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Mazarr, “The Role of Deterrence in Responding to Chinese Gray Zone Campaigns,” in *China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, ed. Ryan D. Martinson and Andrew S. Erickson (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019), 253–80.

<sup>23</sup> Erickson and Martinson, *China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, 10, 297.

<sup>24</sup> Yoshihara and Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific*.

<sup>25</sup> McDevitt, *China as a Twenty-First-Century Naval Power*.

<sup>26</sup> McDevitt, x.

<sup>27</sup> Yoshihara and Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific*, 1.

<sup>28</sup> McDevitt, *China as a Twenty-First-Century Naval Power*, 176.

<sup>29</sup> Yoshihara and Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific*, 17.

The Department of Defense’s 2021 Annual Report to Congress offers another assessment of the CMM within the PRC’s “military and security developments.”<sup>30</sup> The authors highlight the importance of the PRC’s Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) and explicitly mention the CMM.<sup>31</sup> The report warns that “the PRC’s paramilitary forces continue to grow in scale and sophistication, including the coordination between the PLAN [People’s Liberation Army Navy], the CCG [Chinese Coast Guard], and the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM).”<sup>32</sup> The report shows that the PRC is expanding its irregular approach and strategy to achieve its national interest—with a specific role for the CMM.

Ambiguous threats like the CMM are also examined from alternative perspectives. Political scientists Austin Carson and Keren Yarhi-Milo argue that states “used covert action to send signals of resolve” and discussed whether “such messages [are] intelligible and credible to signal receivers.”<sup>33</sup> The central idea is the use of ambiguity to signal messages. Although the maritime militia is not strictly a covert operation, it does share the same characteristics, such as a high level of ambiguity and the problem of attribution. Similar to covert signaling, ambiguity also plays an important role in Jane Vaynman and Tristan Volpe’s research on dual-use technology.<sup>34</sup> This research recognized the recent shift in dual-use civilian ships for “military purposes” and specifically referred to the CMM.<sup>35</sup> Both studies are valuable because they broaden the view on CMM objectives and effects.

## 2. Sub-Conclusion

This first group of authors focused on the threat of the CMM. The literature covers the knowledge spectrum of the militia’s capabilities, ranging from current to future, and from Congressional reports to ground truth. However, through the lens of coercion,

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<sup>30</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments*.

<sup>31</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, 7.

<sup>32</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, 90.

<sup>33</sup> Carson and Yarhi-Milo, “Covert Communication,” 154.

<sup>34</sup> Vaynman and Volpe, “Dual Use Deception: How Technology Shapes Cooperation in International Relations.”

<sup>35</sup> Vaynman and Volpe, 82–83.

capability does not equal threat. Thomas Schelling explains, “It is tradition in military planning to attend to an enemy’s capabilities, not his intentions. But deterrence is about intentions.”<sup>36</sup> This first group of authors described the threat mainly as the capability and focused less on the intention. Another critical requirement is that a threat must be credible.<sup>37</sup> Although the authors warned of the threat, they didn’t explain why the CMM threat is perceived as credible. So, to truly understand the coercive power of the CMM, all of the elements of an effective threat—not only capability but also intentions and actions—must be fully examined.

Another observation is that a few experts with a conventional approach to the CMM challenge dominate the literature. A significant part of the CMM academic literature is written by the same scholars: Erickson, Martinson, and Kennedy.<sup>38</sup> Although these authors must be lauded for their considerable contribution to the current knowledge, a closer assessment of the recommendations shows a focus on American conventional naval operations, such as escorting, presence, control, and demonstrations.<sup>39</sup> The role of maritime special operations forces is absent in the literature. Furthermore, *China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations* can be seen as the culmination of knowledge up to 2019, in which the editors collected and updated most of the existing literature and reports up to that point in time.<sup>40</sup> Hence, studying the period after 2019 is important to understand the contemporary situation better.

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<sup>36</sup> Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 35.

<sup>37</sup> Tami Davis Biddle, “Coercion Theory: A Basic Introduction for Practitioners,” *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 104.

<sup>38</sup> Erickson, *Maritime Gray Zone Operations*; Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy, *China’s Maritime Militia* (Arlington, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, 2016), [https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA\\_Files/pdf/chinas-maritime-militia.pdf](https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/chinas-maritime-militia.pdf); Kennedy and Erickson, *China’s Third Sea Force*; Ryan D. Martinson, *China Maritime Report No. 2: The Arming of China’s Maritime Frontier* (Newport, RI: China Maritime Studies Institute, U.S. Naval War College, 2017); Erickson and Martinson, *China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations*.

<sup>39</sup> Erickson and Martinson, *China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, 297.

<sup>40</sup> Erickson and Martinson, *China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations*.

## **B. MARITIME IRREGULAR WARFARE**

Maritime irregular warfare involves “at least one irregular actor or tactic that aims to shape the maritime environment”<sup>41</sup> and forms the second construct of the theoretical framework. As mentioned, one of the challenges of understanding irregular threats is their ambiguous character. The theory of irregular warfare helps to recognize the different forms of ambiguous threats and their driving factors. This section therefore focuses on the key elements of irregular warfare in the maritime domain, including the definitions, concepts, forces, crucial interactions, and various actors involved.

### **1. Irregular Warfare**

Irregular warfare is difficult to define because irregular warfare evolves, and any strict definition entails the risk of excluding irregular threats. The 2020 U.S. National Defense Strategy (NDS) defined irregular warfare as “a struggle among state and non-state actors to influence populations and affect legitimacy,” with an indirect approach as a key characteristic.<sup>42</sup> The specific irregular warfare annex to the NDS showed the renewed importance of irregular warfare in the current strategic competition. Recently, the irregular warfare definition was updated again to “a form of warfare where states and non-state actors campaign to assure or coerce states or other groups through indirect, non-attributable, or asymmetric activities.”<sup>43</sup> The changing definitions illustrate irregular warfare’s evolving character from terrorists’ threat during the Global War on Terror (GWOT) to nation-state competitors challenging international security.<sup>44</sup>

It is important to note that irregular warfare is a Western and not a universal definition. Irregular warfare seems to be an integrated part of PRC warfare because PRC military doctrine lacks a clear definition of irregular warfare.<sup>45</sup> In other words, the PRC

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<sup>41</sup> Dunigan et al., *Characterizing and Exploring the Implications*, 14.

<sup>42</sup> Department of Defense, *Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex*, 2.

<sup>43</sup> Theohary, *Defense Primer: What Is Irregular Warfare?*

<sup>44</sup> Department of Defense, *Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex*, 1.

<sup>45</sup> Knoll, Pollpeter, and Plapinger, “China’s Irregular Approach to War”; China Aerospace Studies Institute, *Science of Military Strategy* (2020).

does not recognize irregular warfare as a separate way of warfare. PLA Colonels Qiao and Wang neither mentioned irregular warfare but used unrestricted warfare to define non-traditional warfare. They argued that war would no longer be fought by an “armed force to compel the enemy” but by “all means, ... military and non-military.”<sup>46</sup> Future war would include all aspects of society, such as trade, financial, ecological, psychological, smuggling, media, drugs, networks, fabrications, resources, cultural, and international law warfare.<sup>47</sup>

Two Western political scientists recently illustrated the contrary view between the West and the PRC.<sup>48</sup> In 2020, David Kilcullen analyzed the operationalization of Qiao and Wang’s strategic thoughts. Kilcullen introduced *conceptual development* to point out “the situation in which an adversary’s concept of war becomes so much broader than our own.”<sup>49</sup> Seth Jones had a similar message. He explained how *Three Dangerous Men* in the PRC, Russia, and Iran challenged the United States with an irregular strategy.<sup>50</sup> Jones reframed the current competition as irregular warfare in which states compete for power and influence.

Despite introducing their own terminology, both Eastern and Western authors acknowledge the widening of the definition of war to counter military superiority. Furthermore, the authors described how irregular warfare exploits the conceptual gaps in modern warfare by avoiding strength and confrontation.

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<sup>46</sup> Qiao and Wang, *Un-Restricted Warfare*, xxi–xxii.

<sup>47</sup> Qiao and Wang, 38–43.

<sup>48</sup> Ruud van den Bosch, “Review of *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran and the Rise of Irregular Warfare*, by Seth G. Jones,” *Militaire Spectator* 192, no. 9 (July 24, 2023): 446–47, <https://militairespectator.nl/artikelen/three-dangerous-men>.

<sup>49</sup> Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes*, 175.

<sup>50</sup> Jones, *Three Dangerous Men*.

## 2. Maritime Irregular Warfare

Unlike irregular warfare or conventional naval power, maritime irregular warfare is an underexplored topic in military theory.<sup>51</sup> The existing literature shows that it has been studied, although not extensively. Several attempts have been made to define maritime irregular warfare; the findings do not provide a watertight solution but do offer a useful framework for a better understanding of the term.

A study that did focus on the maritime aspect is the 2012 RAND report *What is Maritime Irregular Warfare?*<sup>52</sup> This report analyzed eight historical case studies of maritime irregular warfare to “contribute to filling the void of information on maritime activities in IW [irregular warfare].”<sup>53</sup> The authors showed that *both* irregular and conventional forces employ *both* irregular and conventional operations against *both* irregular and conventional adversaries. In short, the authors identified three irregular factors: forces, activities, and adversaries. Any combination of one of these irregular factors leads to the definition of maritime irregular warfare. Based on this analysis, RAND defined maritime irregular warfare as “operations involving at least one irregular actor or tactic that aim to shape the maritime environment.”<sup>54</sup> This thesis uses this definition of maritime irregular warfare.

A further illustration of irregular forces helps to recognize maritime irregular warfare better. Researchers from the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) provided a suitable framework by dividing irregular warfare activities into five types of forces: regular, irregular, special operations, proxy, and third-party participation.<sup>55</sup> According to the authors, irregular forces are “armed forces [that] are not part of a state’s officially

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<sup>51</sup> Matthew Hughes and William James Philpott, eds., *Palgrave Advances in Modern Military History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 173; Dunigan et al., *Characterizing and Exploring the Implications*, 5, 10.

<sup>52</sup> Dunigan et al., *Characterizing and Exploring the Implications*.

<sup>53</sup> Dunigan et al., 10.

<sup>54</sup> Dunigan et al., 14.

<sup>55</sup> Knoll, Pollpeter, and Plapinger, “China’s Irregular Approach to War.”

recognized military, and include militias, partisans, and private military contractors.”<sup>56</sup> Although this definition is not inclusive—for example, what about non-armed vessels conducting harassment or reconnaissance?—it contributes to a better understanding of irregular forces.

### 3. Strategic Interaction

A last distinguishing approach to irregular warfare is the interaction of irregular warfare with other critical factors. A debate among the scholars Andrew Mack, Ivan Arreguín-Toft, and Jeffrey Record provides three noteworthy angles on irregular warfare: interests, opposing strategies, and third-party actors.

Mack provided the first angle in his article “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars” from 1975.<sup>57</sup> In this assessment, Mack argued that multiple interests result in a greater political vulnerability, and a superior will to fight can compensate for inferior military power.<sup>58</sup> In essence, Mack’s theory concerns interests and the will to fight. The actor with the highest interests has the strongest will to fight and thus less political vulnerability, which results in a higher chance of victory. Similar to Schelling, Mack suggests that military capability does not equal effect. Prevailing in conflict takes resolve and the will to endure costs. This reasoning provides a valuable framework to examine the main actors’ interests in a maritime dispute with irregular forces.

The second approach can be constructed from Arreguín-Toft’s theory of Strategic Interaction.<sup>59</sup> Where Mack focused on the interaction of interest, Arreguín-Toft focused on the interaction of strategies: “Strong actors will lose an asymmetric conflict when they use the wrong strategy vis-a-vis their opponents’ strategy.”<sup>60</sup> Arreguín-Toft categorized strategies into direct strategies, such as conventional warfare, and indirect strategies, such

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<sup>56</sup> Knoll, Pollpeter, and Plapinger.

<sup>57</sup> Andrew Mack, “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict,” *World Politics* 27, no. 2 (January 1975): 175–200, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009880>.

<sup>58</sup> Mack, 180–81.

<sup>59</sup> Ivan Arreguín-Toft, “How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict,” *International Security* 26, no. 1 (July 2001): 93–128, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228801753212868>.

<sup>60</sup> Arreguín-Toft, 95.



as irregular warfare. The strong actor will more likely win if confronted with a similar strategy. The weak actor will more likely succeed if he fights with a dissimilar strategy. Arreguin-Toft's strategic interaction suggests what strategy could or would not work. Countering the CMM could be seen in the interaction with an irregular maritime strategy of a strong state.

Record provided a third perspective on irregular warfare in the article "Why the Strong Lose." Record further builds on Mack's and Arreguin-Toft's theories by adding the factor of *external support*.<sup>61</sup> Record argues that the "weaker side's possession of superior will and strategy is hardly a guarantee of success" and that "substantial external assistance may be required to convert superior will and strategy into victory."<sup>62</sup> Overall, the scholarly debate between Mack, Arreguin-Toft, and Record shows that irregular warfare interacts with other factors such as national objectives and resolve, different types of military strategies, and third-party actors. Irregular warfare can therefore not be studied in isolation.

#### 4. Sub-Conclusion

The review provides three important insights. First, a maritime ambiguous threat is part of a larger phenomenon, maritime irregular warfare, which is part of comprehensive naval power specifically designed to pursue national interest. Second, irregular warfare is not a universal definition; there are different terminologies for the same theme. Third, irregular warfare interacts with other factors, such as national interests, military strategies, and third-party actors.

The literature review on maritime irregular warfare also reveals an absence of authors discussing how irregular warfare or special operations can contribute to the CMM problem. This observation is important because of the differences between conventional and special operations. The lack of an unconventional approach to the CMM problem directly relates to Arreguin-Toft's argument on the interaction between strategies. U.S. doctrine explains, "In contrast [to conventional warfare], irregular warfare focuses on the

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<sup>61</sup> Jeffrey Record, "Why the Strong Lose," *Parameters* 35, no. 4 (November 1, 2005): 16–31, <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.2281>.

<sup>62</sup> Record, 22.

control or influence of populations, not on the control of an adversary's forces or territory.”<sup>63</sup> And according to Gray, special operations differ from conventional warfare because “special operations forces have as their strategic concept the conduct of small-scale, high-risk/high-payoff, unorthodox operations that are outside the bound of regular warfare.”<sup>64</sup> Thus, studying the CMM from an irregular warfare and special operations perspective provides an additional angle to consider and counter the CMM problem.

## C. ESCALATION

Escalation is the third construct of the theoretical framework and forms the link between threat and effect. Through escalation, a threat results in an effect. The literature review in this section starts with an explanation of escalation concepts and further narrows toward maritime escalation and PRC escalation theory. By funneling the perspective on escalation, we ensure a thorough understanding of the key elements of escalation. Since escalation is a central concept within coercion, Schelling is again the primary starting point for broadening one's perspective on the risk of escalation.

### 1. Escalation Theory

Schelling views escalation as the use or threat of force within “a bargaining process.”<sup>65</sup> In the bargaining process, competition is won not by “who can bring the most force to bear” but by “who is eventually willing to bring more force to bear.”<sup>66</sup> For Schelling, conflict is not about achieving military or political objectives but is a process of risk and escalation. The steps within are decided by which risk is worth taking. A key element of risk is uncertainty—“the sheer unpredictability of dangerous events.”<sup>67</sup> No event can be fully controlled. So, each step, action, or decision “could develop a

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<sup>63</sup> Department of Defense, *Irregular Warfare (IW) Joint Operating Concept (JOC), Version 1.0* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2007), 8, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA496061>.

<sup>64</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 190.

<sup>65</sup> Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 7.

<sup>66</sup> Schelling, 94.

<sup>67</sup> Schelling, 94.

momentum of its own and get out of hand.”<sup>68</sup> In Schelling’s epoch, this could eventually mean nuclear war. Schelling describes three strategies for manipulating risks: manipulating shared risk (brinkmanship), generating risk (rocking the boat), and raising uncertainty.<sup>69</sup> These techniques are helpful when analyzing the CMM and for developing response options.

Parallel to Schelling’s early thoughts in the 1960s, RAND provides a more modern view on escalation types in the report *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century*.<sup>70</sup> This report explains that, in comparison with the bipolar Cold War, the current multipolar world leads to different types of escalation: deliberate, inadvertent, and accidental. In this categorization, combatants can deliberately escalate, escalation can occur by accident, or in the case of inadvertent escalation, escalation is set off by actions that an actor “does not perceive to be escalatory but are interpreted that way by the enemy.”<sup>71</sup> In essence, the key concepts of escalation, such as risk, costs, thresholds, and uncertainty, haven’t changed since Schelling. RAND only expanded and updated the theory with the escalation types.

David Kilcullen provides a useful conceptual framework for the different thresholds in conflicts. In *The Dragons and the Snakes*, Kilcullen introduced “the theory of liminal warfare,” dividing conflict into detection, attribution, and response thresholds, in which activities range from clandestine, covert, ambiguous, and overt operations.<sup>72</sup> Although this model focused on Russian operations, it is just as relevant for other ambiguous operations, such as those conducted by the CMM. Kilcullen’s model is useful because it clearly categorizes actions between the different thresholds. This categorization enables theorists and practitioners to define non-conventional threats quickly.

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<sup>68</sup> Schelling, 94.

<sup>69</sup> Schelling, 94–107.

<sup>70</sup> Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*.

<sup>71</sup> Morgan et al., vii–ix.

<sup>72</sup> Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes*, 152.

## 2. Maritime Escalation

Escalation can be further specified toward the maritime domain. The limited literature on the subject argues that maritime escalation has specific characteristics and is more controllable than land escalation. Sara Mitchell studied why nations disagree over maritime claims and which disputes tend to militarize.<sup>73</sup> Mitchell concludes that “conflict is more likely when multiple issues are contested and when revisionist states seeking to change the maritime status quo possess naval capabilities.”<sup>74</sup> This study is noteworthy because it gives insights into the factors that increase the risk of maritime escalation. Moreover, the PRC’s SCS situation aligns with Mitchell’s factors of increased escalation risks.

Ian Bowers provided another specific view on maritime escalation with the appropriate title “Escalation at Sea.” He argues that “low-level instability is to be expected ... ; however, sustained escalatory cycles are unlikely because of the characteristics of the maritime strategic environment.”<sup>75</sup> According to Bowers, the characteristics of the maritime domain, such as response speed and fast attribution, reduce the potential for escalation.<sup>76</sup> On the one hand, Bowers’ argument supports the initial hypothesis of this thesis that the CMM is effective because there is no significant escalation. On the other hand, Bowers does not explain how the absence of escalation leads to strategic effects.

## 3. PRC Escalation

Scholars still debate how the PRC and the PLA deal with escalation. Kaufman and Hartnett explained the PRC’s perspective on strategy and risk management. They analyzed how the PLA managed conflict and identified the middle stage in the PLA conflict continuum as “the most potentially dangerous.”<sup>77</sup> This “quasi-war” has features of peace

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<sup>73</sup> Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, “Clashes at Sea: Explaining the Onset, Militarization, and Resolution of Diplomatic Maritime Claims,” *Security Studies* 29, no. 4 (August 7, 2020): 637–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2020.1811458>.

<sup>74</sup> Mitchell, 640.

<sup>75</sup> Bowers, “Escalation at Sea,” 45.

<sup>76</sup> Bowers, 45.

<sup>77</sup> Kaufman and Hartnett, *Managing Conflict*, iv.

and war. Even if war has not broken out yet, combat operations are possible. It is uncertain if the maritime militia operates along these doctrinal principles because Kaufman and Hartnett concluded that it is even unsure if the PLA “internalized or operationalized” these views on escalation.<sup>78</sup>

The RAND cooperation provides additional perspectives on PRC escalation and risk management. One report that applies the multi-domain integration (MDI) theory argues that the PRC views the current competition “as a multi-domain confrontation ..., but China seeks to avoid needing to fight openly by integrating all levers of power to gain dominance in the competition phase.”<sup>79</sup> Based on the authoritative PRC doctrine *Science of Military Strategy*, another RAND report explains that the PRC sees escalation as “a trinity of related concepts: (1) deterrence, (2) escalation and war control, and (3) war termination.”<sup>80</sup> Escalation and war control must be considered with deterrence and war termination. Both reports raise an interesting point: the PRC aims to avoid open conflict that will lead to war (“war control”);<sup>81</sup> instead, the PRC competes with the diplomatic, economic, and informational instruments of state power.<sup>82</sup>

#### 4. Sub-Conclusion

A closer examination of the literature on risk reveals that escalation is well understood on the strategic level but less on the tactical level with low technological means. Authors agree on strategies such as risk avoidance, point out the strategic relevance of operations below armed conflict, emphasize the importance of sophisticated technology (nuclear, cyber, artificial intelligence), and recognize the complexity of the ambiguity.<sup>83</sup> This explains that states interact with each other on a strategic level, but it does not explain

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<sup>78</sup> Kaufman and Hartnett, vi.

<sup>79</sup> Black et al., *Multi-Domain Integration in Defence*, 16.

<sup>80</sup> Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, 51.

<sup>81</sup> China Aerospace Studies Institute, *Science of Military Strategy (2020)*, 245.

<sup>82</sup> Morgan et al., “Dangerous Thresholds,” 53–54; Black et al., *Multi-Domain Integration in Defence*, 67.

<sup>83</sup> Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*; Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes*; Mitchell, “Clashes at Sea”; Bowers, “Escalation at Sea”; Kaufman and Hartnett, *Managing Conflict*; Black et al., *Multi-Domain Integration in Defence*.

the tactical role of the CMM within the strategic interaction between states. For example, neither Kilcullen nor Kaufman and Hartnett specifically mentioned the CMM. So, the literature does not provide comprehensive insight into the relationship between escalation with ambiguous tactical threats and risk management on the strategic level.

#### **D. COERCIVE EFFECTS**

The fourth and last construct, coercive effects, explores the outcomes or results of PRC coercion. Coercive actions, including coercive effects, are not clearly recognizable. Different forms of coercion may lead to different effects, and how an actor perceives a threat is not observable. The literature review in this section therefore examines the specific elements of coercion and how tactical actions could lead to strategic effects.

##### **1. Coercion**

States, or actors, use coercion in international politics to influence each other. The aim is to persuade the other to “do something it does not want to do.”<sup>84</sup> In 1966, Schelling described the concept of coercion in his book *Arms and Influence*. Schelling emphasized “the power to hurt,”<sup>85</sup> which is always in the background of diplomacy and acts as a last resort in the bargaining process between states. The power to hurt could be a threat against something the adversary values or the actual use of force.<sup>86</sup>

Coercion consists of two basic strategies: deterrence and compellence. Art and Greenhill state that deterrence is “based on the threat of retaliation that is designed to prevent a target from changing its behavior.”<sup>87</sup> Compellence is “based on hurting a target (or threatening to do so) that is designed to get a target to change its behavior.”<sup>88</sup> The key difference between deterrence and compellence can be described by looking at the status quo. Deterrence is aimed at keeping the status quo. An actor deters another actor not to act.

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<sup>84</sup> Robert J. Art and Kelly M. Greenhill, “The Power and Limits of Compellence: A Research Note,” *Political Science Quarterly* 133, no. 1 (2018): 78, <https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.12738>.

<sup>85</sup> Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 2.

<sup>86</sup> Schelling, 2.

<sup>87</sup> Art and Greenhill, “The Power and Limits of Compellence,” 85.

<sup>88</sup> Art and Greenhill, 79.

Compellence is meant to change the status quo. An actor compels another actor to change his action.

Coercive strategies can be further divided into deterrence (or compellence) by denial or punishment. Punishment is based on the perception that the “chosen course of action far outweighs the achievable potential gains.” The old NATO strategy serves as an example. NATO was unable to stop a Russian invasion of Eastern Europe, but it was able to deter Russia with the threat of severe punishment after an invasion. Denial is based on the idea that the target “will be unable to attain its political goals through force.”<sup>89</sup> The new NATO strategy of forward presence illustrates this.<sup>90</sup> The planned forces on the European borders are meant to deter a Russian attack by increasing the costs of any Russian military action.

The described concept of coercion has clear distinctions, but in reality, it is more challenging to point out the differences. For example, how a target perceives the coercer’s action is hard to determine.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, coercion can take on different forms, such as overt or covert, during war or in peace, or with military or non-military means. States use these other methods to achieve coercive effects. These applied methods are not always explicit or notable on the surface, but they can achieve coercive effects. Similarly, the CMM’s high ambiguity in appearance, actions, and effects also illustrates the diffusion of clear conceptual lines. Coercion theory thus shows general patterns such as objectives and strategies. This enables categorizing and studying the effect of the PRC’s coercive campaign. However, the ambiguous character of maritime irregular threats and variable coercion forms requires the examination of each coercive threat as it occurs individually.

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<sup>89</sup> Art and Greenhill, 85.

<sup>90</sup> Osman Bojang and John Jacobs, “Denial or Punishment?: Perspectives on the Deterrence Strategy behind NATO’s eFP in Lithuania,” *Atlantisch Perspectief* 43, no. 3 (2019): 17, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48581491>.

<sup>91</sup> Art and Greenhill, “The Power and Limits of Compellence,” 79.

## 2. Effects

The final element of the theoretical framework is understanding the relationships between actions and outcomes, tactics and strategy, or, with regard to this thesis, threats and coercive effects. Collin Gray provides a valuable view on this essential relationship in the report *Tactical Operations for Strategic Effect*.<sup>92</sup> According to Gray, there are “inherent ... differences in nature between tactics and strategy.”<sup>93</sup> Tactics and strategy are mutually exclusive. Tactics are about military action; strategy is about the consequences. Gray insists on conceptual clarity: “To repeat, everything is tactical in the doing, but strategic as a consequence of that doing, whether it is pre-planned or not.”<sup>94</sup> So, tactics can become strategic as a result of strategic effects, the same as strategy can become politics as a result of political meaning.<sup>95</sup> To further illustrate this, a mission cannot be strategic: a mission is an action and is therefore tactical. The mission may have a strategic meaning, but this meaning is a consequence of the action.

The key question is how to convert a tactical action into a strategic effect. For this study, the key question is how the relationship between escalation and effects can be explained. If a series of tactical actions form the escalation process, which leads to a strategic effect, then changing the escalation process can change the strategic effect. The change in the escalation process can thus change the effectiveness of the CMM. Ideally, the relationship between the threat and the coercive effect can be *broken*—not by preventing a physical threat, but by preventing this threat from gaining strategic effect or meaning.

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<sup>92</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Tactical Operations for Strategic Effect: The Challenge of Currency Conversion*, JSOU Special Report (Tampa, FL: Joint Special Operations University, 2015).

<sup>93</sup> Gray, 1.

<sup>94</sup> Gray, 39.

<sup>95</sup> Gray, 37, 38.



## E. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The literature review of all four constructs leads to Table 1, showing the constructs, definition, variables, and application. All of these elements are further merged in the next chapter, the Conceptual Model.

Table 1. Theoretical Framework

Construct	Definition	Variables	Application to model
Threats	To persuade someone using “the power to hurt.” <sup>96</sup>	Capability Actions Intent	-variables provide a framework to examine effective and non-effective threats
Maritime Irregular Warfare	“Operations involving at least one irregular actor or tactic that aim to shape the maritime environment.” <sup>97</sup>	Concepts Terminology Interaction – (interests, strategy, external support)	-definitions widen the model’s utility -terminology supports recognizing ambiguous threats -interaction shows factors influencing irregular warfare
Escalation	“An increase in the intensity or scope of conflict that crosses threshold(s) considered significant by one or more of the participants.” <sup>98</sup>	Steps Types Thresholds Maritime characteristics	-variables provide theoretical base for escalation model -model provides insight into relationship between variables and constructs
Effects	A consequence of a coercive action with tactical or “strategic meaning.” <sup>99</sup>	Objectives Tactical actions Strategic effects	-insight into concept of coercion -definitional and casual clarity

<sup>96</sup> Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 2, 3.

<sup>97</sup> Dunigan et al., *Characterizing and Exploring the Implications*, 14.

<sup>98</sup> Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, xi.

<sup>99</sup> Gray, *Tactical Operations for Strategic Effect*, 44.

### III. CONCEPTUAL MODEL

This chapter presents the conceptual model developed in this thesis. The sections describe the model step-by-step. First, the model is introduced with a basic description of how to interpret the matrix, including the relationship between escalation and coercion. Then, an outline follows with local and strategic escalation on the X- and Y-axis and the coercive effects in the quadrants. A short (fictive) example illustrates the application of the model. The second section describes the different strategic concepts within the model, indicating how a change in strategy can affect the coercive results.<sup>100</sup> The last section introduces two research propositions, which provide further focus for the case studies.

#### A. THE ESCALATION-COERCION MODEL

The model in Figure 2 illustrates a relationship between local and strategic escalation and the achieved coercive effects. The model assumes that CMM activities can stay beneath the escalation threshold due to the high level of ambiguity. Because there is no significant escalation, the PRC experiences low risk/costs and high benefits. This enables the PRC to achieve strategic effects that contribute to its political objectives. Applying the model to the CMM case studies provided valuable insights into the relationship between escalation and coercion and into strategic concepts to counter maritime ambiguous threats effectively.

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<sup>100</sup> Harry R. Yarger, *Strategic Theory for the 21st Century: The Little Book on Big Strategy* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2006), 69.

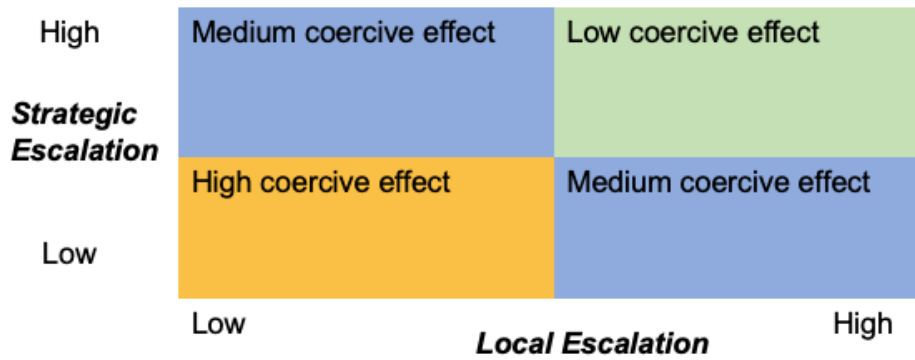


Figure 2. Escalation and Coercion Matrix

### 1. The Model Explained

A closer look at the model shows three key parts: local escalation (along the X-axis), strategic escalation (along the Y-axis), and coercive effects (in the quadrants). The X- and Y-axis are further divided into low or high escalation. The effects in the quadrant can be described as low (local) and high (strategic) coercive effects. It is important to differentiate between the types of escalation (along the axis) and the types of effect (in the quadrants). Escalations are actions; effects are the results of the actions. Lastly, escalation represents the sum of the actions of all actors; effects represent the effect of the CMM’s coercive action.

A common understanding of the model requires clarity in definitions or, as Gray stated, “conceptual clarity.”<sup>101</sup> As mentioned in Chapter II, this thesis uses RAND’s definition of escalation: “Escalation can be defined as an increase in the intensity or scope of conflict that crosses threshold(s) considered significant by one or more of the participants.”<sup>102</sup> The definitions specifying the escalation steps, such as accept/concede,

<sup>101</sup> Gray, *Tactical Operations for Strategic Effect*, 43.

<sup>102</sup> Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, xi.

resist, tit-for-tat, and escalate, are based on game theory.<sup>103</sup> Figure 3 shows the spectrum or intensity of the escalation steps.

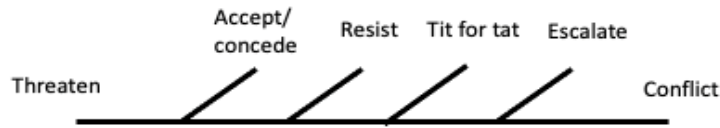


Figure 3. Escalation Ladder

## 2. Local and Strategic Escalation

The model differentiates between the definitions of local and strategic escalation. This thesis considers local escalation actions that affect the operation area, so these would be the tactical actions *at sea*. Local escalation is further divided into low and high escalation. Low local escalation occurs within the intensity range of doing nothing (concede or accept) to a tit-for-tat reaction. High escalation ranges from tit-for-tat to, following the RAND definition, a significant reaction that increases the intensity level in the target area.

Strategic escalation follows the same principles. The model considers strategic escalation as actions taken at the political level. So, these actions are not *at sea level* but are a governmental response to affect the situation by other tools of state power, such as diplomacy, information, military, and economy (DIME). Likewise, strategic escalation is further divided into low and high. Low strategic escalation occurs within the intensity range of inaction (concede or accept) to a reaction or statement intended to limit the intensity or scope of the conflict. High escalation is a response that is *considered significant* and increases the *intensity or scope of conflict* by imposing costs using instruments of power. In short, escalation differs relative to the physical location of the aimed effect. Local

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<sup>103</sup> William Spaniel, *Game Theory 101: The Complete Textbook* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011), 120–22; Avinash K. Dixit and Barry J. Nalebuff, *The Art of Strategy: A Game Theorist's Guide to Success in Business & Life* (New York: Norton & Company, 2010), 173–233.

escalation occurs in the operation area at sea, and strategic escalation is a governmental response that seeks to influence the situation outside the operation area.

### 3. Coercive Effects

In addition to escalation, coercion—the other main element of the model—is further specified in strategic or tactical effects. As explained, a threat or escalation process results in an effect. This thesis builds on Gray’s line of thought: “Everything is tactical, but strategic as a consequence,”<sup>104</sup> and tactics could attain “strategic meaning.”<sup>105</sup> Yarger states that “strategy is employed ... to achieve political objectives”<sup>106</sup> and that strategic effects “ultimately serve national interest.”<sup>107</sup> Combining Gray and Yarger, this thesis considers effects strategic (or high coercion) if a tactical action contributes to political objectives that serve national interest. Effects that do not contribute to national interests are tactical effects (or low coercion).

The model contains four quadrants, each with different coercive effects due to a different combination of local and strategic escalation. The first quadrant (bottom left corner) has low local escalation, low strategic escalation, and a high coercive effect. This is the current situation surrounding the employment of the CMM in the SCS. Because there is no local and low strategic escalation, there are no costs or risks involved. Therefore, the PRC can continue its coercive campaign. The coercive effect in the low/low quadrant is thus high.

The other three quadrants follow the same logic between escalation and coercion. The second quadrant (bottom right corner) has a medium coercive effect as a result of significant costs due to the high local escalation but limited costs due to the low strategic escalation. The third quadrant (top left corner) also has a medium coercive effect due to a combination of high strategic escalation and low local escalation. The fourth quadrant (top right corner) has a low coercive effect due to both high local and high strategic escalation.

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<sup>104</sup> Gray, *Tactical Operations for Strategic Effect*, 39.

<sup>105</sup> Gray, 44.

<sup>106</sup> Yarger, *Strategic Theory for the 21st Century*, 5.

<sup>107</sup> Yarger, 69.

This “full” escalation leads to significant costs and, thereby, a limited willingness to conduct coercive actions.

#### **4. Application of the Model**

The following (fictive) example illustrates how to apply the model to analyze a tactical CMM action (see Figure 2). The escalation process starts with a CMM threat against a Vietnamese fishing vessel to achieve the effect of forcing the vessel out of contested waters. The CMM begins with a coercive action against the Vietnamese vessel (not visualized in the matrix), followed by a Vietnamese response. Vietnam can choose to respond with either local or strategic escalation (corresponding respectively with the X- and Y-axis) or a combination of the two and whether to make the chosen escalation low or high. The Vietnamese reaction to the PRC threat sets off the escalation process, which will finally result in an outcome. Thus, the outcome is the effect of the CMM’s coercive action or threat (illustrated by the text in the quadrants). In short, the CMM forces a Vietnamese fishing vessel out of disputed waters. There is no local or strategic escalation (bottom left quadrant), which results in the PRC’s de facto control of the disputed area (a high coercive effect in the low/low quadrant).

#### **B. STRATEGIC CONCEPTS**

The different quadrants in the model suggest three strategic concepts to influence the success of the CMM (illustrated by the arrows in Figure 4). According to Yarger, strategic concepts (ways) describe how the resources (means) achieve the objective (ends).<sup>108</sup> This explanation fits the model, where the strategic concepts represent a shift in escalation (ways) to influence the coercive effect (ends).

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<sup>108</sup> Yarger, 69.

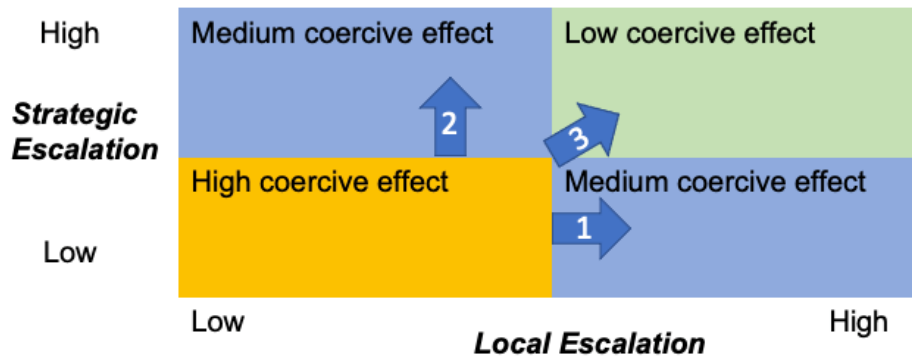


Figure 4. Strategic Concepts

Starting in the bottom left (low/low) quadrant, three strategic concepts are identified:

- (1) Local escalation (arrow 1): The situation shifts from low to high local escalation (from the low/low to the high/low quadrant). In this situation, local escalation can increase the costs at sea level and can therefore limit the willingness to coerce, which results in a medium coercive effect.
- (2) Strategic escalation (arrow 2): The situation shifts from low to high strategic escalation (from the low/low to the low/high quadrant). In this situation, the target refrains from local escalation (for example, to avoid risks for the local vessel crews) but shifts to high strategic escalation (for instance, by internationally publishing and condemning the threats). The coercive success is medium because of the strategic implications.
- (3) Full escalation (arrow 3): The situation shifts to high local and high strategic escalation (from the low/low to the high/high quadrant). The combination of escalation on both levels leads to significant costs and, therefore, to a low coercive result.

In sum, the model illustrates that different strategic concepts influence the escalation process aimed at countering ambiguous maritime threats.

### C. RESEARCH FOCUS

This research focuses mainly on local escalation because it is easier to influence the lower level of escalation from a military perspective or with military means. It thereby

provides more potential for a timely implication of practical measures. Drawing from the previous sections, several research propositions were developed:

Proposition 1: Local escalation, or the plain threat to escalate, decreases coercive success because escalation leads to higher costs and risks, which forms a disincentive to continue coercion (arrow 1).

Proposition 2: Local escalation can trigger the escalation process ending in full escalation, which, based on the theory, would further increase costs and, therefore, further limit “below threshold” coercion (arrow 3).

Based on these initial propositions, the critical question is how to influence the tactical situation in the operation area, thereby increasing the risk or costs of the local escalation, which, based on the propositions, will limit the coercive effects.

There are two key elements of local escalation: the initial threat and the availability of external support. The initial threat is the first action that initiates the escalation. The specific features of this initial threat will thereby determine the course of the escalation process. The presence of external support is essential to the escalatory continuation. As explained in Chapter II, geographical isolation in the maritime domain affects response speed and attribution.<sup>109</sup> Escalation response is thus more difficult, and coercion can be (more) effective. So, where the initial threat is central to the start of the escalation, external support is essential for the escalatory cycle. Therefore, threat and external support are two variables within the research. Before the thesis continues with the research results, the next chapter first explains the specific research methodology.

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<sup>109</sup> Bowers, “Escalation at Sea,” 45.



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## IV. RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter explains and describes the research design of this thesis. Scientific research can consist of three forms of design: quantitative research, qualitative research, or a combination of both, known as mixed methods.<sup>110</sup> John Creswell defines research design as “the plan or proposal to conduct research.”<sup>111</sup> According to Creswell, qualitative research is used to understand “the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem.”<sup>112</sup> Quantitative research analyzes “numbered data ... using statistical procedures.”<sup>113</sup> Following Creswell’s definition, this thesis inductively explores the meaning of ambiguous maritime threats by interpreting *the meaning* of the data.

Based on Creswell’s procedures, this chapter describes the qualitative methods applied in this study.<sup>114</sup> The specific approach is centered on Robert Yin’s *Case Study Research*.<sup>115</sup> The first part of this chapter outlines the research methodology, including the steps for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The second part discusses the accuracy and credibility of the data and findings by describing the research’s validity and the researcher’s role. Overall, this chapter explains the method behind the research and how the quality of the research is ensured.

### A. CASE STUDY STRATEGY

Case studies are one of several ways to conduct qualitative research,<sup>116</sup> also known as “strategies of inquiry.”<sup>117</sup> Yin lists five strategies within social science: experiments, surveys, archival analysis, history, and case studies. Each strategy specifies a form of

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<sup>110</sup> John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2009), 4.

<sup>111</sup> Creswell, 5.

<sup>112</sup> Creswell, 4.

<sup>113</sup> Creswell, 4.

<sup>114</sup> Creswell, 173–202.

<sup>115</sup> Yin, *Case Study Research*.

<sup>116</sup> Creswell, *Research Design*, 13; Yin, *Case Study Research*, 5.

<sup>117</sup> Creswell, *Research Design*, 11.

research question (why, how, what, where, and how much/many) and types of events (behavioral or contemporary).<sup>118</sup> According to Yin, case studies are the preferred strategy to select when “a ‘how’ or ‘why’ question is being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control.”<sup>119</sup> The thesis’ research question explores *how* the escalation process, formed by current CMM events, relates to coercive effects and thus aligns with Yin’s conditions.

## **B. DATA COLLECTION**

The data collection for this thesis consisted of desk and field research. The desk research was conducted at the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) in Monterey. Additionally, the directed study “Qualitative Research Analysis” was completed to support the field research. This class developed the required knowledge and skills to prepare, conduct, and analyze qualitative research.

The data for the case studies was collected during the field research. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with subject matter experts in Japan and the Philippines. Sources included senior Philippine military officers, Philippine Coast Guard personnel, academics, and selected representatives of other nations, who all remain anonymous (see Appendix C).

The interview protocol was carefully developed around the what question to avoid subjective answers. The theoretical model of Chapter III formed the blueprint for the interview protocol. The questions focused on the tactical and strategic situation, conditions, actors, capabilities, escalation process steps, and coercive effects (see Appendix A). During the interviews, notes were taken on paper and then transcribed for the data analysis (see Appendix B). This approach provided a structural and repeatable interview method. The NPS Human Research Protection Program specialist approved the Institutional Review Board for the research in April 2023.

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<sup>118</sup> Yin, *Case Study Research*, 5.

<sup>119</sup> Yin, 9.

### C. DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis and interpretation is the process of giving meaning to raw (collected) data. For this thesis, the flowchart developed by Creswell (shown in Figure 5) was utilized, including the steps to validate the accuracy of information.<sup>120</sup> The coding and interpretation steps within Figure 5 are also known as content analysis.

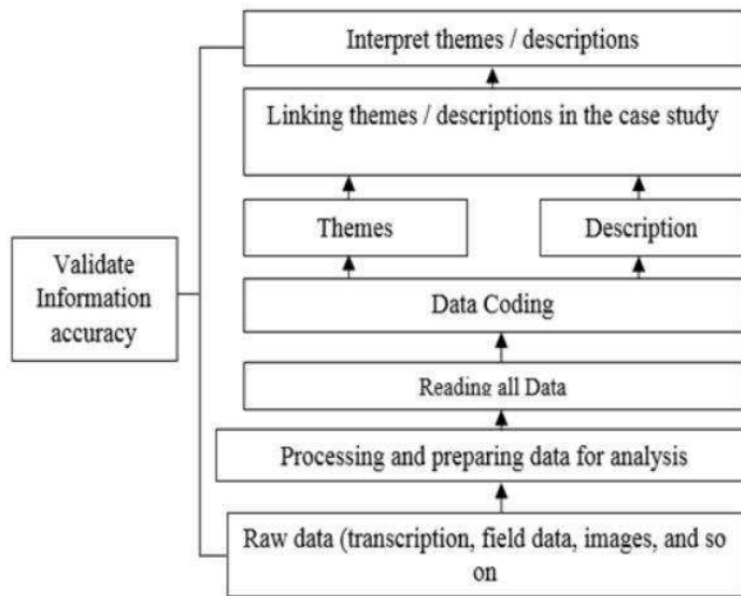


Figure 5. Data Analysis in Qualitative Research<sup>121</sup>

Figure 5 shows that after organizing, preparing, and reading through the data, the process starts with a detailed analysis via a coding process. Coding generates descriptions and themes, which is followed by interconnecting the themes, and the analysis ends with interpreting the meaning of the themes and descriptions. The following section provides a more detailed explanation of how this model was used for this thesis.

<sup>120</sup> Creswell, *Research Design*, 185.

<sup>121</sup> Creswell, 185.

## **1. Coding**

After collecting the data, the material was analyzed via the coding process. Creswell defines coding as “the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information.”<sup>122</sup> Using this technique, the interviews were first transcribed into text documents. Second, the data was categorized into various segments. These segments aligned with the four constructs from the theoretical framework in Chapter II. The segments coded the text into topics, facts, opinions, perspectives, activities, strategies, and themes. These codes were partly predetermined and partly developed based on the emerging data from the interview participants. Third, similar themes were clustered together and organized in sections and subsections along the structure of the conceptual model. Local escalation was divided into three actors: threat, response, and external support; each actor was then subdivided into capability, actions, and intent. Strategic escalation was split into the DIME instruments of power. The sections provided a structured overview of the data. The coded texts allowed for the recognition and identification of interrelationships between the data (see Appendix C for a coding example).

## **2. Interrelating Themes and Descriptions**

The coding process resulted in a detailed description of events and gave insight into themes for analysis.<sup>123</sup> The descriptions led to comprehensive narratives about the incidents with the CMM at sea. It described the settings, the actors, the actions, and the steps in escalation with, finally, the coercive effect. This thorough insight into the escalation process allowed for the recognition of interrelating themes between the case studies. In addition to the descriptions, the themes were identified in each case study. Then, the themes led to identifying a storyline within the case studies and, finally, refining the initial escalation-coercion model.

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<sup>122</sup> Creswell, 186.

<sup>123</sup> Creswell, 185–89.

### 3. Interpreting the Meaning

The final step of the data analysis was interpreting the meaning.<sup>124</sup> This step is about the contribution of knowledge, or learning. It shows how the study's findings relate to the already existing knowledge. In this work, the results of the data analysis process (i.e., the knowledge about escalation in the SCS and the case studies) were used to refine the theoretical model. The products of the data analysis were also examined alongside the knowledge obtained from the literature review. The model shows the relationship between maritime escalation and coercion, including the role of the initial threat and response. The model identifies how to influence the PRC's maritime coercion, mainly from an irregular warfare approach. These findings are described in the last Chapter.

#### D. VALIDATION

This section describes the different methods applied to ensure the validity of the qualitative research process, such as the reliability of the process, accuracy of the findings, and generalization of the research.

##### 1. Reliability, Validity, and Generalization

Reliability was ensured by documenting the procedure of the case studies.<sup>125</sup> For this research, the interview protocol and the coding process were documented. The interviews were carefully transcribed and constantly checked for consistency. Furthermore, parts of the content analysis were cross-checked by my thesis advisor to ensure agreement on the applied codes.

The validity was ensured by incorporating several validity strategies.<sup>126</sup> *Data triangulation* was applied by comparing the interview data with the literature and other sources. *Member checking* was applied by providing the participants in the interview with the opportunity to comment on the findings. *Rich, thick descriptions* were used so that

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<sup>124</sup> Creswell, 189–90.

<sup>125</sup> Creswell, 190–91.

<sup>126</sup> Irene Korstjens and Albine Moser, "Series: Practical Guidance to Qualitative Research. Part 4: Trustworthiness and Publishing," *European Journal of General Practice* 24, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 121, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13814788.2017.1375092>.

critical readers can examine and compare the results. Lastly, the two thesis advisors reviewed the whole research process and served as *external auditors*.<sup>127</sup>

The third method of verification was qualitative generalization.<sup>128</sup> According to Yin, the results can be generalized to a broader theory using the findings of multiple case studies.<sup>129</sup> This generalization was precisely the aim of this thesis: to develop a model for ambiguous maritime threats that may be used in different geographical areas for different irregular maritime actors, instead of just the CMM. Therefore, the research's findings can be extrapolated to other irregular maritime threats worldwide.

## 2. Researcher's Role

The researcher's role is important in qualitative research because the researcher is the primary data collector and interpreter. Personal biases, values, and backgrounds can influence the interpretation of the data.<sup>130</sup> Therefore, this paragraph describes three potential biases that could have influenced my data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Recognizing my past experiences and assumptions can help the reader understand my role as the primary researcher.

First, it is important to note my military background as a professional officer in the Royal Netherlands Marine Corps. This background could have led to a focus on the use of force, or military option, within conflicts. This potential bias was mitigated by applying the conceptual model, which also examines the other instruments of national power, such as diplomatic, informational, and economic.

Second, my cultural background could have influenced my interpretations and findings. My Western education and values could have influenced my perceptions of ethical principles and international rules-based order because Western doctrine applies

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<sup>127</sup> Creswell, *Research Design*, 191–92.

<sup>128</sup> Creswell, 192–93.

<sup>129</sup> Yin, *Case Study Research*, 38.

<sup>130</sup> Creswell, *Research Design*, 177–78.

strict lines to when military force or coercion is legal.<sup>131</sup> This differs from the PRC’s perspective on conflict, which has a different view on the spectrum of conflict.<sup>132</sup> This bias was mitigated by studying PRC military doctrine, including how the PLA conceives the conflict spectrum and the role of escalation (see Chapter II, Section C. Threat).

Third, I am aware that the research theme is in my field of experience and partly within my own organization. Creswell defines this as “backyard research.”<sup>133</sup> Data collection may therefore be more accessible, and reporting data can be more biased. A solid and objective research design, including strict verification procedures, mitigated these potential biases.

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<sup>131</sup> Ryan Fisher, ed., *Operational Law Handbook* (Charlottesville, VA: The Judge Advocate General’s Legal Center & School, U.S. Army, 2022), <https://tjaglspublic.army.mil/tjagls-publications>.

<sup>132</sup> Kaufman and Hartnett, *Managing Conflict*.

<sup>133</sup> Creswell, *Research Design*, 177.



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## V. CASE STUDY BACKGROUND

The CMM is designed to operate between the blurred lines of peace and war and civil and military activities. The high level of ambiguity, such as type of unit, combatant status, and civil or state activity, makes the maritime militia problematic to counter and contributes to the militia's success. Additionally, the CMM operates in the SCS, one of the world's busiest maritime transport areas and a potential flashpoint in the ongoing U.S.–PRC competition. Both the CMM's unique character and the SCS's volatility are crucial to understand when analyzing the PRC's maritime coercion. This chapter therefore provides the necessary background knowledge on the maritime militia and the high stakes in the SCS.

### A. THE CHINESE MARITIME MILITIA

China's long militia tradition has led to a firmly developed militia concept in which the maritime militia forms both an irregular and a conventional threat. The following section briefly explains the origins and organization of the maritime militia, followed by a categorization of the CMM by type of threat.

#### 1. Militia Origins and Organization

China has a long historical militia tradition, resulting in a strong political and organizational anchorage of the CMM. The militia system originates from the historical t'uan-lien tradition of militarizing civil communities.<sup>134</sup> Militia organizations were an attempt to establish local governmental control by regionally organizing a civil–military hierarchy. These local communities were assigned civil and military roles.<sup>135</sup> In the 1940s, Mao Zedong managed to organize and control the country's dispersed power with his people's war, elements of which are still recognizable today. Mao's revolutionary war was led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) but relied on mobilization, organization, and

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<sup>134</sup> Kuhn, *Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China*, 42.

<sup>135</sup> Kuhn, 190–92.

armament of the people.<sup>136</sup> Mao considered the civilian population the basis for the military and viewed war as the struggle of the people. The militias acted as a reserve force for Mao's guerilla and as a home guard to rally support for and protect the revolution.<sup>137</sup> Today, the CCP still considers the people's war as part of their "strategic thinking," in which the CCP explores new ways to innovate the people's war in the modern era of the information age.<sup>138</sup> The CMM serves as a modern example of Mao's people's war with the potential to further develop with new technology and weapon systems.

The militia concept aligns with the PRC's strategic thinking of the people's war and contributes to the ambiguous character of the CMM. Militias can be seen as dual-use entities, where the people also serve as soldiers. In addition to their civilian function, such as the CMM serving as a fishing fleet, militias act as a reserve force with tasks during both war and peace.<sup>139</sup> As a result, the military can hide within the people, and the people can serve the military, just like Mao described in the 1930s.<sup>140</sup> By doing so, militias can operate between civilians and the military, and between peace and war.

The CMM significantly increases the PRC's overall maritime power because the militia can operate independently or integrated into a joint force. The maritime militia is mainly formed from the PRC's fishing fleet, the largest in the world.<sup>141</sup> Thousands of civilian crews are trained to support the PRC's national interests, including supporting its maritime territorial claims and the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in conflict. The CMM is officially part of the PRC's militia system. Together with the PLA and the People's Armed Police (PAP), the militias form the People's Armed Forces (PAF).<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> China Aerospace Studies Institute, *Science of Military Strategy* (2020), 30.

<sup>137</sup> Zedong Mao, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2017), 21.

<sup>138</sup> China Aerospace Studies Institute, *Science of Military Strategy* (2020), 28–32.

<sup>139</sup> Morgan Clemens and Michael Weber, "Rights Protection versus Warfighting: Organizing the Maritime Militia for Peace and War," in *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, ed. Andrew S. Erickson and Ryan D. Martinson (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019), 135–54.

<sup>140</sup> Mao, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 8, 75, 80–81, 93.

<sup>141</sup> Kennedy and Erickson, *China's Third Sea Force*, 2.

<sup>142</sup> China Aerospace Studies Institute, *Science of Military Strategy* (2020), 328.

Furthermore, the maritime militia consists of professional and commercial militia forces. Both are directed and subsidized by the Chinese government.<sup>143</sup> The militia is also able to integrate into a joint force with the CCG or the PAP. The China Maritime Studies Institute stated that the CMM is “a state-organized, -developed, and -controlled force operating under a direct military chain of command to conduct Chinese state-sponsored activities.”<sup>144</sup> Overall, the CMM is a well-organized capability, fully integrated into the PRC’s armed forces and command structure. As the following sections further explain, the PRC uses the CMM as an ambiguous force to pose both an irregular and a conventional threat.

## 2. Irregular Threat

The first way to categorize the CMM is as an irregular threat, allowing the PRC to avoid armed escalation. The Irregular Warfare Annex to the U.S. National Defense Strategy 2020 states, “IW [Irregular Warfare] favors indirect and asymmetric approaches.”<sup>145</sup> These features are clearly recognizable within the CMM. In the last decade, CMM activities occurred below the threshold of armed conflict. The most known tactic, which avoids military response or escalation, is the PRC’s *cabbage strategy*, in which the targeted vessel is not only threatened by the CMM but also intimidated by surrounding CCG and PLAN vessels.<sup>146</sup> This strategy is used to threaten other sailors at sea and thereby acts as a form of coercion. Despite the CMM’s increased weaponization and training, all reported incidents thus far occurred without armed violence. This demonstrates the CMM’s ability to stay below the threshold of armed conflict using an indirect and asymmetric approach.

Irregular CMM actions were seen in two distinctive forms: coercive maneuvers and territorial seizure. Both bear the signature of ambiguity, and both remain below the

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<sup>143</sup> Seth G. Jones et al., *Competing without Fighting: China’s Strategy of Political Warfare* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), 73.

<sup>144</sup> Kennedy and Erickson, *China’s Third Sea Force*, 2.

<sup>145</sup> Department of Defense, *Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex*, 2.

<sup>146</sup> Himmelman, “A Game of Shark.”

threshold of armed conflict. In most events, the PRC's maritime militia applied coercive maneuvers to threaten foreign ships with harassment, collision, obstruction, or other intimidating maneuvers.<sup>147</sup> The PRC hereby structurally coerces foreign vessels out of disputed waters, creating de facto control of these areas. The CMM's targets range from local fishing vessels to U.S. Navy ships. A notorious CMM action was the harassment of the USNS Impeccable, which was conducting undersea reconnaissance in the PRC's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the SCS in 2009.<sup>148</sup> Considering the success of these tactics against a U.S. Navy reconnaissance vessel, it is not hard to imagine the effect on smaller foreign commercial vessels.

In addition to coercive maneuvers, the CMM also conducted several forms of territorial seizures. The Scarborough Shoal standoff in 2012 shows how this modern form of maritime territorial seizure unfolds. That instance led to a permanent PRC presence on the shoal and, thereby, a de facto annexation.<sup>149</sup> A more recent example is the Whitsun Reef occupation in 2021, where around 220 PRC fishing vessels anchored at the reef for several weeks. As described in the opening of Chapter I, the Whitsun Reef incident is not a classic seizure, but it could be labeled as a more refined preliminary move toward land reclamation.

### 3. Conventional Threat

Although the CMM is most notorious for its irregular tactics below thresholds of armed conflict, it must also be recognized for its regular or conventional capabilities. It is incorrect to assume that an irregular force like the CMM only poses an irregular threat.<sup>150</sup> Just as regular forces can conduct irregular operations, irregular forces can conduct regular operations. Such is the case for the CMM. Although the PRC has rarely deployed the conventional capability until now, analysts have pointed out the regular threats the CMM

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<sup>147</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, "Timeline: China's Maritime Disputes," accessed July 12, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/chinas-maritime-disputes>.

<sup>148</sup> Michael J. Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2017), 52–65.

<sup>149</sup> Green et al., 95–123.

<sup>150</sup> Dunigan et al., *Characterizing and Exploring the Implications*, 14.

poses.<sup>151</sup> So, where the irregular threats have been *seen*, conventional threats are, to this point, predominately *known* but equally important.

The CMM's current activities do not represent the full spectrum of its capabilities. Scholars Erickson and Kennedy of the Center for Naval Analyses Cooperation examined potential militia employment within the PLA.<sup>152</sup> In a high-intensity conflict, current CMM capabilities would support regular PLAN operations.<sup>153</sup> The CMM is, therefore, fully integrated into the PLAN organizational and command structure. Conventional taskings range from maintaining maritime security (e.g., control of waterways and vessel inspections) to directly supporting combat operations with resupplies, medical evacuations, and repairs. Furthermore, the CMM can establish a support network of depots, harbors, and maritime facilities.<sup>154</sup> The PRC has also shown military ingenuity with other dual-use vessels, such as amphibious lift capacity, allegedly intended for a cross-street invasion of Taiwan.<sup>155</sup> This example shows that the military application of civilian vessels reaches further than just the CMM's fishing fleet. PRC doctrine defines these forms of requisition as "transport mobilization."<sup>156</sup>

Countering the CMM as an irregular force in a conventional conflict comes with complex legal and practical problems. According to the international law of armed conflict, CMM vessels are not warships but auxiliary forces, which, in the case of armed conflict, may be directly targeted, regardless of their activity at that moment.<sup>157</sup> In other words, the conventional supporting role of the CMM makes them a direct legal target in war. However, the problem is more practical than legal. Aside from the modern challenge of

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<sup>151</sup> Erickson and Kennedy, *China's Maritime Militia*, 28.

<sup>152</sup> Erickson and Kennedy, 28.

<sup>153</sup> Erickson, *Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, 136.

<sup>154</sup> Erickson, 135–39.

<sup>155</sup> Thomas Shugart, "Mind the Gap: How China's Civilian Shipping Could Enable a Taiwan Invasion," *War on the Rocks*, August 16, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/mind-the-gap-how-chinas-civilian-shipping-could-enable-a-taiwan-invasion/>.

<sup>156</sup> China Aerospace Studies Institute, *Science of Military Strategy (2020)*, 208.

<sup>157</sup> James Kraska and Raul A. Pedrozo, *Disruptive Technology and the Law of Naval Warfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 61–62.

distinguishing war and peace, the other, more practical problem is distinguishing the fishing vessels from CMM vessels in support of the PLAN.<sup>158</sup> The thousands of fishing vessels Beijing can deploy in the SCS, in addition to looking identical to the CMM vessels, have the potential to saturate Western radar systems and cripple the strict Western targeting processes. The result is what Mao envisioned in the 1930s: the military hidden amongst the people, only this time at sea.

## **B. THE SOUTH CHINA SEA**

The recent tensions over the disputed areas in the SCS are of global importance. Although the SCS is primarily a regional dispute, it is intertwined with international security and economic interests. Moreover, the SCS is at the center of the rising competition between the PRC and the United States. The unsolved maritime disputes thus form a potential international flashpoint. This section examines the importance, policies, and historical disputes of the SCS and shows the high stakes and complex relationships that are involved.

### **1. Importance of the South China Sea**

For a thorough understanding of escalation and coercion in the SCS, it is essential to understand why the SCS is important to the international community. The first and overarching reason is that the PRC is challenging the current international order in the SCS.<sup>159</sup> The PRC strongly rejects the territorial agreements in the SCS, which, according to PRC scholars, “the United States had drawn up unilaterally” during the San Francisco Conference in 1951 and “blatantly excluded China.”<sup>160</sup> At the core of the SCS disputes lies the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982). UNCLOS

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<sup>158</sup> Kraska and Pedrozo, 63.

<sup>159</sup> Sheena Chestnut Greitens, “Xi Jinping’s Quest for Order,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 3, 2022, 1, 2, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/print/node/1129347>; Alastair Iain Johnston, “China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing’s International Relations,” *International Security* 44, no. 2 (October 1, 2019): 57, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00360](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00360).

<sup>160</sup> Jia Yu and Zhang Xiaoyi, “The Maritime Strategy of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping,” *Interpret: China*, May 1, 2018, 5, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/the-maritime-strategy-of-mao-zedong-deng-xiaoping-and-xi-jinping/>.

regulates the use of the oceans and their resources.<sup>161</sup> The current disputes in the SCS, such as territorial claims, fishing grounds, freedom of navigation, or maritime rights of (underwater) features, are all related to the UNCLOS agreements.<sup>162</sup> In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) stated that Beijing’s claims were not compliant with UNCLOS.<sup>163</sup> By ignoring the PCA ruling, the PRC is undermining the current international system to improve the country’s security and economic position on its maritime borders. The SCS is thereby at the forefront of the competition to rewrite the international rule-based order.

Second, the SCS is important due to its economic value. The SCS is a vital maritime trafficking route accounting for approximately two-thirds of global maritime trade and one-fourth of worldwide trade, with an estimated \$3.4 trillion of commercial goods and energy supplies transported annually.<sup>164</sup> Furthermore, the SCS contains an estimated 11 billion barrels of oil, 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 16.6 million tons of annual fishing catch.<sup>165</sup> The economic value thus provides a significant incentive to claim economic maritime rights.

Third, the SCS is of military strategic value. The United States is especially concerned about the shifting military force balance in the SCS.<sup>166</sup> The newly built PRC bases increased PRC dominance in the region and complicated U.S. military interventions. The United States is primarily concerned about its security obligations toward Taiwan, the

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<sup>161</sup> United Nations, “Convention on the Law of the Sea,” UNTS 397 § (1982), [https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention\\_agreements/texts/unclos/part2.htm](https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/part2.htm).

<sup>162</sup> Shahar Hameiri and Lee Jones, *Fractured China: How State Transformation Is Shaping China’s Rise* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 85.

<sup>163</sup> Marc Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2019), 188, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429437908>.

<sup>164</sup> Ben Dolven, Susan V. Lawrence, and Ronald O’Rourke, *China Primer: South China Sea Disputes*, CRS Report No. IF10607 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2021), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10607>; Joseph R. Biden, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2022), 37.

<sup>165</sup> World Economic Forum, “South China Sea Tensions: What You Need to Know,” June 25, 2016, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/06/south-china-sea-tensions-what-to-know/>.

<sup>166</sup> Ronald O’Rourke, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report No. R42784 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2022), 11, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/search/#/?termsToSearch=R42784&orderBy=Relevance>.



Philippines, and South Korea. Furthermore, a decrease in the United States' ability to react might "encourage countries in the region to reexamine their own defense programs and foreign policies."<sup>167</sup> Hence, the balance of military force in the SCS is related to the current geopolitical and regional security structures.

## 2. The PRC's SCS policy

The PRC's SCS policy is not well-defined by scholars. A key theme in the debate is whether the PRC has an enduring SCS policy. Lanteigne describes the PRC's "peripheral diplomacy," focusing on regional relationships and "a stable periphery in Asia and promoting China's position."<sup>168</sup> Hameiri and Jones argue that Beijing lacks a coherent strategy in the SCS.<sup>169</sup> These authors state that historic claims serve as the "main contours of China's SCS policy," but "the precise goals and methods to attain them are unclear."<sup>170</sup> Zhang argues that the PRC deliberately uses coercive actions in the SCS "when the need to establish a reputation for resolve is high and the economic costs is low."<sup>171</sup> Fravel's key finding is that "actions by the United States and the PRC have often created incentives for the other state to push back."<sup>172</sup>

A second theme between scholars is the balance between different interests. Hameiri and Jones explain this balance as "maintaining stability (*weiwēn*) and protecting China's maritime rights (*weiquan*)."<sup>173</sup> Fravel emphasizes the power balance as "a new equilibrium ... in which the PRC has a stronger presence in the SCS, while the United States has a much stronger presence in littoral states."<sup>174</sup> Zhang explicitly presents the

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<sup>167</sup> O'Rourke, 2–3.

<sup>168</sup> Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy*, 172.

<sup>169</sup> Hameiri and Jones, *Fractured China*, 119.

<sup>170</sup> Hameiri and Jones, 118.

<sup>171</sup> Ketian Zhang, "Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing's Use of Coercion in the South China Sea," *International Security* 44, no. 1 (July 2019): 119, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00354](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00354).

<sup>172</sup> M. Taylor Fravel, *Threading the Needle: The South China Sea Disputes and U.S.-China Relations*, MIT Political Science Department Research Paper No. 2016–23 (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, July 1, 2016), 2, <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2826109>.

<sup>173</sup> Hameiri and Jones, *Fractured China*, 83.

<sup>174</sup> Fravel, *Threading the Needle*, 27.

“cost-balancing theory” to explain the PRC’s coercion in the SCS concerning the expected costs.<sup>175</sup>

A short analysis of the different policy perspectives shows that the PRC guides its coercion strategy in the SCS with a long-term perspective along with its historic territorial claims. These claims serve the PRC’s maritime sovereignty, security, and development interest to ultimately maintain regime security of the CCP.<sup>176</sup> Additionally, the PRC uses coercive actions as calculated and flexible responses to other actors in which costs—mainly relational costs—serve as a balancing aspect. The PRC’s actions in the SCS illustrate this view. On the one hand, the PRC has taken a more assertive stance in defending its historical maritime claims. On the other hand, the PRC is aware of regional relationships and the region’s suspicion of the PRC’s increased influence over the region.<sup>177</sup> The PRC is therefore balancing its actions and policy in the SCS to achieve its interests without suffering disproportionate disadvantages to its regional or international relationships, which can harm the PRC’s long-term goal of economic prosperity that is necessary for regime stability. This balancing perspective provides a useful framework in which to analyze the SCS disputes over the last decades. It also provides a framework to evaluate the PRC’s coercive effects in the SCS.

### 3. SCS Disputes

The SCS disputes can be divided into six periods of fluctuating tensions and relationships. The first period extends from 1974 to 2002 and contains the most aggressive actions in the SCS. In 1974, PRC forces violently seized the western part of the Parcel Islands from South Vietnam.<sup>178</sup> In 1995, the PRC Navy seized Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands after a short military confrontation with the Philippines. This incident led to concerns within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) about a further

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<sup>175</sup> Zhang, “Cautious Bully,” 157.

<sup>176</sup> Greitens, “Xi Jinping’s Quest for Order,” 2; Yu and Xiaoyi, “The Maritime Strategy of Mao Zedong,” 10.

<sup>177</sup> Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy*, 194–95.

<sup>178</sup> Stein Tonnesson, *The Paracels: The Other South China Sea Dispute* (Oslo, Norway: Peace Research Institute Oslo, July 2001), 5–6, <https://www.prio.org/publications/2270>.

destabilization of the region. In November 2002, tensions were settled after the PRC and ASEAN signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which included a commitment to resolve disputes peacefully.<sup>179</sup>

The 2002 TAC agreement forms a significant moment within the enduring period of tensions and conflict in the SCS. In the treaty, all claimants in the SCS agreed to “refrain from inhabiting” new features, not “complicate or escalate” disputes, and solve conflicts by “peaceful means.”<sup>180</sup> The situation in 2002 can be viewed as the status quo because the treaty acknowledged the situation at that moment in time. However, the PRC and the Philippines interpret this status quo differently in specific areas, resulting in ongoing disputes over the legal status of, for example, the BPR *Sierra Madre* on the Second Thomas Shoal.

After the TAC, the second period started with stability in the SCS.<sup>181</sup> The relationships in the region deteriorated in May 2009 when the UN’s Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) incentivized all claimants to fortify their claims.<sup>182</sup> Although not explicitly, the PRC introduced its historic—and infamous—claim with the nine-dash line (9DL), which encompasses almost 90 percent of the SCS.<sup>183</sup> Different incidents followed, the most prominent being the PRC harassment of the USNS *Impeccable*. In 2010, the Obama administration reacted by rejecting the nine-dash line and strengthening regional partnerships. The increased U.S. regional involvement led the PRC to moderate its approach to limit the “internationalization of the disputes.”<sup>184</sup>

The U.S. involvement probably also led to renewed regional tensions, starting the third period. In April 2012, a Philippine naval vessel arrested PRC fishermen at

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<sup>179</sup> Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy*, 186–87.

<sup>180</sup> The Governments of the Member States of ASEAN and the Government of the People’s Republic of China, “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea,” *Chinese Journal of International Law* 2, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.cjilaw.a000479>.

<sup>181</sup> Zhang, “Cautious Bully,” 135–36.

<sup>182</sup> Fravel, *Threading the Needle*, 3–4.

<sup>183</sup> Hameiri and Jones, *Fractured China*, 83–85.

<sup>184</sup> Fravel, *Threading the Needle*, 5–6, 8.

Scarborough Shoal. The fishing vessels were part of and commanded by the Tanmen Maritime Militia Company.<sup>185</sup> This resulted in a two-month standoff between PRC and Philippine vessels. Eventually, both nations removed their ships, but the PRC took control of the shoal the following week. After the standoff, the PRC engaged in several efforts to emphasize cooperation instead of disputes. The PRC initiated talks with ASEAN, and President Xi visited all claimants in the SCS except the Philippines.<sup>186</sup>

The fourth period started in 2014, when the PRC constructed landmasses on all seven features of the Spratly Islands, including a harbor and an airstrip at Fiery Cross Reef. This marked the period of island-building in the SCS, which the United States saw as one of the most provocative PRC actions.<sup>187</sup> This led to a strong ASEAN reaction,<sup>188</sup> whereafter the PRC moderated its approach again by offering multi-billion-dollar loans for infrastructure developments in the region and establishing reassuring agreements between Xi and President Obama in November 2014.<sup>189</sup>

The fifth period contains the period from 2015 to 2022. Although the PRC continued its land reclamation and provocations, this period did not see a significant change in behavior that sparked further escalation. Despite the militarization of the islands and U.S. concerns,<sup>190</sup> the situation in the SCS seems to have stabilized. The PRC also made some progress on the bilateral engagement by establishing a hotline with Japan and warming ties with Philippine President Duterte.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Conor M. Kennedy and Andrew S. Erickson, “Model Maritime Militia: Tanmen’s Leading Role in the April 2012 Scarborough Shoal Incident,” Center for International Maritime Security, April 21, 2016, <https://cimsec.org/model-maritime-militia-tanmens-leading-role-april-2012-scarborough-shoal-incident/>.

<sup>186</sup> Fravel, *Threading the Needle*, 16.

<sup>187</sup> Fravel, 20.

<sup>188</sup> Green et al., *Countering Coercion*, 202–23.

<sup>189</sup> Fravel, *Threading the Needle*, 21–23.

<sup>190</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, “China Lands First Bomber on South China Sea Island,” May 18, 2018, <https://amti.csis.org/china-lands-first-bomber-south-china-sea-island/>; Amanda Macias, “China Quietly Installed Missile Systems on Strategic Spratly Islands in Hotly Contested South China Sea,” CNBC, May 2, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/05/02/china-added-missile-systems-on-spratly-islands-in-south-china-sea.html>; O’Rourke, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition*, 2–3.

<sup>191</sup> Jane Perlez, “Rodrigo Duterte and Xi Jinping Agree to Reopen South China Sea Talks,” *New York Times*, October 20, 2016, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/21/world/asia/rodrigo-duterte-philippines-china-xi-jinping.html>.

In 2023, the situation in the SCS deteriorated, with several incidents leading to renewed tensions. The year 2023 thereby marks the sixth period. The escalation started in January with the PRC harassment of Philippine fishing vessels. In February, a Chinese Coast Guard vessel (CCGV) directed a military-grade laser at a Philippine warship. These incidents led to a fierce Philippine reaction; it increased its naval patrols and hardened its political stance.<sup>192</sup> Starting in August, a series of incidents occurred during a resupply mission at Second Thomas Shoal, marking a definite change in tensions and relationships between the PRC and the Philippines.<sup>193</sup> In September, the CCG installed a floating barrier at Scarborough Shoal.<sup>194</sup> In October and December, PRC vessels rammed Philippine ships. During the year, the Philippines reported multiple instances of the illegal presence or occupation of Chinese Maritime Militia Vessels (CMMV) near Whitsun Reef, Iroquois Reef, and Thitu Island. Meanwhile, the United States and the Philippines strengthened their relationship by signing the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Act (EDCA), reinterpreting and restating the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, making the first Philippine presidential visit to Washington in 10 years, and conducting the largest U.S.–Philippine military exercise ever.<sup>195</sup> Eventually, 2023 ended with a sign of reproachment at the Asia-Pacific Economic Conference (APEC) summit in California where, on the sidelines, Presidents Xi and Marcos agreed on future talks about the disputes in the SCS.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Anonymous Philippine sources M1, Author Interview, September 11, 2023, Manila.

<sup>193</sup> CNN Philippines, “Marcos: Rescind Deal with China to Remove BRP Sierra Madre from Ayungin Shoal If It Exists,” August 9, 2023, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2023/8/9/marcos-no-agreement-sierra-mdre-ayungin-shoal.html>.

<sup>194</sup> Presidential Communications Office, “PBBM’s ‘Decisive Action’ on WPS Sends Strong Message to Chinese Gov’t, Says International Studies Professor,” Office of the President of the Philippines, September 30, 2023, [https://pco.gov.ph/news\\_releases/pbbms-decisive-action-on-wps-sends-strong-message-to-chinese-govt-says-international-studies-professor/](https://pco.gov.ph/news_releases/pbbms-decisive-action-on-wps-sends-strong-message-to-chinese-govt-says-international-studies-professor/).

<sup>195</sup> Reuters, “China-Philippines Relations: Major Events in South China Sea Dispute,” Reuters, December 21, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/rift-deepens-between-philippines-china-over-south-china-sea-2023-12-21/>.

<sup>196</sup> GOVPH, “PBBM Says WPS Issue Not the Defining Element of PH-China Relationship,” GOVPH, November 18, 2023, [https://pco.gov.ph/news\\_releases/pbbm-says-wps-issue-not-the-defining-element-of-ph-china-relationship/](https://pco.gov.ph/news_releases/pbbm-says-wps-issue-not-the-defining-element-of-ph-china-relationship/); and White House, “Readout of President Joe Biden’s Meeting with President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China,” November 16, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/11/15/readout-of-president-joe-bidens-meeting-with-president-xi-jinping-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-2/>.

An examination of the disputes in the SCS shows that the PRC has been consistently pursuing its maritime claims since 1974. With a variation of intensity in provocations, alternated with reestablishing damaged relationships, the PRC has continued to improve its position in the SCS. Currently, in 2024, the physical reality is a stronger PRC presence in the SCS on several islands, including military bases. Furthermore, the PRC has not lowered its territorial claims. So, whether supported by a well-defined policy but remarkably guided by the nine-dash line, the PRC has improved its position in the SCS by patiently changing the status quo. However, these achievements have come with a price for the PRC's international image, including the rise of alliances aimed at countering the PRC's ambitions. The newly formed alliances, combined with the increased tensions in the SCS, have also increased the risk of escalation. This shows that the PRC's balanced approach between security and relationships hasn't achieved an optimal equilibrium: the physical aims in the SCS came with high relational costs.

### C. CONCERNS

Despite the described conventional threat, the CMM's irregular capability is the current threat and a challenging problem for the international community. As mentioned, the CMM is difficult to counter due to its ambiguous character. However, the actual problem lies in the potential effect of the threat. The PRC uses the CMM to change the status quo slowly via a salami-slicing strategy, forcing the international community to accept a *fait accompli*. These operations bring two significant concerns.

The first concern is that the PRC's irregular strategy destabilizes the current international order.<sup>197</sup> The PRC has historically opposed hegemonic dominance.<sup>198</sup> CMM actions currently undermine the 1982 UNCLOS, the 2002 TAC, and the 2016 PCA ruling. The PRC's reinterpretation of these international rules could lead to a maritime domino effect. A U.S. congressional report expressed that the PRC's alternative interpretation of

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<sup>197</sup> Johnston, "China in a World of Orders," 57; Hoffman, Frank G., "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges," *PRISM* 7, no. 4 (November 2018): 33, <https://cco.ndu.edu/news/article/1680696/examining-complex-forms-of-conflict-gray-zone-and-hybrid-challenges/http%3A%2F%2Fcco.ndu.edu%2FNews%2FArticle%2F1680696%2Fexamining-complex-forms-of-conflict-gray-zone-and-hybrid-challenges%2F>.

<sup>198</sup> Johnston, "China in a World of Orders," 29–31.

the PCA ruling “could serve as a precedent for challenging it in other parts of the world.”<sup>199</sup> For example, the Taiwanese island Tiaping Dao is also part of the Spratly Islands, and similar PRC actions could fuel tensions in the Taiwanese Strait. The potential danger is that the maritime disputes are the initial test and will be a flashpoint within the changing world order. Within this highly volatile context, CMM irregular tactics play a vital role.

The second concern involves the risk of escalation *above* the threshold of armed conflict. The CMM strategy, although intended to stay below the threshold, does not come without risks. Scholar and irregular warfare expert David Kilcullen states that operations below the threshold may lead a state to “completely misunderstand” the other’s actions and result in “lethal miscalculation.”<sup>200</sup> The CMM’s actions may unintentionally escalate, so although the PRC uses the CMM to achieve its objectives below the response threshold, it could be considered potentially dangerous due to escalation risks.

The CMM is a good example of what recent NATO doctrine defines as comprehensive defense: “an official Government strategy, which encompasses a whole-of-society approach.”<sup>201</sup> NATO emphasizes the 98 percent “untapped capability” of the private and civic sector’s contribution to the public sector. Clearly, the PRC already established its own comprehensive defense with integrated regular and irregular components, before and in conflict. From this perspective, the CMM resembles a modern approach to force design utilizing all of society’s maritime components. The following two chapters describe how the PRC exploited these unique features of the maritime militia in the SCS.

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<sup>199</sup> O’Rourke, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition*, 5.

<sup>200</sup> Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes*, 175.

<sup>201</sup> NATO Special Operations Headquarters, *Comprehensive Defence Handbook*, vol. 1, A (Mons, 2020), 15.

## VI. LOCAL AND STRATEGIC ESCALATION IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

The PRC and the Philippines each compete in the SCS by applying different strategies and deploying different means, as illustrated by the escalation process. At the local level at sea, the PRC uses the CMM to advance its historical claims through coercive activities. The PRC reinforces these tactical actions by applying the informational and economic instruments of state power. The Philippines responds with the same elements: On the local level, the barely capable Philippine security forces attempt to resist; at the strategic level, the Philippines leverages the information and diplomatic environments.

These local (or tactical) and strategic actions can be understood through the lens of the escalation process (see Figure 6). Local escalation can be studied through the threat and response, including external support. Strategic escalation can be examined through the national instruments of state power (DIME). Taken together, the escalation components provide the fundamental understanding required for the analysis of the relationship between escalation and coercive effect in the next chapter.

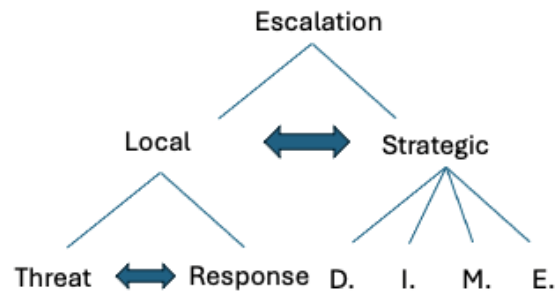


Figure 6. Escalation Components

### A. LOCAL ESCALATION

Local escalation can be seen as the interaction between a threat and the response to the threat at the local level or, in this specific maritime case, at sea. From the Philippine perspective, the CMM poses the threat in the SCS disputes; the Philippines and its external support form the response. Escalation at sea can therefore be understood by examining the



actors within local escalation: the threat and response, including external support. Subsequently, these actors can be further divided into capability, actions, and intent (see Figure 7).

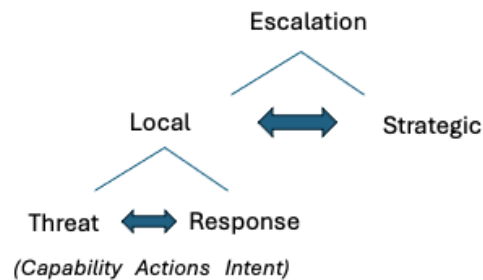


Figure 7. Local Escalation

### 1. Threat: The CMM

The CMM threat in the SCS consists of a sizeable maritime militia force, specifically designed and controlled to conduct tactical coercive activities below the threshold of armed conflict to pursue territorial control while simultaneously maintaining plausible deniability. The following section analyzes the CMM’s capability, actions, and intent.

#### a. CMM: Capability

The PRC continues to deploy vast numbers of CMMVs in the SCS, which form a significant challenge for the Philippines to monitor and control. The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) reported more than 700 CMMVs operating in the SCS in the first half of 2023; compared with the same period in 2022, this is an increase of 200 vessels.<sup>202</sup> Part of this increase is probably a result of intensified Philippine patrols with newly acquired capabilities. The increase in CMMVs could also be explained by prolonged CMM deployment periods, from one month in 2022 to five months in 2023.<sup>203</sup> The relatively

<sup>202</sup> Anonymous Philippine sources M1, Author Interview.

<sup>203</sup> Anonymous Philippine sources M1.

small Philippine force makes control of the maritime militia unrealizable simply because of the sheer size of the CMM and the vast area of the SCS. One interviewee described the CMM problem at its core: “There are simply too many of them.”<sup>204</sup>

The CMM characteristics in the SCS indicate that most of these vessels are not fishing vessels but part of the specifically designed and professionalized maritime militia. The most straightforward evidence is that professional CMM do not fish.<sup>205</sup> Although CMMVs have the physical appearance of a fishing vessel from a distance, closer inspection shows that CMMVs have a different structure buildup without any specific fishing equipment and with different communication systems.<sup>206</sup> Furthermore, CMMV crews differ from fishing vessel crews in size and outward appearance. CMMV crews consist of three to four men with recent haircuts, pale skin, and clean clothing. These characteristics contrast with regular 12-man fishing crews equipped and dressed for the harsh conditions of fishing at sea.<sup>207</sup>

The professional CMM in the SCS is enabled by a joint command and control structure integrating CMM, CCG, and PLAN forces. Maritime maneuvers with multiple CMMVs and CCGVs shadowing, blocking, and harassing targets require a high level of coordination and control. The PRC blockade of the Philippine resupply mission to the BPR *Sierra Madre* on the Second Thomas Shoal on August 5, 2023, demonstrated this level of control.<sup>208</sup> During the blockade, the PRC deployed 20 vessels, including 12 CMMVs, four CCGVs, and four PLAN vessels, as well as one helicopter. These units operated in a layered response with prepositioned forces, early warning, shadowing, and, finally, harassment and obstruction.<sup>209</sup> The level of control indicates an on-scene commander

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<sup>204</sup> Anonymous Philippine source M2, Author Interview, September 12, 2023, Manila.

<sup>205</sup> Gregory B. Poling, Tabitha Grace Mallory, and Prétat Harrison, “Pulling Back the Curtain on China’s Maritime Militia,” November 2021, 12–13, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/pulling-back-curtain-chinas-maritime-militia>.

<sup>206</sup> Anonymous Philippine source P2, Author Interview, September 14, 2023, Puerto Princesa.

<sup>207</sup> Anonymous Philippine source P2.

<sup>208</sup> Politics as Usual, “WPS Conflict Not Cold War but Tension That Can Be Resolved Peacefully, Says WESCOM Chief,” Video, CNN Philippines, September 13, 2023, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2023/9/13/afp-wescom-west-philippine-sea-cold-war-tension.html>.

<sup>209</sup> Politics as Usual.

directing all synchronized maneuvers and cooperating units.<sup>210</sup> During another resupply mission, a Philippine vessel slipped through the PRC blockade. The PCG monitored Chinese radio communication and reported that an allegedly emotional CCG commander directed other CCGVs and CMMVs with a stressed voice to their new positions.<sup>211</sup> Knowing the complexity of maneuvering multiple vessels at sea, one interviewee stated that he was impressed by the “level of control between the CCG and CMM.”<sup>212</sup> The high level of control also indicates that large CMM operations are planned and directed by the PLA, since these complex maritime maneuvers require planning and preparation, likely along with training and a predetermined command structure.

***b. CMM: Activities***

The CMM’s tactical activities in the SCS can be categorized as preparations, coercive maneuvers, and territorial seizure. From the perspective of local escalation, these activities could lead to next steps in the escalation process. However, the ambiguous character of the CMM enables the PRC to conduct these operations below the threshold of armed violence, thereby avoiding escalation. The tactical activities of the CMM are thus not escalatory per definition, but the PRC applies these activities to coerce the Philippines to accept PRC maritime claims.

The CMM conducts several intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) activities to prepare the operational environment. According to an operational expert in the maritime domain, “each vessel is a sensor.”<sup>213</sup> Many CMMVs have radio communication equipment to report significant activities, resulting in a dispersed network of single but connected sensors. In this way, the CMM contributes to the PLAN maritime domain awareness (MDA) in the SCS.<sup>214</sup> Another example of the CMM’s ISR capability is

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<sup>210</sup> Republic of the Philippines – Philippine News Agency, “AFP Eyes More Vessels, Aircraft for West Ph Sea Patrols,” Republic of the Philippines – Philippine News Agency, August 11, 2023, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1207616>; Anonymous Philippine source P2, Author Interview.

<sup>211</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, Author Interview, September 14, 2023, Puerto Princesa.

<sup>212</sup> Anonymous sources O1, Author Interview, September 5, 2023, Okinawa.

<sup>213</sup> Anonymous sources O1.

<sup>214</sup> Anonymous sources O1; Anonymous source O2, Author Interview, September 6, 2023, Okinawa.

Chinese maritime research surveillance vessels (MSRVs). These state-owned maritime research vessels are a different type of CMMVs (not fishing vessels) that conduct seabed surveys. The survey results indicate, for example, future oil and gas exploitation, which can direct CMMVs to coerce foreign vessels out of these resource-rich waters.<sup>215</sup> Although ISR activities are not coercive in nature, the CMM uses its ISR capability to prepare the operational environment. CMM ISR activities can thus be seen as a preparatory step in the coercion process because they can lead to or provide the conditions for coercive activities.

CMM coercive maneuvers are the most threatening activities in the SCS. These maneuvers are not only dangerous but also illegal since they are a direct violation of the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (COLREGS). CMMVs routinely shadow other vessels by monitoring and mirroring their movements. Some interviewed practitioners described these actions as stalking since CMMVs pursue vessels with unwanted attention.<sup>216</sup> Harassment is another form of coercive maneuvers. CMMVs maneuver at distances up to 10 yards—exceptionally close distances in the maritime sector. By doing so, the CMM forces other vessels to change course or to stop. Ship captains perceive these close encounters as exceptionally threatening because one of their primary concerns is the seaworthiness of their ship.<sup>217</sup> Collisions, especially with the CMMV's reinforced steel hull, are extremely dangerous and have already sunk Philippine fishing vessels. In the 2019 Reed Bank incident, 22 Philippine fishermen had to survive for six hours in the water after a CMMV rammed and sunk their vessel.<sup>218</sup> Overall, these coercive maneuvers show a buildup in escalation from shadowing to stalking, harassment, intentional collision, and eventually ramming and sinking.

Territorial seizure, though in different forms, is the third form of coercive CCM activities in the SCS. Some focus group discussions described these activities as swarming,

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<sup>215</sup> Anonymous Philippine sources M1, Author Interview.

<sup>216</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, Author Interview; Anonymous Philippine source P2, Author Interview; Anonymous Philippine focus group M3, Author Interview, September 13, 2023, Manila.

<sup>217</sup> Anonymous sources O1, Author Interview.

<sup>218</sup> Richard Javad Heydarian, "The Reed Bank Crisis: A Call for Upgrading the Philippine-U.S. Alliance," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, July 10, 2019, <https://amti.csis.org/the-reed-bank-crisis-a-call-for-upgrading-the-philippine-u-s-alliance/>.

in which groups of CMMVs occupy strategic locations in the SCS, such as Reed Bank, Escoda Shoal, and the direct vicinity of Second Thomas Shoal. CMMVs anchor together and, according to one source, “do nothing and are just present.”<sup>219</sup> One subject matter expert had a more doctrinal view, labeling these so-called swarming tactics as straightforward “occupation.”<sup>220</sup> While the CMM conducts these swarming tactics overtly, it also applies covert techniques as a more incremental step of territorial seizure. Several reports mentioned how CMMVs covertly harvest and dump coral around the Reed Bank to slowly build up the reef, allegedly for artificial island construction in the long term.<sup>221</sup> The current CMMV presence in the SCS is less direct than the takeover of Scarborough Shoal in 2012 or the island-building campaign around 2014. However, considering the PRC’s long-term objectives, these incremental steps of presence, occupation, and transformation challenge the status quo, which all parties agreed on in the 2002 TAC. Mischief Reef, the PRC’s largest artificial island in the Spratly Islands, also started as a fishermen’s shelter.<sup>222</sup>

*c. CMM: Intent*

The analysis of recent CMM activities in the SCS shows a delicate calibration of intents: some actions are intended to provoke escalation, while others are clearly designed to prevent escalation. Overall, the PRC directs CMM tactical activities to enforce its maritime claims and signal its national resolve to Philippine authorities while simultaneously denying any direct responsibility for the CMM actions.

The PRC’s actions during the Philippine resupply mission at the Second Thomas Shoal indicate that the PRC deliberately intends to escalate the situation in the SCS. On several occasions, such as the resupplies on August 5 and 8, 2023, the PRC deliberately obstructed Philippine vessels by positioning CCGs as well as CMMVs in the sailing route

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<sup>219</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, Author Interview.

<sup>220</sup> Anonymous Philippine source M2, Author Interview.

<sup>221</sup> Kathleen Magramo, “The Philippines Accuses China’s Shadowy Maritime Militia of Destroying Coral Reefs in South China Sea,” CNN, September 23, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/22/asia/south-china-sea-philippines-coral-reef-damage-intl-hnk/index.html>; Anonymous Philippine source P2, Author Interview.

<sup>222</sup> Green et al., *Countering Coercion*, 170.

of the Philippine vessels.<sup>223</sup> Philippine authorities assume that the PRC intends to cause collisions.<sup>224</sup> Other sources claim that Philippine forces are provoked to respond to aggressive maneuvers by the CCG and CMM.<sup>225</sup> These sources assume that the PRC aims to exploit the orchestrated this so called Philippine aggression in the information domain through media coverage and diplomatic response aimed at influencing domestic and international public opinion of the PRC.

Contrary to its provocation tactics, the PRC also uses the CMM to provide plausible deniability for its aggressive actions, thereby avoiding escalation or armed response. The concept of plausible deniability enables the PRC to prevent attribution and deny responsibility for the CMM's actions. The PRC mainly uses plausible deniability for its different stages in territorial seizure, which Manila structurally condemns as incursions and illegal occupation of the Philippine EEZ.<sup>226</sup> Beijing simply responds that the Chinese vessels are just fishing vessels hiding from a storm.<sup>227</sup> Plausible deniability is also used to avoid armed escalation.<sup>228</sup> A dangerous maneuver by, for example, a PLAN vessel will be considered a military action, such as a maritime blockade. Likewise, PLAN transfers in Philippine territorial waters will be labeled as incursions and its extended presence as occupation. The ambiguous character of the CMM enables the PRC to achieve similar effects to using official PLAN vessels, but without taking responsibility.

Besides provocation and plausible deniability, CMM behavior in the SCS indicates a broader PRC objective to establish de facto control of the disputed sea areas in the

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<sup>223</sup> *Independent*, “Live: Philippines Holds News Conference after Chinese Coast Guard Water Cannon Incident,” video, 2:21, YouTube, August 6, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PP6itmWkD4A>.

<sup>224</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, Author Interview.

<sup>225</sup> Anonymous Philippine sources M1, Author Interview; Anonymous Philippine focus group M3, Author Interview.

<sup>226</sup> Reuters, “Philippines Raises Alarm over Increase in Chinese Boats in Disputed Sea,” July 7, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-raises-alarm-over-increase-chinese-boats-disputed-sea-2023-07-07/>.

<sup>227</sup> Lendon, “Beijing Has a Navy It Doesn’t Even Admit Exists.”

<sup>228</sup> Anonymous sources O1, Author Interview.

SCS.<sup>229</sup> CMM and CCG harassment and intimidation aim to deter Philippine vessels from accessing strategic waterways surrounding the Spratlys. These PRC activities also intend to dissuade and deter Philippine forces from asserting their sovereign rights in waters that are legally Philippine EEZ.<sup>230</sup> The PRC thereby undermines Philippine authority and control in the SCS by hampering the PCG vessels' attempts to conduct maritime and sovereignty patrols.<sup>231</sup> According to several interviewees, the CCG, supported by the CMMV, behaves in the disputed areas as "if it is Chinese territory" and challenges Philippine vessels first in Mandarin, then in English.<sup>232</sup> The reports on the October 22, 2023, collision illustrate this. The CCG said the Philippine vessels were trespassing in Chinese waters without authorization and demanded the vessels to leave the area.<sup>233</sup> In sum, PRC activities in the SCS suggest that the CMM currently does not intend to seize parts of the SCS area but rather to control it.

## **2. Response: The Philippines**

Where the CMM poses a threat at the local escalation level, the Philippine maritime security forces form the initial response to the threat. A further examination of the Philippine response shows that the Philippine government has recently taken a firmer position towards the PRC in the SCS, intending to resist PRC coercion and simultaneously avoid escalation. However, the PCG and the Philippine Navy still lack the capability, and a unified political response remains absent.

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<sup>229</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, Author Interview.

<sup>230</sup> Anonymous source, September 2023.

<sup>231</sup> Anonymous Philippine sources M1, author interview; Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, author interview.

<sup>232</sup> Anonymous sources O1, author interview; Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, author interview; Anonymous Philippine source P2, author interview.

<sup>233</sup> Jim Gomez, "Philippines Says a Coast Guard Ship and Supply Boat Were Rammed by Chinese Vessels at Disputed Shoal," Associated Press, October 22, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/south-china-sea-philippines-second-thomas-shoal-64d4fad7bb42b44f991df183fb39fe1d>.

*a. The Philippines: Capability*

The Philippine forces in the SCS consist of the PCG and the Philippine Navy. Both subunits are stationed in Puerto Princessa on Palawan, a Philippine Island east of the disputed Spratly Islands. The PCG is the primary responder for handling the CMMV problem. The Armed Forces of the Philippines' Western Command (AFP WESCOM) are responsible for military defense. Philippine maritime security forces are improving but still lack numbers and capabilities. A recent PCG report states that these forces have “an insufficient amount of assets incapable of patrolling an archipelagic state.”<sup>234</sup> Additionally, a Philippine Senate bill from December 2023 acknowledged the need “to modernize and enhance the capabilities.”<sup>235</sup> The United States and Japan support Philippine modernization efforts with funds and equipment.<sup>236</sup> For example, on September 25, 2023, the United States completed the transfer of 10 patrol ships to the Philippine Navy. According to U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines Mary Kay Carlson, these vessels are intended to support operations in the SCS.<sup>237</sup>

Despite modernization efforts, Philippine capabilities are still outmatched by the PRC forces, and the country is still unable to control the vast area of the SCS. The large amount of CMMVs saturates the Philippine response capability, but the lack of sufficient resources is only one part of the problem.<sup>238</sup> As the Philippines strides to enhance its monitoring capabilities, the PRC is also intensifying its efforts to increase its presence in

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<sup>234</sup> Jun Karlo Laroza and Marren A. Adan, *Deterrence by Denial: The Philippine Coastguard's Role in Mitigating Maritime Security Challenges*, Coast Guard Maritime Digest 2023–01 (Manila, Philippines: Coast Guard Strategic Studies and International Affairs Center, 2023), 19, <https://cgssiac.coastguard.gov.ph/publications/>.

<sup>235</sup> PCG Modernization Act, Senate of the Philippines Bill No. 2516 (2023), [https://legacy.senate.gov.ph/lis/bill\\_res.aspx?congress=19&q=SBN-2516](https://legacy.senate.gov.ph/lis/bill_res.aspx?congress=19&q=SBN-2516).

<sup>236</sup> The Maritime Executive, “Japan Provides Aid to Philippines for Five New Coast Guard Patrol Boats,” November 9, 2023, <https://maritime-executive.com/article/japan-provides-aid-to-philippines-for-five-new-coast-guard-patrol-boats>.

<sup>237</sup> Justus Domingo, “US Sends Last Two Cyclone-Class Patrol Ships to Philippines,” The Defense Post, September 15, 2023, [https://www.thedefensepost.com/2023/09/15/us-cyclone-class-patrol-ships-philippines/?expand\\_article=1](https://www.thedefensepost.com/2023/09/15/us-cyclone-class-patrol-ships-philippines/?expand_article=1).

<sup>238</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, Author Interview; Anonymous Philippine focus group M3, Author Interview.



the SCS.<sup>239</sup> The imbalance in state power and resources provides the PRC the means to pare, outmatch, and, ultimately, render irrelevant Philippine efforts. Other problems are more technical but also stress Philippine force capability and capacity. For example, monitoring PLAN vessels requires physical surveillance because PRC warships do not use their automatic identification system (AIS) signals.<sup>240</sup>

In addition to monitoring, Philippine operational response is also hampered by the CMM's ambiguous character. The Philippine Navy is hindered because the CMM is mainly a law enforcement issue for which the Philippine Navy lacks rules of engagement. The PCG is hampered in its response due to the CMM's ambiguous activities.<sup>241</sup> Firstly, it would be very difficult for the PCG to effectively respond to 50 anchored fishing vessels that are strategically seizing territory but that are legally only lingering vessels. Secondly, the political restrictions in place to avoid escalation complicate an effective Philippine response.<sup>242</sup>

***b. The Philippines: Actions***

The Philippine stance toward the disputes in the SCS became substantially more assertive after two incidents in January 2023.<sup>243</sup> The PCG intensified its operations to monitor and respond by increasing its presence, employing new monitoring capabilities, and expanding air patrols. PCG vessels conducted nine maritime patrols and five Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) flights in the SCS.<sup>244</sup> However, these activities were still restricted to observing and monitoring. According to a senior Philippine operational planner, "Observe and report is the most we can do."<sup>245</sup> Other operations, such as physical inspections or boarding operations, are considered too dangerous. CMM crews are assumed

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<sup>239</sup> Anonymous Philippine sources M1, Author Interview; Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, Author Interview.

<sup>240</sup> Anonymous Philippine sources M1, Author Interview.

<sup>241</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, Author Interview.

<sup>242</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group P1; Anonymous Philippine source P2, Author Interview.

<sup>243</sup> Anonymous source, interview.

<sup>244</sup> Anonymous Philippine sources M1, Author Interview.

<sup>245</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, Author Interview.

to be trained by the PLA, and how they will react is uncertain. The language barrier and risk of misinterpretation could result in self-defense using force.<sup>246</sup> So, although the monitoring operations have intensified, the range of operations to control the CMM has not.

The PCG has also strengthened its posture by intensifying its operations in the SCS and showing a more active commitment. Besides deploying more patrol vessels in the SCS, the PCG also began participating in the resupply mission at the Second Thomas Shoal (a Philippine Navy responsibility).<sup>247</sup> The PCG recently started escorting the contracted civilian supply vessels after having only a limited role in the years prior. The PCG also demonstrated its more assertive stance by installing five additional navigational buoys at strategic locations in the SCS to indicate Philippine claims.<sup>248</sup> The increased Philippine assertiveness did not go unnoticed by the PRC. The PRC responded by placing its own buoys in the vicinity of the Philippine buoys, and more significantly, it led to aggressive behavior of PRC vessels in the area, with the recent escalation around the Second Thomas Shoal as the most prominent incident.

The first period of 2023 also saw escalatory steps in the information domain. The Philippine government started its Transparency Initiative to expose PRC aggression in the SCS and counter PRC misinformation and disinformation. The Philippine Navy and PCG were prioritized to document CMM activities to provide evidence.<sup>249</sup> The Philippines started by issuing press releases and statements to inform the domestic and international public about PRC activities.<sup>250</sup> Philippine authorities also embedded reporters in maritime

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<sup>246</sup> Anonymous Philippine source P2, Author Interview.

<sup>247</sup> Anonymous Philippine sources M1, Author Interview.

<sup>248</sup> Reuters, “Philippines Places Buoys in Parts of S.China Sea to Assert Sovereignty,” May 14, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-places-buoys-parts-schina-sea-assert-sovereignty-2023-05-14/>; Presidential Communications Office, “PBBM’s ‘Decisive Action’ on WPS Sends Strong Message to Chinese Gov’t, Says International Studies Professor.”

<sup>249</sup> Anonymous Philippine sources M1, author interview; Anonymous Philippine source P2, author interview.

<sup>250</sup> Philippine Coast Guard, “Philippines Remains Committed to Protecting and Securing the National Interest, Despite Provocations,” Republic of the Philippines, October 23, 2023, <https://coastguard.gov.ph/index.php/11-news/5369-philippines-remains-committed-to-protecting-and-securing-the-national-interest-despite-provocations>.

patrols, allowed video recording, and invited Philippine politicians to experience the situation with their own eyes. This approach led to an influx of news reports, CNN coverage, and international attention.<sup>251</sup> Combined with increased operations and a more assertive Philippine stance on asserting their claims, these information operations fueled tensions with the PRC. So, despite the limited Philippine capabilities to compete with the PRC in the physical dimension, the Philippines seemingly found a way to challenge the PRC in the information domain.

*c. The Philippines: Intent*

The Philippines’ stance in 2023 indicates an intent to resist the PRC’s coercion by defending its sovereign right in its EEZ and avoiding escalation while simultaneously garnering international support. As the previous section showed, the Philippine government has no intention to escalate with armed force in the physical domain. However, the firm Philippine stance also shows that neither is it willing to accept PRC coercion. The Philippine actions within the escalation process show the intent to *resist*, which, on the escalation ladder, is positioned between *accept* and *tit-for-tat* or *escalate* (see Figure 8).

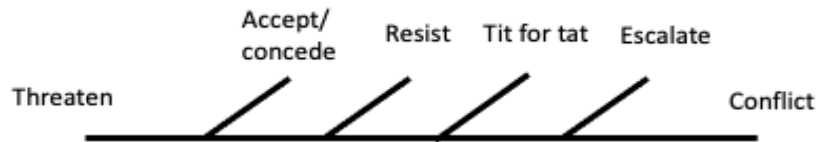


Figure 8. Escalation Ladder

<sup>251</sup> Brad Lendon and Kathleen Magramo, “International Backlash Grows after Chinese Vessel Fires Water Cannon on Philippine Boats,” CNN, August 7, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/07/asia/china-philippines-coast-guard-confrontation-south-china-sea-intl-hnk/index.html>; *Independent*, “Live: Philippines Holds News Conference after Chinese Coast Guard Water Cannon Incident”; Jill Goldenziel, “Water Cannon Reveals Philippine Transparency Strategy Against China Needs Reinforcement,” *Forbes*, September 1, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jillgoldenziel/2023/09/01/water-cannon-reveals-philippine-transparency-strategy-against-china-needs-reinforcement/>; CNN Philippines, “Politics As Usual,” video, Facebook, Politics as Usual, September 13, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/CNNPhilippines/videos/politics-as-usual-september-13-2023-wednesday/306361095377507/>; Kathleen Magramo, “Philippines Says South China Sea Outpost Resupplied despite Chinese Harassment,” CNN, August 23, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/22/asia/philippines-brp-sierra-madre-south-china-sea-intl-hnk/index.html>.

The first way the Philippines intends to resist PRC coercion is by maintaining the status quo in the SCS (referring to the 2002 TAC agreement). As described, the PRC challenges the status quo by competing for de facto control of the area.<sup>252</sup> The Philippines is thus entangled in a competition to uphold its authority in its territorial waters and EEZ. Where the PRC aims to deter and deny Philippine vessels' access, the Philippines aims to show resolve by upholding its access to waterways and asserting their sovereign rights in the Philippine EEZ. Philippine patrols, presence, and communication are all used to reinforce the Philippine claims in its EEZ. The Philippines is driven by the idea that accepting PRC behavior is another step toward losing its sovereign control over the disputed area.<sup>253</sup> So, although no overt seizure or transformation of features has recently occurred in the competition for de facto control, the Philippines continues to challenge all PRC undermining behaviors. By doing so, the Philippines defends its legal position over its EEZ in the SCS.

The second way the Philippines intends to resist is by avoiding escalation. The PCG builds on years of experience working with the CMM and CCG and knows how to cope with these uninvited guests in their waters. The PCG is able to avoid escalation by, according to one local maritime expert, "making no mistakes from our side." PCG commanders know how to act predictably so the PRC captains (CMM or CCG) at sea can read and anticipate Philippine maneuvers.<sup>254</sup> Seemingly, both Philippine and PRC actors at the tactical level have found a day-to-day pragmatic routine or balance in which they uphold and comply with the strategic situation of competition by challenging, replying, patrolling, observing, and reporting while simultaneously preventing escalation at the tactical level. This explanation is less applicable to situations where the PRC intends to provoke escalation, such as the resupply missions at the Second Thomas Shoal. Still, Philippine commanders apply the same experience to avoid escalation, for example, by preventing collisions during the resupply missions.

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<sup>252</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, Author Interview.

<sup>253</sup> Anonymous Philippine sources M1, Author Interview; Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, Author Interview.

<sup>254</sup> Anonymous source, interview.

The described Philippine intents are temporarily sufficient to resist the PRC's coercion, but overall, the Philippine political will is insufficient for an effective response. First, there is no single military solution to the PRC aggression in the SCS because the PRC will almost certainly hold escalation domination in most foreseeable situations. Currently, the CMM problem is mainly left to the PCG and the Philippine Navy. The CMM problem requires a more integral or whole-of-government response to resist not only the threats at sea but also the PRC's diplomatic, informational, and economic coercion.<sup>255</sup> Several proposals to enhance Philippine resilience, such as subsidizing larger fishing vessels or fishing in contested waters, lacked political support.<sup>256</sup> According to senior Philippine officials, the Philippine political landscape is divided between supporters of former President Duterte, who still see the benefits of close PRC ties, and supporters of current President Marcos, who strongly object to the PRC.<sup>257</sup> This division hampers a unified Philippine political response, and without political will, a threat (or response) is not credible. Given this division, the political will to effectively respond in the SCS faces significant challenges.

### 3. **Response: External Support**

To counter the CMM threat effectively, the Philippines needs external support with a multinational strategy. This section explains that competing interests and lack of political will severely hamper the current multinational cooperation. Although these problems are more strategic in nature, they result in the absence of a credible multinational tactical response at sea.

Multinational cooperation is required because the Philippines is part of the PRC's broader regional objective to realize its historical claims along the nine-dash line. From a military perspective, the Philippines is part of the First Island Chain, running from the

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<sup>255</sup> Anonymous source.

<sup>256</sup> Anonymous source.

<sup>257</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, Author Interview; and Anonymous Philippine focus group M3, Author Interview.

Japanese home islands, Taiwan, the Philippine Islands, and Malaysia to Indonesia.<sup>258</sup> The broader CMM campaign is thus not only aimed at the Philippines but also affects most Southeast Asian states in the region. For example, PRC MSRVs also operate in the EEZs of Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia, assumingly to survey the presence, extent, and value of energy reserves. CCGVs and CMMVs routinely escort the MSRVs, possibly intended to signal the PRC's interests and as a form of intimidation.<sup>259</sup> The shared problem in the region thus underscores the need for a multinational response to confront the PRC.

Despite the shared problem in the Southeast Asia region, effective multinational cooperation is hampered due to competing interests amongst the ASEAN nations. The PRC and the Philippines are not the only two claimants in the SCS, or more specifically, the Spratly Islands. The Spratly Islands consist of over 100 small islands or features, 45 of which are occupied by either the PRC, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, or Taiwan.<sup>260</sup> All of these nations, including Brunei, are claimants in this area. Although the nations agreed in the 2002 TAC to refrain from new occupation or the use of violence, several features are still disputed. Different national interests thus result in a certain level of complexity and distrust, hampering a unified response toward the PRC.<sup>261</sup>

A second problem with multinational cooperation concerns the credibility of external support to the Philippines. The United States is the Philippines' most powerful and supportive ally to counter PRC coercion. The 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty formed the backbone of the U.S.–Philippine security alliance.<sup>262</sup> Due to the rise of the U.S.–PRC strategic competition, the Philippines became a crucial partner for the United States in the Pacific region. The two countries' recent \$20 billion Enhanced Defense Cooperation Act

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<sup>258</sup> Yoshihara and Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific*, 71–82.

<sup>259</sup> Anonymous source, interview.

<sup>260</sup> The World Factbook, “Spratly Islands,” Central Intelligence Agency, November 1, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/spratly-islands/>.

<sup>261</sup> Anonymous source, interview.

<sup>262</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “U.S. Philippines Bilateral Defense Guidelines,” May 3, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3383607/fact-sheet-us-philippines-bilateral-defense-guidelines/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.defense.gov%2FNews%2FReleases%2FRelease%2FArticle%2F3383607%2Ffact-sheet-us-philippines-bilateral-defense-guidelines%2F>.

(EDCA) illustrates the renewed alliance. The United States also reaffirmed its security commitment in May 2023 to support the Philippines in case of armed aggression against Philippine “public vessels, aircraft, and armed forces—to include those of its Coast Guard—in the Pacific, including in the South China Sea.”<sup>263</sup> However, several interviewees question the credibility of the U.S. commitment. They question if the United States will actually go to war over a Philippine–PRC conflict.<sup>264</sup> Although the question is understandable from a Philippine perspective, it comes too early from an escalation process perspective. The PRC can interpret a stronger U.S. commitment to the SCS as escalatory, and the United States would diminish its future escalation options. Furthermore, a U.S. military intervention will strongly depend on U.S. interest at stake at that specific moment, which will depend on multiple factors such as the U.S. domestic political situation, U.S. military commitments elsewhere, and the Taiwanese Strait situation.

The doubt of U.S. credibility severely affects the Philippine tactical will and response to PRC coercion. If the Philippine captains at sea lack trust in U.S. support, this influences decision to accept, resist, equally respond, or escalate. On the other hand, following the same line of thought, the interviewees did express having extra confidence when they perceive a form of external support. Allied frigates in the vicinity, or ISR overhead, seem to increase confidence and willingness to act at the tactical level at sea.<sup>265</sup> The perceived support may not compensate for the overall lack of a credible full U.S. military response, but it does seem to contribute to the tactical will to respond.

Another element that limits the international response to the CMM is the lack of political willingness within the international community to provide effective capabilities to enforce the UNCLOS agreement. Without political willingness, every multinational intent to counter the PRC’s coercive campaign lacks credibility. The enforcement of the

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<sup>263</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “Readout of Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III’s Call with Philippine Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro Jr.,” August 8, 2023, [https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3487281/readout-of-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iiis-call-with-philippine-secret/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.defense.gov%2FNews%2FReleases%2FRelease%2FArticle%2F3487281%2Freadout-of-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iiis-call-with-philippine-secret%2F](https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3487281/readout-of-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iiis-call-with-philippine-secret/).

<sup>264</sup> Anonymous source, interview.

<sup>265</sup> Anonymous source.

UNCLOS agreement, or actually the absence of any enforcement, is an example of absent political will. Although the international community ratified the UNCLOS agreement, there are no tactical units or vessels enforcing this agreement. Besides the political agreement necessary to authorize combined operations, the tactical execution is hampered due to a lack of interoperability, such as rules of engagement or command and control systems. Recent reports do indicate that the Philippines is striving to improve its interoperability with Japan and Australia; however, until now, this has not resulted in effective cooperation in the SCS. According to one interviewed practitioner, these tactical preconditions “are far from being realized.”<sup>266</sup> Back to the SCS, the Philippine Navy and Coast Guard are confronted with the PRC’s UNCLOS violations without significant multinational support.<sup>267</sup>

Lastly, it is questionable whether all of the combined efforts within the multinational strategy are able to pose enough costs or risks to compel the PRC to stop its coercive actions in the SCS. As explained, the PRC’s interest in the SCS is part of its national ambition to restore its perceived historical rights in the SCS. The PRC claims in the SCS are thus backed by a strong national resolve, which in turn are based on a deep historical sense of national rejuvenation. So, based on the components of a threat or response, multinational capability with a unified intent or political will is still far from being realized. Even if realized, it is still questionable if the multinational resolve can equal the historically anchored and unified PRC resolve on this matter. With no foreseeable solution, the question arises: What can compel the PRC to stop? The next section on strategic escalation analyzes how the instruments of national power are used in the SCS disputes.

## **B. STRATEGIC ESCALATION**

The PRC and the Philippines not only compete with military means at the local level but also use diplomatic, informational, military, and economic (DIME) instruments to pursue their national interests in the SCS (see Figure 9). This thesis considers the four

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<sup>266</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group M3, Author Interview.

<sup>267</sup> Anonymous Philippine source P2, Author Interview.



DIME factors within the escalation process as strategic escalation and incorporates the instruments “law” under the informational instrument and “law enforcement” under the military component.

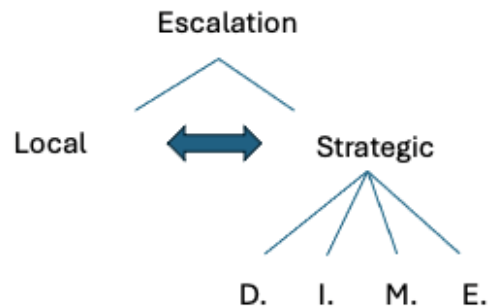


Figure 9. Strategic Escalation

The following section shows that both nations intend to limit military escalation and, as a result, compete with the other instruments. Currently, both countries are engaged in a battle for public support in the information environment, where the PRC mainly leverages its military and economic power. At the same time, the Philippines intends to compensate for its lack of military and economic power by exploiting diplomatic channels.

### 1. Diplomatic

The claimants in the SCS widely use diplomacy to reinforce their claims. According to Joint Chiefs of Staff Joint Publication 1, “Diplomacy is the principal instrument for engaging with other states and foreign groups to advance [national] values, interests, and objectives.”<sup>268</sup> Diplomatic efforts can deliberately target relationships with other nations, such as recalling the ambassador, closing the embassy, ending diplomatic ties, canceling high-level government meetings, or reducing senior-level communications.<sup>269</sup> In the SCS, the Philippines relies on the regional Asian community and the United States to leverage

<sup>268</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, I–12.

<sup>269</sup> Zhang, “Cautious Bully,” 121.

its diplomatic power against the PRC, which, in turn, uses diplomacy to maintain its relationships and regional stability to advance its development.

PRC diplomatic engagements with the countries in the Asia-Pacific are known as the PRC's "peripheral diplomacy."<sup>270</sup> This policy originated after the Tiananmen Incident in 1989 and aims to improve the PRC's relationships with its neighboring countries to provide a stable periphery for the PRC's economic rise. Originally, this policy was aimed at cooperation instead of competition and improving the PRC's relationships with its bordering nations in Southeast Asia.<sup>271</sup> The disputes in the SCS show that the PRC is not able to solve its issues through solely diplomatic means. As described in Chapter V, the PRC uses diplomacy to mitigate the relational costs resulting from its coercive behavior.

The ASEAN community plays a central role in the relationship between the PRC and the surrounding nations in the SCS. The SCS dispute has been a serious issue between the PRC and ASEAN since the 1990s. One of ASEAN's aims is to "promote regional peace and stability [...] and the rule of law in the relationship among countries of the region."<sup>272</sup> ASEAN has been actively involved in all of the major incidents and developments in the SCS, such as the seizure of Mischief Reef in 1995 and Scarborough Shoal in 2012. During these incidents, ASEAN members expressed their concerns through diplomatic channels and condemned PRC aggression. ASEAN also reached agreements such as the 2002 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which committed the SCS claimants to peaceful solutions to their disputes.<sup>273</sup> The Philippines, being a small nation compared to the PRC,<sup>274</sup> uses ASEAN diplomacy to compensate for the imbalance of state power with the PRC.

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<sup>270</sup> Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy*, 172.

<sup>271</sup> Lanteigne, 172.

<sup>272</sup> Association of Southeast Asian Nations, "What We Do," accessed November 7, 2023, <https://asean.org/what-we-do/>.

<sup>273</sup> Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy*, 186–87.

<sup>274</sup> Lowy Institute Asia Power Index, "Philippines," accessed February 8, 2024, <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/countries/philippines/>.

Besides relying on ASEAN, the Philippines also relies on the United States' diplomatic weight to counter PRC coercive behavior in the SCS. The Philippine government routinely summons the PRC ambassador in Manila and hands over a formal diplomatic protest after incidents in the SCS.<sup>275</sup> However, these actions likely fail to impress the PRC. U.S. diplomacy has more impact and can confront the PRC with the threat of international isolation, regional (security) alliances, or containment of PRC development. President Marcos indirectly chose the U.S. side in the broader U.S.–PRC competition by expanding the EDCA cooperation in April 2023. The United States continued to demonstrate a coordinated effort to strengthen its diplomatic ties in the Pacific-Asian region as the year progressed. Commander, Joint Special Operations Command, Vice Admiral Bradley met with the commander of the Philippine Special Operations Command in July, Vice President Harris visited the 11th U.S.–ASEAN Summit in Jakarta on September 6, President Biden visited Hanoi on September 10, and Commander, U.S. Strategic Command, General Cotton visited South Korea in September and Japan in October.<sup>276</sup> These diplomatic moves positively affected U.S.–Southeast Asian relationships. However, based on earlier similar events, the PRC likely considers these diplomatic visits an attempt to isolate the PRC and, therefore, a form of U.S. coercion.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Jim Gomez, “Philippines Summons Chinese Ambassador over Water Cannon Incident in Disputed South China Sea,” Associated Press, August 7, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/philippines-south-china-sea-water-cannon-ambassador-c39a279d3267990320041cff211fd6da>.

<sup>276</sup> U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, “JSOC Commanding Officer Engages with Indo-Pacific Allies,” accessed November 7, 2023, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3479502/jsoc-commanding-officer-engages-with-indo-pacific-allies/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.pacom.mil%2FMedia%2FNews%2FSpotlight%2FArticle%2F3479502%2Fjsoc-commanding-officer-engages-with-indo-pacific-allies%2F>; The White House, “Remarks by Vice President Harris at the 11th U.S.–ASEAN Summit,” September 6, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/09/06/remarks-by-vice-president-harris-at-the-11th-u-s-asean-summit/>; Reuters, “US and Vietnam Ink Historic Partnership in Biden Visit, with Eyes on China,” September 10, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-vietnam-elevate-ties-during-biden-visit-with-eye-china-2023-09-09/>; Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, “USSTRATCOM Commander Meets with Key Indo-Pacific Allies,” September 27, 2023, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2023/09/usstratcom-commander-meets-with-key-indo-pacific-allies/>.

<sup>277</sup> Interpret: China, “U.S. Deterrence and Coercive Diplomacy toward China and China’s Response,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, accessed January 18, 2024, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/u-s-deterrence-and-coercive-diplomacy-toward-china-and-chinas-response/>.

Despite the lack of direct Philippine diplomatic power toward the PRC, the Philippines seems to be able to exploit the international diplomatic arena through the ASEAN community and the United States. ASEAN serves as a platform for regional protests and bargaining, and the United States is a powerful ally for threatening PRC interests. By exploiting these channels, the Philippines can counter PRC ambitions in the SCS. The Philippines might be insignificant to the PRC as a single nation, but using skillful diplomacy, the Philippines can affect PRC interests in the cooperative regional environment that is required for the PRC's continuing economic development. So far, the recent change in the Philippine presidency from Duterte to Marcos has marked a significant change in the Philippines' diplomatic relationship with and stance toward the PRC, in which Marcos seems more willing to leverage the Philippines' indirect diplomatic power toward the PRC.

## 2. Information

The PRC's aggressive strategy in the information environment stands out when compared to the Philippines' strategy. The PRC uses various methods such as propaganda, disinformation, and censorship to influence the narratives and perceptions in SCS disputes. In general, information is one of the PRC's preferred tools of state power. A recent Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) report concluded, "Beijing uses false or biased information to promote positive views of the PRC and ... suppresses critical information that contradicts its desired narratives."<sup>278</sup> The SCS is mentioned explicitly as an example. The PRC's information manipulation ranges from digital and printed content to targeting local academics and politicians, engaging in multilateral platforms and diplomacy, and intimidation, censoring, and sponsoring.<sup>279</sup> When applied, all of these methods can be seen as escalation steps in the information environment.

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<sup>278</sup> Global Engagement Center, *How the People's Republic of China Seeks to Reshape the Global Information Environment* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2023), 4, <https://www.state.gov/gec-special-report-how-the-peoples-republic-of-china-seeks-to-reshape-the-global-information-environment/>.

<sup>279</sup> Global Engagement Center, 3, 10, 23, 30.

From a PRC doctrinal standpoint, the PRC applies the Three Warfares strategy (public opinion, psychological, and legal) to conduct its information warfare. The Central Military Commission (CMC) officially adopted this strategy in 2013.<sup>280</sup> Michael Clarke argues that the PRC applies the three elements in the SCS “ultimately to degrade [its adversaries’] will and capability to initiate or sustain political-military struggle contra PRC interests.”<sup>281</sup> Psychological warfare is aimed at the adversary’s decision-making capabilities and will to act. Public opinion warfare is aimed at winning domestic and international public support. Legal warfare exploits the legal system to assert legitimacy.<sup>282</sup> In accordance with the PRC’s view on “ways of military conflict,” this strategy is not solely for war but also preventive in times of “non-war or para-war.”<sup>283</sup> A closer examination of the SCS dispute shows that the PRC uses the CMM in its Three Warfares strategy.

Within psychological warfare, the ambiguous character and objectives of the CMM intend to create inaction at the strategic and tactical levels. At a strategic level, the CMM causes doubt among the Philippines’ leadership and, equally important, the U.S. and ASEAN administrations, on how to respond to the CMM threat. Since the CMM state or non-state objectives and sponsorship are unclear, so are the response options. At the core of the strategic decisions lies whether the CMM activities warrant the risk of escalation, also described as “the risk of action.”<sup>284</sup> Seemingly, the Philippines, along with the United States and the international community, have refrained from a direct response to CMM activities, indicating that the PRC’s strategic psychological warfare objective of degrading the will and capability to counter PRC interest has succeeded. At the tactical level, a similar situation is noticeable since no suitable response is available to stop the CMM without the

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<sup>280</sup> Michael Clarke, “China’s Application of the ‘Three Warfares’ in the South China Sea and Xinjiang,” *Orbis* 63, no. 2 (January 2019): 191, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2019.02.007>.

<sup>281</sup> Clarke, 208.

<sup>282</sup> Clarke, 191–92.

<sup>283</sup> China Aerospace Studies Institute, *Science of Military Strategy* (2020), 86.

<sup>284</sup> Nathan Freier et al., *Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2016), 27.

risk of crossing the threshold of armed conflict. Or, as one maritime expert stated: “There is no tactical solution for the maritime militia.”<sup>285</sup>

The battle for public opinion, the second Three Warfares strategy, is also observable in the SCS dispute. As described earlier, the Philippine transparency initiative counters PRC disinformation and publicly exposes PRC coercion. The PRC also competes for public opinion. See, for example (among many), the Global Times article in which PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin responds to the U.S. 7th fleet commander’s accusation of PRC aggressive behavior in the SCS.<sup>286</sup> However credible the messaging may look from a Western perspective, the information environment seems to favor the PRC since the international community is still unwilling to intervene and support the Philippine resistance. In the Philippines, the previously described political divisions indicate a lack of public support since a firm, unified political response is still absent.<sup>287</sup>

Lastly, the aspect of legal warfare in the SCS dispute is best illustrated by a decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in 2016. In 2013, the Philippines requested a ruling of the PCA in The Hague after the PRC increased its harassment and started the construction of artificial islands. The PCA’s ruling stated that the PRC’s historical claims and the nine-dash line had no legal basis and that none of the Spratly Islands or claimed land features generated the right of a 200-nautical mile (NM) EEZ.<sup>288</sup> The PRC has continued to reject the ruling and support its perceived legal claims. A recent example of the PRC’s persistence is establishing a center for underwater archaeology in the SCS to provide archaeological evidence to support its legal claims.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Anonymous Philippine source M2, Author Interview.

<sup>286</sup> Fan Anqi, “US’ Provocation on S.China Sea Aims to Turn Region into a ‘Ticking Bomb,’” Global Times, August 28, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1297128.shtml>.

<sup>287</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group M3, Author Interview.

<sup>288</sup> Caitlin Campbell and Nargiza Salidjanova, “South China Sea Arbitration Ruling: What Happened and What’s Next?,” U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, July 12, 2016, 3–4, <https://www.uscc.gov/research/south-china-sea-arbitration-ruling-what-happened-and-whats-next>.

<sup>289</sup> *The Economist*, “Why China Is So Keen to Salvage Shipwrecks in the South China Sea,” June 29, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/china/2023/06/29/why-china-is-so-keen-to-salvage-shipwrecks-in-the-south-china-sea>.

### 3. Military

All parties in the SCS widely use military power; however, it is not the classical violent use of force. The CMM campaign in the SCS, including the Philippine response, can be categorized as the application of military power. According to Joint Chiefs of Staff Joint Publication 1, the purpose of the military instrument is “to fight and win the Nation’s wars,” but the military is “fundamentally, ... coercive in nature.”<sup>290</sup> While the PRC does not formally recognize the CMM as a military unit, the CMM does align with the definition of military power since the CMM threatens to use force as a form of coercion. In other words, the CMM is a paramilitary capability and a subcategory of military power. This form of military power can also signal messages or intentions by presence, military exercises, training of allied partners, or as a show of force.<sup>291</sup> Relative to the other instruments of state power, military power is the most severe step in the escalation process because even a perceived threat can start a spiral of violence. See Chapter II for more detailed information on military power or coercion.

Currently, the PRC and the Philippines apply non-violent military power to pursue their objectives in the SCS. The absence of armed violence does not imply that military escalation does not take place. On the contrary, military escalation is at the core of the CMM problem; however, the escalation does not reach the threshold of armed conflict. Of note, the actual application of military force (taking something by violence) was last used by the PRC against Vietnamese soldiers at Johnson South Reef in 1988.<sup>292</sup> The Philippines also applies non-violent military force. For example, the renewed U.S.–Philippine military cooperation can be seen as escalatory military steps with the recent examples of the transfer of coast guard vessels, the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement, and joint military exercises. Overall, examining military power in the escalation process is about the use of force and the threat to use force, including signaling.

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<sup>290</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, I–13.

<sup>291</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, I–15.

<sup>292</sup> Koh Swee Lean Collin and Ngo Minh Tri, “Learning From the Battle of the Spratly Islands,” *The Diplomat*, March 20, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/learning-from-the-battle-of-the-spratly-islands/>.

#### 4. Economic

The PRC applies economic power for political objectives and has already demonstrated its willingness to use economic coercion. The PRC seems to apply economic coercion when challenged in its national interests, such as territorial integrity or domestic political legitimacy,<sup>293</sup> or to defend its reputation by showing national resolve.<sup>294</sup> Recent examples are sanctioning Japan over the Senkaku Islands dispute (2010), Norway over the Nobel Peace Prize (2010), and South Korea after installing the THAAD air defense system (2016).<sup>295</sup>

Globally, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) illustrates PRC economic engagements. The BRI bears the signature of the PRC's state-led capitalist economy, in which the PRC conducts economic diplomacy by combining commercial negotiations and deals with political influence.<sup>296</sup> Former Philippine President Duterte's SCS appeasement policy exemplifies how the PRC's economic promises influenced Philippine political decisions.<sup>297</sup> For instance, Duterte hoped to improve the Philippines' relationship with the PRC by ignoring the 2016 PCA ruling.<sup>298</sup>

The PRC specifically targeted the Philippines in two cases. During the Scarborough Shoal standoff in 2012, the PRC blocked imports of Philippine bananas (and discouraged Chinese tourism to the Philippines).<sup>299</sup> The PRC applied a certain level of deniability within its economic coercion by stating the import restriction was due to concerns of

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<sup>293</sup> Matthew Reynolds, "Standing United Against the People's Republic of China's Economic Aggression and Predatory Practices," Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 18, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/standing-united-against-peoples-republic-chinas-economic-aggression-and-predatory>.

<sup>294</sup> Zhang, "Cautious Bully," 119.

<sup>295</sup> Reynolds, "Standing United Against the People's Republic of China's Economic Aggression and Predatory Practices."

<sup>296</sup> Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy*, 74.

<sup>297</sup> Rommel Jude G. Ong, "Maritime COIN Is a Team Sport," U.S. Naval Institute, August 1, 2023, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2023/august/maritime-coin-team-sport>.

<sup>298</sup> Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy*, 102.

<sup>299</sup> Reynolds, "Standing United Against the People's Republic of China's Economic Aggression and Predatory Practices."



contamination with mealybugs. Beijing also targeted the former political region of the Philippine president by sanctioning the main production area of Philippine bananas. According to a congressional testimony, these informal but highly targeted sanctions illustrate the PRC's economic coercion.<sup>300</sup>

The economic dependency between the Philippines and the PRC poses a potential risk for the Philippines. Philippine exports to the PRC are 15 percent, and its imports are 22 percent.<sup>301</sup> The PRC's export to the Philippines is only 1.6 percent, and its import is around 1 percent. With a Chinese GDP of \$17.9 trillion compared with the \$404 billion U.S. dollars Philippine GDP, the PRC's economic leverage or potential for economic coercion against the Philippines is significant.<sup>302</sup> The type of goods exported from the PRC to the Philippines also shows vulnerabilities. The Philippines largely depends on Chinese oil, which can impact overall Philippine economic activity and, on a public level, fuel prices. The Philippines also largely depends on Chinese electric communication goods. This reliance can affect not only national aspects such as cybersecurity but also Philippine society due to its dependence on these products.<sup>303</sup>

### C. CONCLUSION

At the local escalation level, there is a tactical imbalance between the PRC threat and the Philippine response. The CMM enables the PRC to project a credible threat at sea, advance its territorial control, maintain plausible deniability, and avoid escalation above the threshold of armed conflict. The Philippine response recently shifted to a firmer stance toward the PRC's activities in the SCS with the intent to resist; however, the PCG and the Philippine Navy still lack capability, and a unified political response remains absent. External support from the international community fails to compensate for the deficient

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<sup>300</sup> Reynolds.

<sup>301</sup> World Integrated Trade Solution, "Philippines Trade," accessed November 7, 2023, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountrySnapshot/en/PHL/textview>.

<sup>302</sup> Erick Nielson C. Javier, "Economic Coercion: Implication to the Philippines and Possible Counters," National Defense College of the Philippines, accessed November 7, 2023, <https://www.ndcp.edu.ph/economic-coercion-implication-to-the-philippines-and-possible-counters/>.

<sup>303</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group M3, Author Interview; Javier, "Economic Coercion."

Philippine response due to competing interests and insufficient political will. This leads to an imbalance between threat and response: the CMM poses a credible threat against an insufficient Philippine response backed up by partly incapable and partly noncredible external support. The local imbalance results in the PRC continuing its coercive CMM campaign.

At the strategic escalation level, the PRC and the Philippines apply the instruments of state power process, but since not all instruments are evenly available, each nation has its preference on which tool to use and when. The PRC relies on a delicate use of military power by utilizing the ambiguous CMM combined with an aggressive stance in the information domain. The Philippines, supported by the United States, has recently taken a firmer diplomatic position toward the PRC by using the information domain to garner international support. Currently, this international support is mainly diplomatic, although some efforts are being made to signal military support. Lastly, the direct application of PRC economic power remains absent but looms as a credible threat to the Philippines.

Besides the application of tactical actions and national power, a relevant question is how the developments within the escalation process actually contribute to the effect of coercion or resisting coercion. The next chapter attempts to provide more insight into this challenging question through a detailed examination of the relationship between tactical and strategic escalation and the coercive effects of each.

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## VII. CASE STUDIES ANALYSIS

In 2023, the PRC and the Philippines were entangled in a fierce dispute over the Second Thomas Shoal and Iroquois Reef. Both maritime features are part of the Spratly Islands and situated within the Philippine EEZ (see Figure 10). Journalists have called the Second Thomas Shoal dispute the “most dangerous flashpoint in the South China Sea.”<sup>304</sup> Iroquois Reef is less known to the general public. The PRC’s coercive activities differed in both cases; the overt PRC blockade and harassments around Second Thomas Shoal contradict with the covert PRC actions to transform the seabed at Iroquois Reef. However, both case studies suggest a similar importance of local escalation in the escalation process and its coercive effect.

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<sup>304</sup> Associated Press, “Dozens of Chinese Ships Chase Philippine Vessels as U.S. Renews Warning It Will Defend Its Treaty Ally,” November 11, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/south-china-sea-disputed-second-thomas-shoal-f702d9b9b84f9019083fb4d530fdf970>.

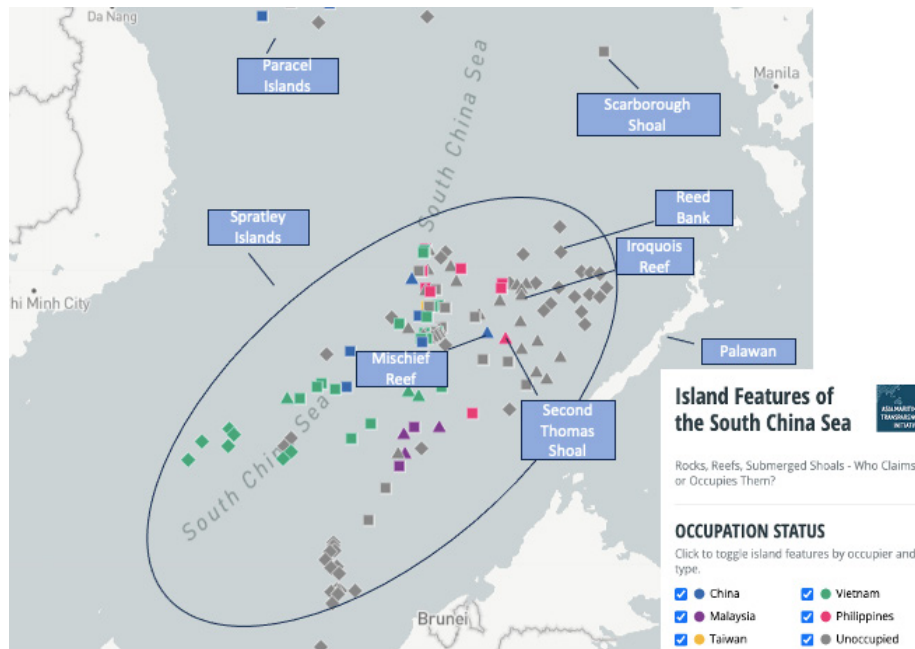


Figure 10. Map of Spratly Islands<sup>305</sup>

This chapter presents the Second Thomas Shoal and Iroquois Reef case studies and applies the conceptual model to analyze the relationship between escalation and coercion. The first two sections present the case studies in a similar way. First, the background introduces the problem and its importance. Second, the analysis of local escalation reconstructs the interaction between threat and response. Third, an examination of strategic escalation shows how the PRC and the Philippines applied the instruments of state power. Fourth, the assessment of the coercive effects explores the contribution of CMM objectives to PRC national interests. Each case study concludes with the conceptual model indicating the relationship between escalation and coercive effects. After the case studies, the third section provides a cross-case analysis with the key findings regarding the two case studies and the broader PRC–Philippine dispute in the SCS.

<sup>305</sup> Adapted from Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, “Rocks, Reefs, Submerged Shoals – Who Claims or Occupies Them?” accessed February 6, 2024, <https://amti.csis.org/scs-features-map/>.

## A. SECOND THOMAS SHOAL

The Second Thomas Shoal is one of the best known and most contested features in the SCS. This low tide elevation, above water at low tide but submerged at high tide,<sup>306</sup> is located 105 NM west of the Philippine Island of Palawan. In 1999, the Philippines beached a former U.S. World War II landing ship (LS 57) at the shoal in reaction to increasing PRC build-up in the SCS. Since then, the BPR *Sierra Madre* has been an isolated Philippine outpost, dependent on rotation and resupply (RORE) of personnel and supplies from the mainland. The deteriorating vessel symbolizes the Philippine struggle against its more powerful PRC neighbor, which slowly strategizes to isolate the outpost until it collapses from SCS erosion.

### 1. Background

The desolate *Sierra Madre* outpost is a unique but dangerous situation. The vessel is manned by armed Philippine marines who depend on resupply and personnel rotations. Furthermore, the Philippines has not yet decommissioned the ship.<sup>307</sup> The combination of armed isolated personnel on an active deteriorating warship has the potential to escalate military. Moreover, the 1951 U.S.–Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty applies to the *Sierra Madre*, potentially turning a minor incident at this remote Philippine outpost in the SCS into a conflict between superpowers.

The Second Thomas Shoal is of significant interest to the Philippines, the PRC, and, as part of a larger context, also to the United States. The Philippines views the Second Thomas Shoal as strategic because of Philippine logistic supply lines and its proximity to the oil-rich Reed Bank and the PRC-occupied Mischief Reef.<sup>308</sup> Additionally, the shoal lies within the Philippine 200 NM EEZ. The PRC is mainly concerned about the construction of a permanent Philippine facility at the shoal. According to PRC statements, the waters within the nine-dash line are PRC territory, which the Philippines misuses for

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<sup>306</sup> United Nations, “Part II: Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone,” 1982, [https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention\\_agreements/texts/unclos/part2.htm](https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/part2.htm).

<sup>307</sup> Green et al., *Countering Coercion*, 171.

<sup>308</sup> Green et al., 170.

resupply missions involving “illegal transportation of construction supplies to PRC Ren’ai Reef.”<sup>309</sup> The United States is primarily concerned about a “free and open Indo-Pacific” and specifically “open access to the South China Sea” in addition to the general strategic competition with the PRC.<sup>310</sup>

The dispute around the Second Thomas Shoal is further troubled by the complex problem of the BPR *Sierra Madre*’s status. At the core of the problem lies the 2002 TAC, in which the claimants agreed not to build new structures or occupy new features.<sup>311</sup> According to Philippine perspective, the *Sierra Madre* situation is pre-2002, and the resupply thus maintains the status quo. The Philippines always denied that the outpost was permanent and recognized the permanent status for the first time on March 14, 2014, after the United States recognized the pre-2002 status quo.<sup>312</sup> Similarly, referring to the 2002 treaty, the PRC views the Second Thomas Shoal as unoccupied and considers any construction as building new structures.<sup>313</sup> These opposing perspectives on the status quo explain why the RORE missions are not just about the resupply of Philippine marines. From the PRC’s perspective, the RORE missions change the status quo within the territory of the nine-dash line.

Table 2 presents an overview of the events around the Second Thomas Shoal escalation.

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<sup>309</sup> Magramo, “Philippines Says South China Sea”; Liu Caiyu et al., “China ‘Fully Prepared’ for Any Possible Situations Around Ren’ai Reef,” *Global Times*, August 8, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1295901.shtml>; China Coast Guard, “Spokesperson of the China Coast Guard Issued a Statement on the Illegal Intrusion of the Philippines into Ren’ai Reef,” accessed November 28, 2023, [https://www.ccg.gov.cn/2023/hjyw\\_1004/2340.html](https://www.ccg.gov.cn/2023/hjyw_1004/2340.html).

<sup>310</sup> Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 37.

<sup>311</sup> The Governments of the Member States of ASEAN and the Government of the People’s Republic of China, “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea.”

<sup>312</sup> Green et al., *Countering Coercion*, 173,186,187.

<sup>313</sup> Green et al., 200.

Table 2. Second Thomas Shoal Timeline, 2023

	Local actions		Strategic actions
	PRC	Philippines	DIME
Jan–Jun	-Force buildup -25 coercive actions		
February 6	Laser incident		
August 5	Blockade + harassment	Failed resupply	
August 6			Philippine press conference
August 6–9			-International condemnation -U.S. reaffirms 1952 Mutual Defense Treaty -Ph. presidential statement
Mid-August	Blockade + reduced force posture	Report successful resupply	
Sept–Nov	Several blockades + harassments	Several successful resupplies	
October 22	Ram + collide with Philippine vessels		
November			Presidential meetings PRC – U.S., Philippines, Australia

## 2. Local Escalation: Threat and Response

The Second Thomas Shoal dispute escalated on August 5, 2023. A steady PRC force posture buildup preceded the first skirmishes. From January to June 2023, WESCOM conducted six RORE missions in which the observed PRC force package increased from one CCGV, two CMMVs, and zero PLAN vessels in February to one CCGV, eight CMMVs, and four PLAN vessels in June.<sup>314</sup> From January to June, the Philippines recorded 25 coercive PRC actions. The CMM served as force multipliers to the CCG and PLAN vessels by monitoring, blocking entry routes of resupply boats, and driving away other fishing vessels near the shoal.<sup>315</sup> The most aggressive action occurred on February 6, when a CCGV directed a military-grade laser light toward the bridge of the BRP Malapascua, temporarily blinding the Philippine crew members.<sup>316</sup>

<sup>314</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, Author Interview.

<sup>315</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group P1.

<sup>316</sup> Neil Jerome Morales and Karen Lema, “Philippines President Summons China Envoy over Laser Incident,” Reuters, February 14, 2023, sec. Asia Pacific, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-files-protest-china-over-use-laser-aggressive-activities-by-vessels-2023-02-14/>.



On August 5, the PRC deployed an even larger maritime force package. A total of 6 CCGVs, 12 CMMVs, and 2 PLAN vessels waited while carefully positioned in a layered force model. Approximately three days earlier, several CMMVs were prepositioned to act as an early warning. Other vessels were positioned at Sabina Shoal, 14 NM from Second Thomas Shoal (see Figure 11). The Philippines deployed two PCG, two navy, and two auxiliary civilian vessels. These civilian vessels were small, indigenous wooden boats capable of approaching and entering the Second Thomas Shoal’s shallow waters.<sup>317</sup>

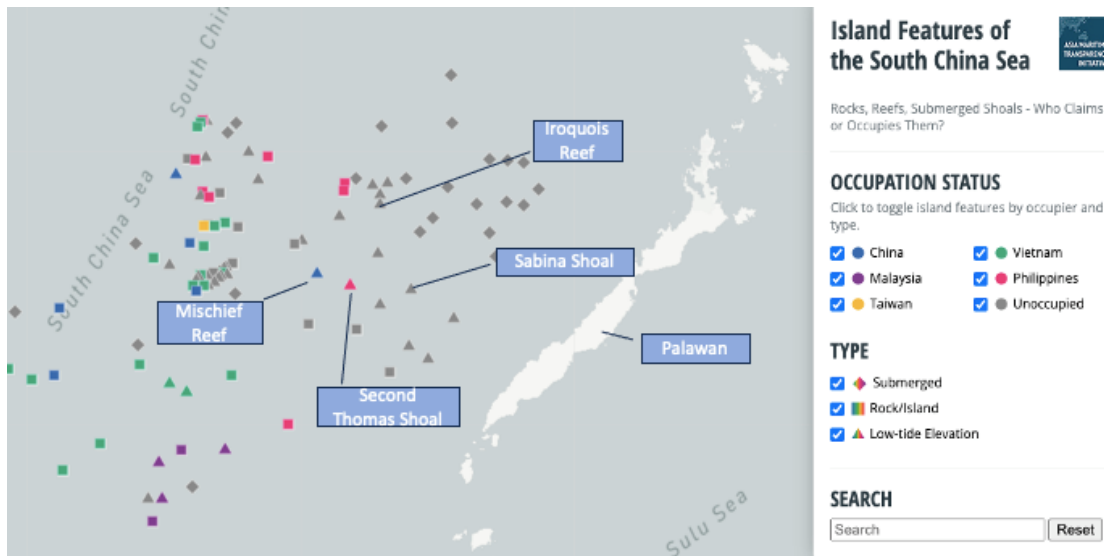


Figure 11. Map of Second Thomas Shoal and Surroundings<sup>318</sup>

As soon as the Philippine vessels passed Sabina Shoal, PRC vessels started shadowing them. What followed was a series of well-coordinated harassments and intimidations. The PRC vessels attempted to prevent the Philippines from reaching the BPR *Sierra Madre* by conducting dangerous maneuvers such as crossing the bow at distances up to 40 yards, using water cannons, and attempting to cause deliberate collisions.<sup>319</sup> According to several interviewees, CMM and CCG crews took direct orders from an on-

<sup>317</sup> CNN Philippines, “Politics As Usual.”

<sup>318</sup> Adapted from Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, “South China Sea Features.”

<sup>319</sup> The Independent, “Philippine Press Conference August 5th Incident.”

scene commander located over the horizon or at Mischief Reef.<sup>320</sup> The PRC vessels ultimately forced the Philippine vessels in another direction by shouldering the Philippine vessels at the starboard and port sides with a third vessel at the rear. Eventually, only one Philippine auxiliary supply vessel reached the *Sierra Madre*.

In mid-August, the Philippines launched a second attempt to reach the BPR *Sierra Madre*. This time, the Philippines encountered a significantly smaller PRC force package. While the Philippines deployed the same number and types of ships, in which one PCG vessel escorted each auxiliary vessel, the PRC had adjusted their forces and posture. The PRC deployed smaller vessels, probably to enhance their maneuverability, and positioned the PLAN vessels 30 NM out instead of the 5 NM during the August 5 RORE, likely to downscale its military posture.<sup>321</sup> On August 22, the National Task Force on the West Philippine Sea (NTF-WPS) announced that Philippines vessels had successfully delivered provision supplies to the contingent manning the BRP *Sierra Madre* despite repeated interference from PRC vessels.

More successful RORE missions followed, such as those on October 4 and November 10.<sup>322</sup> However, two severe incidents also occurred. On the night of October 2, an unidentified foreign vessel rammed the Philippine fishing vessel FFB *Dearyn* in the waters off Scarborough Shoal, killing three Philippine fishermen. Whether or not the incident was related to PRC aggression is unclear.<sup>323</sup> The second incident occurred on October 22, when a CCGV collided with a Philippines-contracted resupply boat (UM2)

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<sup>320</sup> Anonymous Philippine source P2, Author Interview; Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, Author Interview.

<sup>321</sup> Anonymous Philippine source C1, Author Interview, February 16, 2024, Monterey, CA.

<sup>322</sup> CNN Philippines, “Another Resupply Mission to Ayungin Successful despite China’s Attempts to Harass, Interfere Again,” CNN Philippines, accessed November 18, 2023, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2023/10/4/ayungin-resupply-mission-china-attempt-interference.html>; National Task Force-West Philippine Sea, “Statement of the National Task Force-West Philippine Sea,” Institute for Maritime and Ocean Affairs, November 13, 2023, <https://www.imoa.ph/statement-of-the-national-task-force-west-philippine-sea/>.

<sup>323</sup> Presidential Communications Office, “PBBM Assures to Exhaust Legal Remedies in the Deaths of 3 Filipino Fishermen,” Presidential Communications Office, October 4, 2023, [https://pco.gov.ph/news\\_releases/pbbm-assures-to-exhaust-legal-remedies-in-the-deaths-of-3-filipino-fishermen/](https://pco.gov.ph/news_releases/pbbm-assures-to-exhaust-legal-remedies-in-the-deaths-of-3-filipino-fishermen/).

and a CMMV rammed a PCG vessel northeast of the Second Thomas Shoal.<sup>324</sup> The incident was significant because this was the first time a PRC vessel rammed a Philippine vessel during a RORE. No crew members were injured, but the incident initiated another round of Philippine and international condemnations.

An analysis of the tactical actions at Second Thomas Shoal shows not only a clear escalation on and directly after August 5 but also within the broader period from January to October 2023. Starting in January, the PRC took the first step in the escalation process by deploying more vessels into the area around the Second Thomas Shoal. The Philippines disagreed with but accepted the escalation since no action was taken to actively counter the additional PRC vessels. The PRC also executed the second step in the escalation process with the laser incident. Again, no Philippine tactical response followed.

The August 5 incident also marked a clear escalation in which the Philippines responded more assertively toward PRC non-armed aggression. The Philippines neither accepted nor escalated with force but resisted by outmaneuvering the PRC's blockade. This new Philippine stance, combined with informational and diplomatic escalation (as shown in the next section), probably changed the PRC's cost calculus. This possibly led to a decreased PRC force posture in the following RORE. The Philippines continued to persist in this newly discovered tactical leverage over the PRC, while the PRC again stepped up its escalation, leading to a collision during the RORE on October 22.

The increased Philippine tactical will to resist can be explained by the components of threat or response, namely intent or, more specifically, the will to act. The success of the RORE missions depends eventually on the willingness of the Philippine auxiliary vessel's captain to maneuver against the CCG and CCM threat. The August 5 video shows how the captain of the auxiliary vessel took risks to persevere with his mission.<sup>325</sup> Interview data also indicates that the perceived external support bolstered the captain's willingness at sea

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<sup>324</sup> National Task Force-West Philippine Sea, "Statement of the National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea," Embassy of the Philippines, October 22, 2023, <https://dohape.dfa.gov.ph/newsroom/advisories/866-statement-of-the-national-task-force-for-the-west-philippine-sea,-22-october-2023.html>.

<sup>325</sup> The Independent, "Philippine Press Conference August 5th Incident."

to resist and to take risks.<sup>326</sup> Video footage from August 5 supports these two claims by showing a U.S. aircraft circling above the Philippine and PRC vessels, indicating external support.<sup>327</sup>

Overall, January–October 2023 showed a gradual increase in the local escalation, but both actors remained below the threshold of armed response. Classical coercion and game theory classify this type of gradual escalation as small steps.<sup>328</sup> The escalation process continues, but it does so incrementally. These small steps by each side can continue until one of the players has run out of options. This moment is dangerous because, at this point, the actor who ran out of options must decide to accept defeat or cross the threshold of armed violence.

### **3. Strategic Escalation: DIME**

The day after the incident, Philippine officials exposed and condemned the PRC aggression at a press conference.<sup>329</sup> The PCG showed a video of a significantly larger CCGV firing a water cannon at the small Philippine auxiliary vessel. The video footage also showed how a PRC ship dangerously crossed the bow of a PCG vessel. Philippine statements accompanied the video and condemned the “dangerous maneuvers and illegal use of water cannons against PCG vessels.”<sup>330</sup> Philippine and international media picked up this message of the water cannon incident, which led to a fierce international backlash against the PRC.<sup>331</sup> The incident on August 5 thus triggered a broader escalation.

The August 5 incident served as a showcase for the Philippine transparency initiative, setting off a series of strategic escalations. The released video formed the first step in the strategic escalation process as the video successfully spread and raised national and international support against PRC aggression. In other words, the Philippine

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<sup>326</sup> Anonymous sources O3, Author Interview, September 7, 2023, Okinawa.

<sup>327</sup> The Independent, “Philippine Press Conference August 5th Incident.”

<sup>328</sup> Dixit and Nalebuff, *The Art of Strategy*, 192–93.

<sup>329</sup> The Independent, “Philippine Press Conference August 5th Incident.”

<sup>330</sup> Lendon and Magramo, “International Backlash Grows.”

<sup>331</sup> Lendon and Magramo.

government combined the local escalation at sea with an escalation in the information domain, which resulted in further diplomatic and, arguably, military support.

The key messages supporting the video focused on influencing public opinion by condemning PRC aggression. The video was initially followed up by moderate messaging, although at the highest level. President Marcos said, “We continue to assert our sovereignty. We continue to assert our territorial rights in the face of all of these challenges and consistent with the international law and UNCLOS.”<sup>332</sup> President Marcos also stressed the importance of open lines of communication after the failed attempt of the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs to establish diplomatic contact with the PRC while the incident occurred.

Diplomatic efforts with a fierce stance at the highest political level followed the initial information campaign. After the incident, the Philippine foreign affairs secretary filed a diplomatic note of complaint against Beijing.<sup>333</sup> The Department of Foreign Affairs summoned the PRC ambassador in Manila. On Wednesday, President Marcos stepped up the tone of his messaging. He clearly stated, “The BRP *Sierra Madre* will stay right where it is in Ayungin Shoal.”<sup>334</sup> Marcos, supported by National Security Council Assistant Director General Jonathan Malaya, further denied the existence of the insinuated Philippine–PRC agreement to remove the *Sierra Madre*. Marcos even went a step further by stating, “if there does exist such an agreement, I rescind that agreement now.”<sup>335</sup> Meanwhile, diplomatic interactions between Philippine Vice President Sara Duterte and PRC and U.S. embassy officials continued. Marcos expressed support for the ongoing diplomacy on August 23 but also stated, “Might does not make it right. We will stand our ground because we are in the right.”<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> CNN Philippines, “PH Summons Chinese Ambassador, Files Diplomatic Protest after Incident near Ayungin Shoal,” CNN Philippines, accessed November 19, 2023, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2023/8/7/ph-sends-note-verbale-water-cannon-attack.html>.

<sup>333</sup> Lendon and Magramo, “International Backlash Grows.”

<sup>334</sup> CNN Philippines, “Marcos: Rescind Deal with China.”

<sup>335</sup> CNN Philippines.

<sup>336</sup> Michael Punongbayan Mateo Janvic, “Ayungin Resupply Pushes Through,” Philstar.com, August 14, 2023, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2023/08/23/2290693/ayungin-resupply-pushes-through>.

The public exposure of the water canon incident also triggered a domestic and international response. The Philippine strategic communication clearly reached the domestic audience. A week after the incident, two Philippine political science professors discussed how it stirred up Philippine nationalism and how the Philippines could increase its resilience toward the PRC.<sup>337</sup> Internationally, the United States sent a prompt and clear signal on August 6 by condemning the PRC’s actions. Other nations, like Australia, Japan, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the European Union (EU), supported the Philippines. The Japanese ambassador called the actions “totally unacceptable,” Australia called them “serious risks to regional peace and stability,” and the EU Ambassador stressed “the rule-based order” and the “legally binding nature of the 2016 South China Sea arbitration.”<sup>338</sup>

The United States probably sent the most severe signal by reminding the PRC that “the Mutual Defense Treaty extends to Philippine public vessels, aircraft, and armed forces—to include those of its Coast Guard—in the Pacific, including in the South China Sea.”<sup>339</sup> This statement by U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin arguably exceeds the diplomatic domain and resembles a military threat from the PRC perspective. The U.S. statement was designed to increase the Philippine will to resist, which, as a result, played an important role in the success of the RORE missions after August 5.

The U.S. statement is more than a sign of diplomatic support to the Philippines. It is a direct and credible threat to the PRC, firstly, because the United States has the military capability to execute the threat and, secondly, because the United States applied one of the coercion principles of commitment: the threat was made publicly and legally binding due to the mutual defense treaty.<sup>340</sup> Not executing this threat would cost the United States severe reputational damage and credibility to defend the current rules-based order and its

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<sup>337</sup> Jerome Aning, “Ayungin Incident Has Sparked Nationalism – Political Analysts,” *Inquirer.net*, August 14, 2023, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/217751/ayungin-incident-has-sparked-nationalism-political-analysts>.

<sup>338</sup> Tina G. Santos, “US, Allies Slam China for Firing Water Cannons on Philippine Vessels,” *Asia News Network*, August 7, 2023, <https://asianews.network/us-allies-slam-china-for-firing-water-cannons-on-philippine-vessels/>.

<sup>339</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “Readout of Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin.”

<sup>340</sup> Dixit and Nalebuff, *The Art of Strategy*, 201–18.

allies. Additionally, the U.S. statement can be seen as a moderate signal with enough room for further escalation. The United States limited its response to a statement and refrained from even stronger military signals such as troop movements, exercises, commitment, or establishing tripwires.

Overall, the public exposure of the water canon incident on August 5 resulted in a temporarily decreased PRC willingness to respond and a persistent increased Philippine willingness to do so. As described in Chapter II, a credible threat or response depends on three components: capability, actions, and intent. The willingness to act is part of the intent; the intent is predominantly determined by the political will to support and authorize the action. After the August 5 incident, PRC willingness decreased due to the risks of international backlash from public exposure. And although the Philippine capability remained the same, its intent changed because of its increased political will. The Philippine political will had changed due to the achieved overhand in the information domain and the following national and international support. So, the change in political will on both sides eventually resulted in a more credible Philippine response and a less credible PRC threat. This change finally altered the tactical balance and provided maneuvering space for the Philippines at sea. Within the escalation process, the combination of the information domain and the external support proved to be decisive.

#### **4. Effects**

The PRC's coercive effects at the Second Thomas Shoal can be assessed by analyzing whether the CMM's objectives contributed to the PRC's territorial objectives in the SCS. As explained, advancing authority and control of the SCS is part of the PRC's nine-dash line strategic interest; however, the PRC balances this objective against the relational costs. To pursue its national interests, the PRC uses the CMM to secure incremental steps with plausible deniability below the threshold of response. The coercive effect at the Second Thomas Shoal is thus determined by assessing if the CMM's effects contributed to the PRC's territorial objectives in the SCS.

First, the PRC failed to advance its objectives in the SCS during the Second Thomas Shoal escalation. The Second Thomas Shoal is a vital part of the PRC's ambition of

territorial control of the waters and features within the nine-dash line. Until now, the PRC has failed to lower the Philippines' willingness to give up its sovereignty and its ambition to establish a permanent structure at Second Thomas Shoal. On the contrary, Philippine political resolve and public nationalism have only increased since the crisis. Also, the PRC failed to establish control of the waters surrounding the shoal since Philippine Navy and Coast Guard vessels still effectively conduct RORE missions to the *Sierra Madre*. Lastly, the PRC failed to prevent relational costs, as the strategic escalation resulted in severe international backlash. However, the PRC seemed to have mitigated these costs through diplomatic efforts later in 2023. President Xi discussed “beneficial relationships” with his U.S., Philippine, and Australian counterparts during several top meetings in November.<sup>341</sup>

Second, CMM activities have not advanced the objective of territorial control in the SCS by realizing incremental steps with plausible deniability below the threshold of armed response. The RORE video footage showed how CMMVs harass and obstruct Philippine vessels. The close coordination and apparent integration with the CCG leave little doubt about the CMM's sponsor. Most Western media and statements have stopped paying attention to the separate role or status of the CCM during the RORE missions and have already assumed that Beijing directs the CMM and the CCG.<sup>342</sup> From a more authoritative level, the CMM has not significantly increased its control at or around the Second Thomas Shoal. The shoal is still a Philippine-occupied feature, which the Philippines is able and willing to sustain. Moreover, the legal claims seem to favor the Philippines since international public opinion increasingly supports the Philippines. Finally, the CMM has not succeeded in provoking the Philippines to cross the threshold of armed response. As shown, the Philippine Navy and PCG vessels are still able to resist without the use of force.

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<sup>341</sup> The White House, “Readout of President Joe Biden’s Meeting”; and GOVPH, “PBBM Says WPS Issue Not the Defining Element of PH-China Relationship”; and Reuters, “China and Australia Agree to Turn the Page as Tensions Ease,” *The Japan Times*, November 6, 2023, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/11/06/asia-pacific/albanese-xi-meeting/>.

<sup>342</sup> CNN Philippines, “Another Resupply Mission to Ayungin Successful despite China’s Attempts to Harass, Interfere Again”; National Task Force-West Philippine Sea, “Statement of the National Task Force-West Philippine Sea.”



Overall, the coercive effect of CMM activities at the Second Thomas Shoal can be labeled as low. The PRC could not utilize the CMM’s plausible deniability and its ability to undermine the Philippine territorial control to advance its historical claims along the nine-dash line with limited relational costs. The PRC has failed to impose high enough costs on the Philippines to force the Philippines to accept the PRC’s coercion. Nonetheless, the tactical and strategic escalation were still continuing while this thesis was being written. Considering the PRC’s long-term strategy, time will provide the PRC with more opportunities to find different approaches to achieve its objective. As for now, the recent Philippines stance seems to be effective.

### 5. Sub-Conclusion

The analysis of the Second Thomas Shoal incident is shown in Figure 12 with a combination of moderate local escalation and high strategic escalation, resulting in a low coercive effect. The findings suggest a relationship between local and strategic escalation and the importance of an actual visible tactical response. The tactical action of the Philippine auxiliary vessel’s captain eventually acquired diplomatic and military strategic meaning through exposure in the information domain. The tactical action facilitated the strategic escalation, which in turn reinforced the effect of the tactical action.

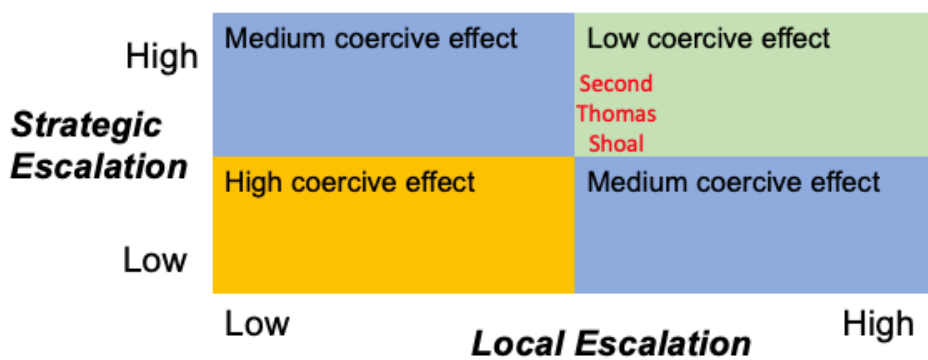


Figure 12. Second Thomas Shoal Escalation and Coercion Matrix

The fact that there was a physical, tactical action provided the opportunities for the Philippines. First, the tactical action could be exploited in the information domain. Second, the tactical action could be augmented with external support, as the U.S. military patrol aircraft indicates, as well as diplomatic international support. Third, the will to resist could be influenced by external support. Lastly, the monthly repeating RORE missions created further occasions to reinforce successful tactics and strategies. These events show the advantages of having a tactical action to exploit strategically. It thereby indicates the value and the need to respond locally to coercion.

## **B. IROQUOIS REEF**

Vice Admiral Alberto Carlos, AFP's WESCOM chief, set off the escalation process around Iroquois Reef by exposing PRC activities at a press conference on September 16, 2023. Carlos did not directly accuse the PRC of illegal coral harvesting and destruction, but he did make indications that suggesting that the PRC was responsible.<sup>343</sup> Two days later, the PCG supported the AFP's chief by revealing, "The PCG undertook an extensive underwater survey of the seabed in both Rozul Reef and Escoda Shoal during the covert operations [conducted by the PRC]." <sup>344</sup> The presented evidence indicated that the intentional dumping of cleaned and crushed coral was altering the underwater terrain. Although the first accusations did not mention possible land reclamation, further political reactions focused on the looming threat of PRC island-building resurgence in the SCS.<sup>345</sup>

Analyzing the events around Iroquois Reef through the application of the conceptual model reveals that the PRC advanced its territorial objectives in the SCS using incremental steps. Furthermore, the lack of an effective Philippine local response seemed

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<sup>343</sup> MI News Network, "Philippines Accuses China Of Illegal Coral Harvesting In The West Philippine Sea," Marine Insight, September 19, 2023, <https://www.marineinsight.com/shipping-news/philippines-accuses-china-of-illegal-coral-harvesting-in-the-west-philippine-sea/>.

<sup>344</sup> Celeste Anna Formoso, "PCG Confirms Coral Damage by Chinese Militia at Iroquois Reef, Sabina Shoal," Palawan News, September 18, 2023, <https://palawan-news.com/pcg-confirms-coral-damage-by-chinese-militia-at-iroquois-reef-sabina-shoal/>.

<sup>345</sup> CNN Philippines, "China's Suspected Damaging of WPS Reefs 'Ripe' for Senate Probe – Hontiveros," CNN Philippines, September 18, 2023, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2023/9/18/china-alleged-reef-harvesting-ripe-senate-probe.html>.

to limit the escalation process, eventually resulting in another successful instance of PRC coercion.

## 1. Background

Iroquois (Rozul) Reef is a non-occupied but contested underwater feature in the upper northeast part of the Spratly Islands. The reef is part of Reed Bank, also known under the Philippine name, Recto Bank. It is located approximately 130 NM northwest of the Philippine Island of Palawan (see Figure 13). In the arbitration of 2016, the PCA ruled that Reed Bank is part of the Philippine EEZ, giving the Philippines the right to exploit the presumed rich hydrocarbon resources. Until now, the Philippines has refrained from offshore exploitation due to PRC pressure and threats.<sup>346</sup>

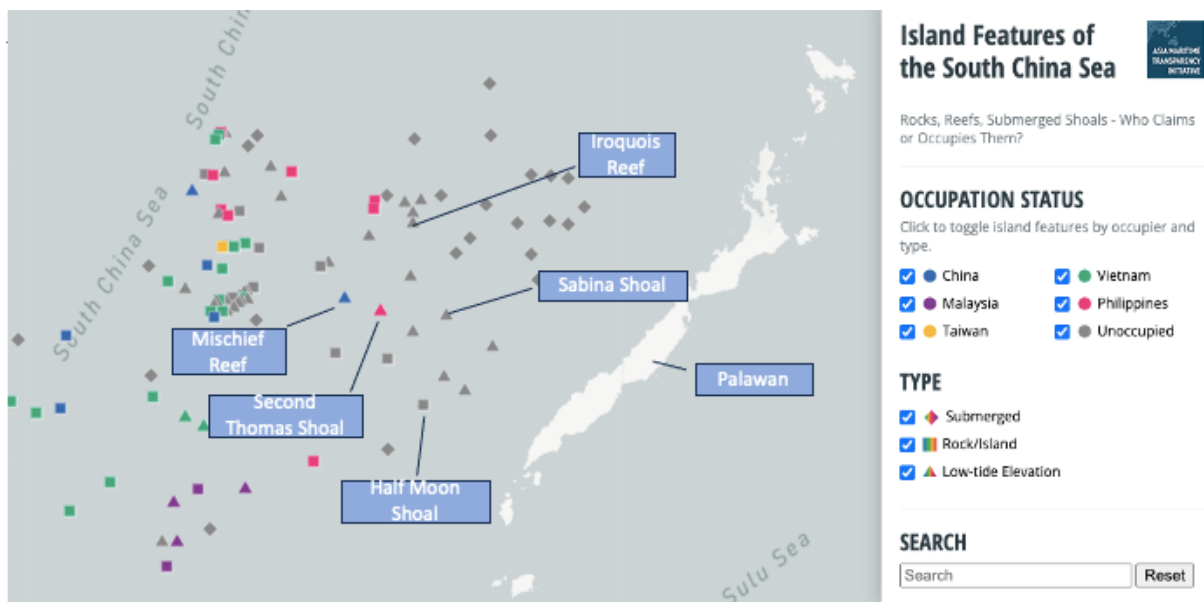


Figure 13. Map of Iroquois Reef<sup>347</sup>

<sup>346</sup> Paul Benecki, "'Swarm' of Chinese Vessels Spotted Near Strategic Reed Bank," *The Maritime Executive*, July 10, 2023, <https://maritime-executive.com/article/swarm-of-chinese-vessels-spotted-near-strategic-reed-bank>; Anonymous source, interview.

<sup>347</sup> Adapted from Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "South China Sea Features."

The strategic location of Iroquois Reef explains the PRC’s interest. The line between Iroquois Reef, Sabina Shoal, and Half Moon Shoal aligns with part of the nine-dash line. Together with Mischief Reef, this triangle isolates the heavily contested and Philippine-occupied Second Thomas Shoal.<sup>348</sup> Additionally, these underwater formations are of specific interest to the PRC because the features are suitable for land reclamation and island construction due to their hydrographic characteristics.<sup>349</sup> The economic and strategic value thus explains the PRC’s and CMM’s focus on these areas; as one interviewee with a long career of coping with the CMM stated, “Presence is never just presence; they are always doing something.”<sup>350</sup>

Table 3 presents an overview of the events around the Iroquois Reef escalation.

Table 3. Iroquois Reef Timeline, 2023

	Local actions		Strategic actions
	PRC	Philippines	DIME
March-May	Increases loitering CMMVs to 55		The Philippines files diplomatic protest
Sept	Transforms seabed by dumping coral	Observe + report	
Sept 16			AFP press conference exposing reef destruction
Sept 18		Increase patrols + conduct underwater survey	PCG reveals video footage
Sept 16–20			Philippine + international diplomatic protests Philippine President mentions fishing ban. Public debate on ecological impact.
Sept 20			US transfer patrol aircraft

<sup>348</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, Author Interview; Anonymous Philippine source C1, Author Interview.

<sup>349</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, Author Interview; Anonymous Philippine source C1, Author Interview.

<sup>350</sup> Anonymous Philippine source P2, Author Interview.

## 2. Local Escalation: Threat and Response

Several alarming events and reports preceded the recent exposure of the covert CMM activities at Iroquois Reef. On June 30, 2023, the AFP publicly released reports and photos in which aerial surveillance patrols confirmed the presence of 48 PRC fishing vessels loitering at Iroquois Reef.<sup>351</sup> Other official reports also showed a significant increase of CMMVs in the vicinity of Iroquois Reef, ranging from 18 vessels in March 2023 to 55 in May 2023.<sup>352</sup> Early Philippine concerns concentrated on violations of Philippine sovereign rights in the area and the undeveloped oil and gas potential.<sup>353</sup> However, the Philippines took no actions other than informing the Philippine line of command and filing a diplomatic protest.<sup>354</sup>

One focus group discussion confirmed the suspected covert land reclamation before the press conference in September 2023.<sup>355</sup> The PCG routinely conducts inspections based on satellite imagery that indicate changes on the seabed.<sup>356</sup> The first reports indicated that CMMVs were dumping rocks in the area, but no evidence was found after inspection.<sup>357</sup> Still, there was reason to believe that CMMVs secretly harvested and dumped coral around Iroquois Reef to patiently transform the seabed, presumably making it suitable for land reclamation. CMM crews would work at night under the cover of darkness and stop their activities when observed. The PRC crews would specifically dump coral, not sand or rocks, because coral is less affected than sand or stones by sea erosion.<sup>358</sup> The Philippine suspicion is understandable since the PRC applied similar methods in 2014 when PRC

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<sup>351</sup> Benecki, “‘Swarm’ of Chinese Vessels.”

<sup>352</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, Author Interview.

<sup>353</sup> Anonymous Philippine sources M1, Author Interview.

<sup>354</sup> Benecki, “‘Swarm’ of Chinese Vessels.”

<sup>355</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, Author Interview.

<sup>356</sup> Anonymous Philippine source C1, Author Interview.

<sup>357</sup> Anonymous Philippine source P2, Author Interview.

<sup>358</sup> Anonymous Philippine focus group P1, Author Interview.

fishing vessels first dumped sediment, preceding the large dredgers that constructed the artificial islands.<sup>359</sup>

A closer examination of the tactical steps within the Iroquois Reef developments shows that the escalation process took place; however, local escalation remained low. The initial Philippine reports already indicated an increased presence of CMMVs at Iroquois Reef in June 2023. As mentioned, “presence is never just presence.” In other words, the increased PRC presence can be seen as a first step in the escalation process. The Philippines reacted by observing and reporting the PRC presence, but it refrained from physical action or increased posture. Viewed another way, the PRC made its first tactical move by increasing its presence and thereby changing the status quo. The Philippines took the next step by accepting the new status quo. Of course, the Philippines protested and exposed the PRC’s activity, but a tactical response at sea remained absent.

The PRC and the Philippines carefully designed their next moves in the escalation process. The PRC continued its covert harvesting and dumping of coral to change the status quo by raising the level of the submerged reef. The Philippines responded with covert and overt tactical activities aimed at collecting evidence. AFP divers conducted underwater inspections after the CMMVs left the area, and air patrols monitored the area.<sup>360</sup> Once again, the Philippines refrained from tactical action to compel the PRC to halt its illegal activities, thereby accepting the changing status quo on the seabed around Iroquois Reef.

Looking back at the local escalation, the PRC changed the status quo twice: in force presence and in geographical transformation (see Figure 14).

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<sup>359</sup> Green et al., *Countering Coercion*, 240–41.

<sup>360</sup> Angeline Marcelino, “AFP Sounds Alarm: Rozul Reef’s Corals Completely Wiped Out,” *Inquirer.net*, September 16, 2023, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/219428/chinese-militia-suspected-of-coral-harvesting-in-west-ph-sea>.

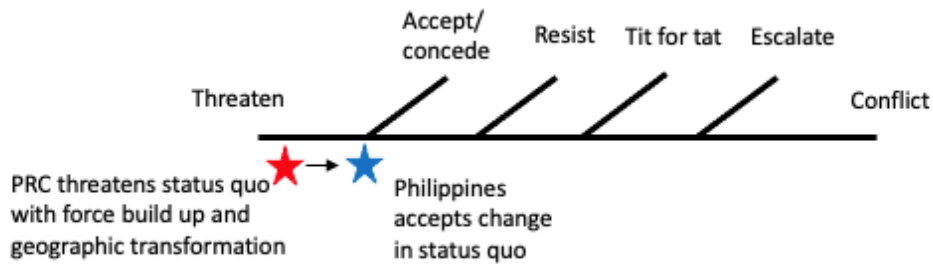


Figure 14. Escalation Ladder at Iroquois Reef

The Philippines accepted the status quo change twice, most likely not voluntarily, but out of necessity and because of the absence of viable tactical response options. Not accepting would imply resisting or a tit-for-tat response directed at stopping or engaging approximately 50 CMMVs at sea. Both alternative options would have required significant tactical resources, actions, and, foremost, political will to accept the risks and costs of escalation.<sup>361</sup> For example, the Philippines would need to have a fleet of large ships to force 50 CMMVs out of the area. Or Philippine forces would have to board each vessel, arrest the crew, fly in a Philippine crew, and sail the vessel back to a harbor. The PRC would perceive all these actions as illegal and escalatory.<sup>362</sup> Seemingly, the Philippines were not able and willing to take these risks.

### 3. Strategic Escalation: DIME

Examining the DIME factors shows that the Philippines have tried to apply a broad and information-heavy approach to counter PRC aggression. Philippine authorities and media highlighted economic implications, environmental abuses, and legal violations while also incorporating research institutes and suggested legal steps domestically and internationally. Nevertheless, these steps stayed within the information domain and slightly touched the diplomatic domain, while the more direct and classical economic and military

<sup>361</sup> Anonymous Philippine source C1, Author Interview.

<sup>362</sup> Anonymous Philippine source C1.

measures remained absent. Overall, and within the conceptual model, the strategic escalation can be assessed as low.

The exposure of the environmental damage around Iroquois Reef, including the accusations toward the PRC, resulted in a moderate diplomatic exchange of statements at the senior leadership level. Immediately after the AFP revealed the PRC activities, several Philippine senators expressed their concerns about the PRC intentions behind the coral destruction, suggesting possible land reclamation.<sup>363</sup> They also urged the Philippine government to start formal investigations and to file claims and damages at the UN tribunal. U.S. Ambassador MaryKay Carlson and the Department of Foreign Affairs issued statements regarding concerns about the coral ecosystems, but neither mentioned the PRC.<sup>364</sup> The Japanese ambassador called the harvesting alarming. The PRC's spokesman Mao Ning responded, "We advise the Philippine authorities not to utilize fabricated information to stage a political farce."<sup>365</sup> Overall, diplomatic responses were given, but not at the highest level or in the strongest expression. This indicates a low diplomatic escalation.

The Philippines took a broader approach to the information domain by using multiple communication channels. The messaging flow started when the PCG released an underwater video showing coral destruction at Iroquois Reef. Scientists from the Philippines Marine Science Institute supported the video with additional footage of a 2021 survey highlighting the differences between the rich reef ecosystem in 2021 and the grey-bleached corals in 2023.<sup>366</sup> Philippine and international media picked up this messaging and funneled the domestic and international public debate toward the environmental

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<sup>363</sup> Charie Abarca, "Senate Urged to Probe China's Alleged Harvesting of Corals in Rozul Reef," *Inquirer.net*, September 18, 2023, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/219469/senate-urged-to-probe-chinas-alleged-harvesting-of-corals-in-rozul-reef>.

<sup>364</sup> Michael Punongbayan and Pia Lee-Brago, "US Alarmed by Coral Destruction in West Philippine Sea," *Philstar.com*, September 20, 2023, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2023/09/20/2297572/us-alarmed-coral-destruction-west-philippine-sea>.

<sup>365</sup> Magramo, "The Philippines Accuses China's Shadowy."

<sup>366</sup> Rappler. "*Survey of Rozul (Iroquios) Reef in 2021*, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HEq-5YehFzQ>.



damage and impact.<sup>367</sup> The key message concentrated more on the ecological impact and less on the possible land reclamation. This approach can be seen as a deliberate choice to limit the escalation in the information domain because environmental damage is less escalatory than land reclamation.

The environmental damage did provide additional legal opportunities to counter the PRC presence and activities around Iroquois Reef. The Philippine Senate urged the Philippine government to file legal claims and damages at a tribunal recognized by the United Nations.<sup>368</sup> Other Philippine marine scientists suggested establishing a marine protected area to protect the reef ecosystems. The Philippine Senate introduced a national bill to declare a 3 NM zone surrounding the Kalayaan Island Group in the West Philippine Sea (referring to the Philippine names).<sup>369</sup> If adopted, the new Philippine legislation could acquire international status or support.

The events around Iroquois Reef did not trigger a significant military response either. The AFP WESCOM commander announced plans to increase Philippine assets and personnel in the disputed areas, but he did not describe how and with what capabilities the plans would be executed.<sup>370</sup> In terms of coercion theory, this statement is not a credible threat because the military capability is simply unavailable, let alone a political statement supporting the military ambition. In addition, the United States sent a minor military signal with the formal turnover of a third Cessna C-208B surveillance aircraft to the Philippines. The chief of the Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group – Philippines handed over the aircraft three days after the press conference that revealed the coral destruction.<sup>371</sup> Although the timing of the handover could be interpreted as a signal of support, this very modest military

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<sup>367</sup> Magramo, “The Philippines Accuses China’s Shadowy.”

<sup>368</sup> Abarca, “Senate Urged to Probe.”

<sup>369</sup> CNN Philippines, “Experts: More Research on Rozul Reef Needed,” video, YouTube, September 20, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLOW1906jfM>.

<sup>370</sup> Magramo, “The Philippines Accuses China’s Shadowy.”

<sup>371</sup> The Manila Times, “PH Boosts WPS Watch with New U.S. Aircraft,” The Manila Times, September 20, 2023, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2023/09/20/podcasts/headlines-ph-boosts-wps-watch-with-new-us-aircraft-september-2023/1910904>; Asia Pacific Defense Journal, “Philippines Inducts 3rd Cessna C-208B Grand Caravan Surveillance Aircraft,” Asia Pacific Defense Journal, September 19, 2023, <https://www.asiapacificdefensejournal.com/2023/09/philippines-inducts-3rd-cessna-c-208b.html>.

capability cannot be viewed as a significant military signal. On the contrary, the PRC could even interpret this surveillance asset as a confirmation of the international community's unwillingness to support the Philippine resistance.

Lastly, the economic state tool has remained absent in the Iroquois Reef incident. President Marcos did frame the situation in an economic setting. He suggested a fishing ban to preserve the breeding grounds and to secure the nation's fish stocks.<sup>372</sup> A stronger reaction could have been to label the PRC activities at Iroquois Reef as economic aggression. Philippine director of Maritime Affairs Jay Batongbacal explained how Iroquois Reef is part of the PRC's "ecocide strategy," as the ecological destruction would also remove the economic incentive to fish in the area, thereby driving out Philippine fishing vessels.<sup>373</sup> From the escalation process perspective, the PRC escalated by destroying economic resources, followed by a Philippine response of—perhaps—introducing a fishing ban.

Overall, the Philippine strategic escalation remained low. The Philippine response focused on reporting and messaging in the information and diplomatic domains. There was no tit-for-tat reaction, nor were immediate costs imposed or active resistance pursued to halt or alter the course of events. This response could be an effective strategy in the long run, aimed at strengthening domestic political support for more funds and authority, garnering international support, or developing the legal framework for response options. However, the long-term effect is yet to be shown.

From the perspective of the escalation process, no local or strategic escalation occurred. The Philippines thereby accepted the PRC change of status quo. The Philippines did initiate several lines of effort to counter the PRC coercion, but overall, the messaging remained messaging and failed to operationalize. To be more precise, neither the local nor the strategic escalation succeeded in imposing costs or the risk of costs on the PRC. The Philippine reaction at Iroquois Reef sharply contrasts with the escalation around Second

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<sup>372</sup> Punongbayan and Lee-Brago, "US Alarmed by Coral Destruction."

<sup>373</sup> CNN Philippines, "Rozul Reef Profitable for China, Activities Linked to Reclamation – Maritime Law Expert," CNN Philippines, accessed November 17, 2023, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2023/9/18/Rozul-Reef-profitable-for-China.html>.

Thomas Shoal. Part of the explanation could be the absence of a tactical action to exploit strategically at Iroquois Reef, or perhaps the lack of international support prevented the Philippines from further escalation. The exact reasons are unknown, but the contrast remains remarkable.

#### **4. Effects**

The effects of the PRC's coercive activities at Iroquois Reef can be assessed by examining whether the PRC achieved its objectives. Clearly, the PRC has not stated its objectives for its actions at Iroquois Reef. Hence, the previously described PRC foreign policy and the CMM's intent form the framework to assess the effects. The PRC's coercive strategy is predominantly guided by a balancing approach of pursuing its long-term objectives along the nine-dash line while mitigating relational costs. The Iroquois Reef incident aligns with this strategy, as the PRC has taken incremental, perhaps preparatory, steps of increased presence and geographical transformation within the nine-dash line. The second part of the strategy concerns the relational costs. The strategic escalation showed that these costs were minimal. Of course, the battle in the information domain continues, and the PRC is accused of legal, environmental, and economic violations. However, a significant international response remains absent. Thus, the PRC coercion–cost balancing strategy seems to have succeeded.

The Iroquois Reef Incident also aligns with the described PRC intent of exploiting the CMM for the PRC's coercive campaign. First, the CMM provided the PRC with plausible deniability to deny the PRC's responsibility. After all, the fishing vessels were just loitering in the water, and no evidence has been shown of the CMMV's crew dumping coral. According to the PRC, the ecological devastation is due to "contaminated nuclear water from Fukushima [Japan]."<sup>374</sup> Second, the CMM presence at Iroquois Reef undermines Philippine governance because it demonstrates the Philippine inability to control its EEZ, thereby strengthening the perception of PRC territorial claims. Only the

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<sup>374</sup> PIME Asia News, "Manila Against Beijing Over Devastated Coral Reef," PIME Asia news, September 21, 2023, <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Manila-against-Beijing-over-devastated-coral-reef-59200.html>.

third described CMM intent of provocation did not occur at Iroquois Reef since the Philippines refrained from directly confronting the CMMVs.

Overall, the coercive effect of CMM activities at Iroquois Reef can be labeled as high. The PRC was able to utilize the CMM’s plausible deniability and its ability to undermine Philippine territorial control to advance its historical claims along the nine-dash line with limited relational costs. The incremental steps are likely still satisfactory from a PRC perspective since these steps were made against minimal costs. The effect shows the strength of the PRC’s long-term strategy, which still advances with small gains, while the adversary is forced to take high risks to counter only minimal imposed costs.

**5. Sub-Conclusion**

The analysis of the Iroquois Reef incident is shown in Figure 15, with a combination of low local escalation and low strategic escalation, resulting in a high coercive effect.

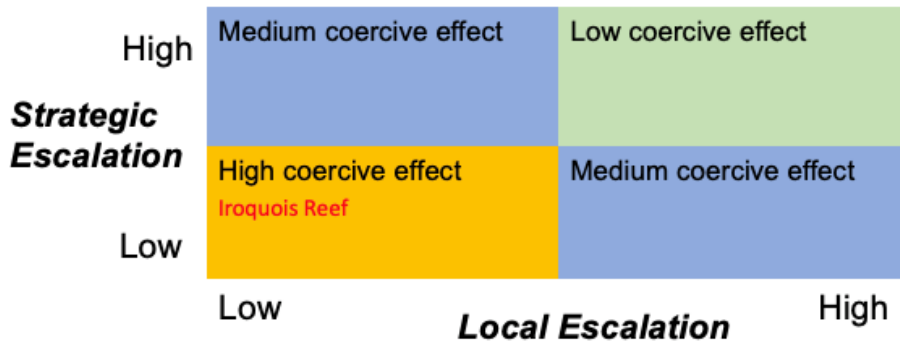


Figure 15. Iroquois Reef Escalation and Coercion Matrix

The relationship between local and strategic escalation is difficult to pinpoint because of the absence of any significant physical local escalation. The fact that there was no local escalation also implied that tactical action could not be supported, influenced, or exploited. The Philippines could therefore only rely on its strategic escalation. However, as described, the strategic escalation could not surpass the information domain to gain

significant public support or strategic effects in the other domains. In other words, there was no local escalation to ignite and accelerate the strategic escalation. The result was relatively unopposed coercive action—another incremental step towards the PRC’s long-term objective.

### **C. CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS**

This final section presents a cross-case analysis of PRC–Philippine disputes in the SCS. It starts with the cross-case analysis between the Second Thomas Shoal and Iroquois Reef, which suggests that responding with tactical action to a coercive threat is essential for the development of the escalation process and, subsequently, the coercive effect. Second, a broader assessment of the disputes in the SCS follows. This analysis shows that focusing on short-term (2023) or long-term (1974–2023) perspectives leads to different assessments of coercive effects. In other words, where recent PRC coercion might seem insignificant, these same actions can be significant when viewed over a longer period.

#### **1. Second Thomas Shoal and Iroquois Reef**

The two case studies indicate that different tactical actions led to different unfolding escalation paths and different coercive results. During the Second Thomas Shoal incidents, the Philippine tactical actions gained strategic meaning. The Philippine captains at sea actively resisted with tactical maneuvers against the PRC’s maritime forces. Afterward, the Philippine Transparency Initiative publicly exposed the PRC’s coercion. This exposure triggered domestic and international public and diplomatic support, which resulted in strong international backlash against the PRC and a new tactical balance between the PRC threat and the Philippine response. In other words, the Philippine tactical actions facilitated the strategic escalation, resulting in a reduced coercive effect (see Figure 16).

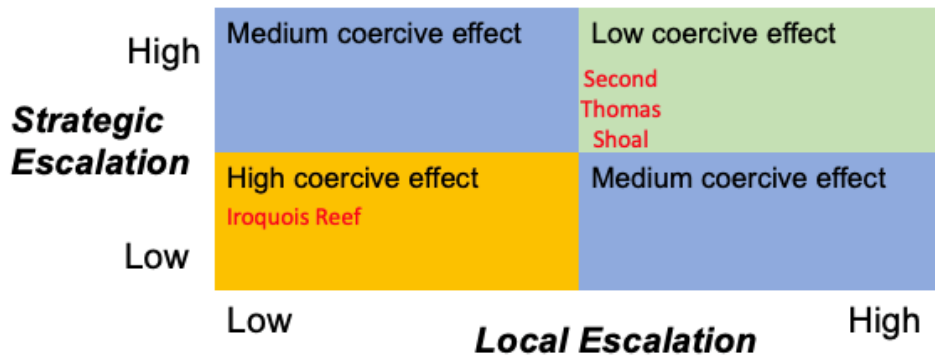


Figure 16. Second Thomas Shoal vs. Iroquois Reef Escalation and Coercion Matrix

The event analysis of the Iroquois Reef crisis suggests that the absence of a significant Philippine tactical action, and therefore the absence of local escalation, resulted in an isolated and ineffective strategic escalation. The PRC confronted the Philippines twice with changes in the status quo through an increased force presence and an altered seabed. The Philippines refrained from responding tactically at sea and thereby, whether consciously or unconsciously, chose to refrain from local escalation and arguably accepted the new status quo. The Philippines did attempt to achieve strategic effects through strategic escalation with a carefully designed information campaign, but this attempt failed to gain momentum. The Iroquois Reef event analysis thus demonstrates how a low tactical and low strategic escalation resulted in a high coercive effect (see Figure 16).

Comparing the two events reveals significant differences in the local escalation process. First and foremost, the application or absence of local escalation suggests that it is a crucial aspect of achieving coercive effects. No local escalation implies no action to influence or support externally and no significant (and for the public, attractive) events to exploit in the information or diplomatic domains. These failures to engage in local escalation activities can all be considered missed opportunities to eventually impose costs or risks on the PRC and change its cost calculus. A second seemingly crucial aspect of local escalation is the direct tactical response to the threat. It is important to be aware of the crucial small escalation steps between doing nothing (accept) and intentionally

increasing the intensity or scope of the conflict (escalate). The Philippines clearly resisted at the Second Thomas Shoal and arguably accepted a status quo change at Iroquois Reef. The Philippine response at the Second Thomas Shoal demonstrates the effectiveness of small resistance steps, while the Iroquois Reef incident demonstrates the ineffectiveness of tactical acceptance.

The comparison of strategic escalation between the Second Thomas Shoal and the Iroquois Reef events also shows noteworthy differences. In both events, action in the information domain set off the strategic escalation. However, at the Second Thomas Shoal, the Philippines presented profound evidence of PRC (non-armed) force against a visibly outmatched Philippine vessel. Philippine President Marcos followed up with a strong condemnation. At Iroquois Reef, the Philippine response suggested an ecological violation by the PRC. Afterward, Philippine senators proposed to initiate legal procedures. The two events display a clear difference in response between a presidential condemnation of unjust violence and a political suggestion of ecological violation. The first was backed up by a U.S. statement about the mutual defense treaty, signaling the support of the world's strongest military. The second was augmented with the turnover of another Cessna patrol aircraft. Obviously, each event of strategic escalation sends a different signal to the PRC and the international community.

Lastly, the difference in coercive effects between the two events explains the success of the PRC's maritime coercion. On the level of national interests, the PRC gradually advanced its objectives within the nine-dash line at Iroquois Reef. Although the new status quo represented minor progress, it is still progress. Many little achievements culminate in substantial progress within the PRC's long-term strategy. From this long-term perspective, the Philippines endured another loss in the competition for territorial control of the Spratly Islands. Contrarily, the Second Thomas Shoal incident can be described as a Philippine win. The Philippines successfully demonstrated its willingness and capability to resist PRC coercion and even enforced its will by resupplying the PRC-blocked BPR *Sierra Madre*.

## 2. South China Sea

The study of the SCS dispute shows that the PRC has continuously used coercion to assert its national historic claims of sovereign control within the nine-dash line. The PRC has pursued its maritime interest in the SCS since 1974 with periods of tension, in which the PRC coercively advanced its strategic objectives, altered with periods of rapprochement, in which the PRC attempted to restore the afflicted relationships and international public opinion. In recent decades, the CMM has played an important role in the PRC's coercive campaign by exploiting its ambiguous character to accomplish gradual progress under the threshold of armed response. The CMM successfully contributed to increasing territorial control in the SCS without causing significant local or strategic escalation to backfire on the PRC's national interests. Thus, a long-term perspective on the PRC's coercive campaigns reveals a low local and low strategic escalation with a high coercive effect (see Figure 17).

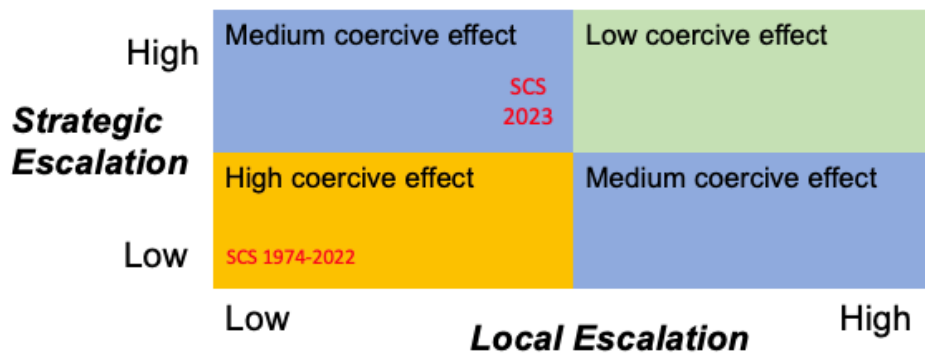


Figure 17. SCS Short- and Long-Term Escalation and Coercion Matrix

Analysis of recent (2023) events shows a different result. Since January 2023, the situation in the SCS has escalated, with both nations taking a fiercer stance in the territorial dispute. The PRC gradually intensified aggressive actions through an increasing presence, the laser incident, and the blockade and harassment of the RORE mission at the Second Thomas Shoal. The Philippines stepped up its resistance, mainly at the Second Thomas



Shoal. This local escalation process unfolded below the threshold of armed conflict despite the CMM's attempts to provoke the Philippines to respond forcefully. On the strategic level, both nations competed by applying national instruments of state power in the escalation process. The Philippines, supported by the United States, relied heavily on the information domain to garner domestic and international public and diplomatic support. The PRC supported its use of military force (e.g., the CMM) with an aggressive information campaign. Economic coercion has not yet been seen but remains a significant threat to the Philippine interests.

Despite the escalation, the CMM failed to expand its territorial control over the SCS. Although the CMM increased its presence in the SCS, the CMM may even have suffered setbacks due to severe international criticism, which affected the PRC's international position, and the increased Philippine willingness to defend its sovereign rights. Furthermore, the role of the CMM has been publicly exposed, reducing the PRC's plausible deniability—perhaps even showing the limitations of the militia concept over time. Therefore, with no credible plausible deniability and limited incremental territorial progress, the CMM's contribution to national objectives in the first part of 2023 can be assessed as medium. The short-term perspective thus shows a moderate local and high strategic escalation with a medium coercive effect (see Figure 17).

Comparing the two perspectives reveals the effectiveness of the PRC's long-term strategy in the SCS. The short-term effectiveness is minimal; however, the long-term effects are significant. The explanation is straightforward: many small steps lead to considerable progress over time. This explanation shows the strength of the PRC's maritime coercive campaign. The PRC's steps are so small that they do not justify a risky response of local escalation. But over time, the incremental steps culminate in the gradual realization of national interest. This gradual encroachment indicates the need for an opposing strategy of continuous competition for the slightest changes in the status quo while avoiding crossing the threshold of armed response.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

In 2023, the PRC continued its coercive campaign to compete for control over the SCS with, in particular, the Second Thomas Shoal blockade and the Iroquois Reef transformation. The CMM exploited the lack of effective countermeasures below the threshold of armed conflict by utilizing its vast numbers and ambiguous character. Although the Philippine resistance in the territorial dispute hardened, specifically at the Second Thomas Shoal, the CMM persisted in incrementally advancing the PRC's territorial objectives along the nine-dash line and continued to undermine the international rules-based order. Because there was no significant local escalation, and thereby no strategic escalation, the PRC could continue its maritime coercion campaign at acceptable costs in 2023, gradually realizing its political objectives over the long term.

This study indicates that the interaction between local escalation at sea and strategic escalation with the national instruments of state power is a key element that influences the coercive effects of irregular threats in the maritime domain. Within this interaction, local escalation can enable strategic escalation. Subsequently, strategic escalation can provide tactical actions with a strategic effect. Local escalation thus seems to form a vital link between maritime escalation and coercion. These insights into local escalation contribute to the theory of escalation and coercion. Combining the developed local and established strategic escalation theories could mutually reinforce both theories.

The following sections explain the relationship between escalation and coercion by presenting the thesis' key findings, implications, limitations and future research suggestions.

### A. KEY FINDINGS

The first finding is that the conceptual model proved to be a suitable theoretical representation of the complex reality of escalation and coercion. The case study results largely align with the presumed relationship between local escalation, strategic escalation, and coercive effects (see Figure 18). The bottom left quadrant (low local and low strategic escalation with a high coercive effect) is supported by the analysis of the long-term

developments in the SCS and the Iroquois Reef case. Incremental steps over a long period, without significant resistance, cumulatively lead to progress or, in this case, high coercion. The top left quadrant (low local and high strategic escalation with a medium coercive effect) is supported by the overall situation in the SCS in 2023. In this case, local and strategic escalation led to a temporary setback of the PRC’s ambition to assert territorial control. The top right quadrant (high local and high strategic escalation with a low coercive effect) is supported by the Second Thomas Shoal crisis, in which escalation at sea facilitated the use of national and allied instruments of state power. The Second Thomas Shoal case is positioned left in the quadrant to indicate the moderate local escalation since, for example, no armed violence occurred. Events in the bottom right quadrant (high local and low strategic escalation with a medium coercive effect) have not been observed since this quadrant implies high local escalation that all actors in the dispute avoided.

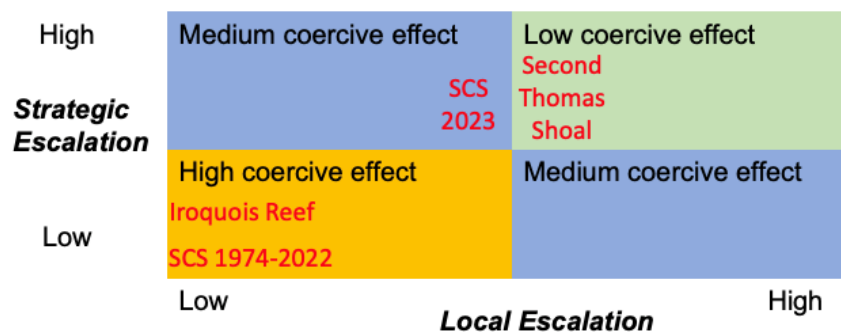


Figure 18. Combined Second Thomas Shoal, Iroquois Reef, and SCS Short- and Long-Term Escalation and Coercion Matrix

The second finding suggests that local escalation can lead to strategic escalation, which consequently can reinforce the tactical actions to gain strategic meaning (e.g., Second Thomas Shoal crisis). The findings strongly indicate that moderate local escalation is mainly beneficial for enabling sufficient strategic escalation. Low local escalation seems insufficient to trigger strategic escalation, and the absence of tactical action implies an absence of occasions to exploit at the strategic level (e.g., Iroquois Reef incident). The research did not find evidence of deliberate high local escalation, as high local escalation increases the risk of crossing the threshold of armed conflict.

Third, the case study findings generally support the strategic concepts (see arrows in Figure 19). Local escalation (arrow 1) is partly illustrated by the Second Thomas Shoal event with the reduced PRC force posture after the initial Philippine local escalation. Local escalation hereby led to a reduced willingness to coerce. However, strategic escalation occurred simultaneously (arrow 3), which could have also contributed to the PRC's reduced will to continue coercion. Strategic escalation (arrow 2) is illustrated by the Iroquois Reef events; however, the intended strategic escalation failed to achieve a reduced coercive effect, as the shift from high to medium coercive effect indicates. On the other hand, the strategic escalation at Iroquois Reef did not arguably reach high strategic escalation because the strategic escalation process did not gain enough momentum and thus stayed at low strategic escalation. Full escalation (shifting from the low/low to the high/high quadrant, arrow 3) is partly illustrated during the Second Thomas Shoal crisis with a moderate local escalation and a high strategic escalation resulting in a low coercive effect. Despite the nuances in escalation levels and effects, the broad motions of the strategic concepts seem to align with reality.

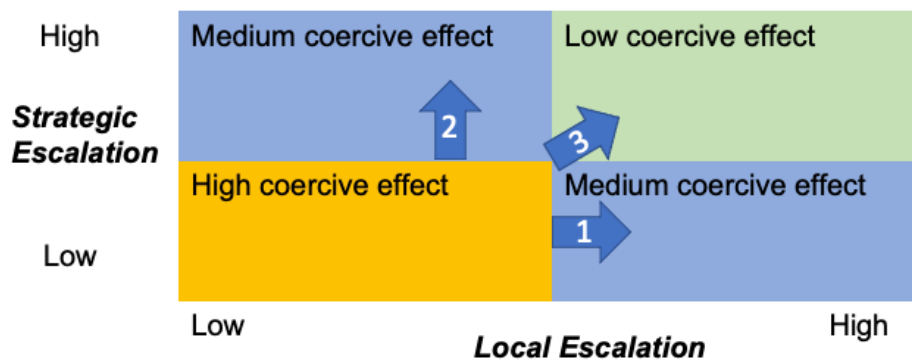


Figure 19. Strategic Concepts

## B. IMPLICATIONS

This thesis opposes the general misconception of strategists and practitioners that countering coercion below the threshold of armed conflict is unrealizable because the adversary's activities stay below the threshold. Just as the adversary can threaten below

thresholds, so too can the threatened actor respond below thresholds. More specifically, it is important to recognize that local escalation consists of a spectrum of escalation steps ranging from accept, resist, and tit-for-tat to escalation below or above the threshold of armed response. The tactical response options countering below threshold coercion can thus be found in the small escalation steps between accepting and escalating. It is this part of the escalation spectrum that must be mastered to counter below-threshold coercion effectively.

The absence of high local escalation in the findings is noteworthy because it further focuses the most potential strategic concept. The CMM case study reveals that all involved nations (the PRC, the Philippines, and the United States) intend to avoid high local escalation because the risks are too high (arrows 1 and 3). As a result, the actors continue to compete below threshold with low local and high strategic escalation (arrow 2). The Iroquois Reef analysis showed that isolated strategic escalation without any tactical action other than accept will likely not reduce coercive effects. The Second Thomas Shoal findings showed that strategic escalation (arrow 2) is optimally executed by persistent, moderate local escalation with small steps below the threshold of armed conflict combined with a high strategic escalation in the information domain to accelerate diplomatic, public, and military support. In other words, when confronted with coercion at sea, strategists and practitioners should consider combining two options: local escalation with small steps and strategic escalation. Doing nothing or only choosing one escalation form will probably not achieve the optimal results.

Lastly, the findings of this thesis provide valuable insight into the different approaches to influence the escalation process. As demonstrated in Chapter VI, the three components of a threat (capability, actions, and intent) can be used to analyze the threat and response, including external support. The analytical differentiation between the components can increase the understanding of local escalation since local escalation is the interaction between the threat and the response. Subsequently, practitioners can use the three elements to examine and influence the balance between the components of the threat and response. For example, during the Second Thomas Shoal incident, the Philippine tactical will to resist (part of the component intent) was successfully influenced and bolstered by the perceived external support. The adjustment proved crucial in changing the Philippine escalation response into

resistance. A relevant operational and next question is how and with what capability this type of (influence) operation should be conducted. Potentially, this could be a role for special operations forces conducting irregular warfare.

Extrapolating the findings, Western nations or their allies could potentially reduce similar non-military maritime threats in other geographic regions, such as the North Sea, the Baltic Sea, or the Arctic, thereby strengthening the Western position in long-term competition with adversaries in the maritime domain. The melting Arctic icecap could soon provide the conditions for other territorial grabs, including resource-rich areas, where states may avoid military escalation by competing below the threshold of armed conflict using ambiguous maritime threats at the sea level combined with the instruments of state power at the strategic level.

To counter these future ambiguous maritime threats, Western countries should develop the capability to conduct local escalation with small steps and high strategic escalation. Local escalation with small steps requires capabilities that can stay below the threshold of armed conflict—not by accepting or conceding, but by actions such as resistance or a similar tit-for-tat response. In other words, Western nations should develop a scalable maritime response model. For example, resilient commercial vessels should be able to resist foreign coercive actions. Likewise, non-escalatory units, such as coast guards (or perhaps even newly designed ambiguous governmental maritime assistance vessels), should be able to support national interests at sea. These new capabilities will fill the current response gap between doing nothing and escalating.

Besides the response capability at sea, Western countries should enhance their interoperability between the local and strategic levels. States should be able to respond adequately with the diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments of power to support tactical events at sea. This requires established protocols, procedures, and networks to respond swiftly. Furthermore, these measures should be scalable to switch from low to high strategic escalation. Lastly, these measures should be fully interoperable with the tactical actions at sea, requiring high interoperability between public and private authorities. Only when local and strategic escalation form a calibrated interaction can threatened actors at sea resist and, in *optima forma*, exploit local events or crises at sea.

### C. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the case study results broadly align with the presumed relationship between escalation and coercion, the research contains several limitations that, in turn, offer future research possibilities. The first limitation is the limited number of case studies to support the conceptual model. The Second Thomas Shoal and the Iroquois Reef case studies provided detailed information about the events. Additionally, the two perspectives on the SCS over a shorter (2023) and longer (1974–2022) period provided additional data for the model. However, more case studies can potentially reinforce or deny the conceptual model’s accuracy and utility.

A second limitation is that the case study was restricted to one particular maritime irregular threat (the CMM) in one specific geographic area (the SCS). Further research on the CMM threats in the East China Sea or the Yellow Sea could provide additional data. For example, it would be worth examining how the escalation process develops when the CMM threat faces a stronger state (i.e., Japan or South Korea) or with different distances from shore-based support to the operation area at sea. These factors could provide extra insights into maritime escalation. Furthermore, studying other nations’ maritime threats, such as Russian research vessels in the North Sea or the Arctic, would provide another angle to test the conceptual model.

A third limitation is that the initial propositions in Chapter I could not be confirmed or denied. The two propositions align with strategic concepts 1 (local escalation, arrow 1) and 2 (full escalation, arrow 3) in Figure 19. Both concepts included a high local escalation. Since all actors in the SCS dispute avoided high local escalation, the research could not provide sufficient evidence to confirm or deny the propositions. The findings indicate that the propositions are correct, as the Philippine local escalation at the Second Thomas Shoal indicated. However, more research on case studies with a clear high local escalation could further confirm the propositions.

## APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Why is the CMM a problem?

What were recent examples of CMM activities or operations in your area of responsibility?

What was the tactical and strategic context?

What were the conditions of the situation?

Which actors were involved, and what were their capabilities?

Which steps in the escalation process were taken?

What was the outcome of the event?

How can the steps in the escalation process be influenced?

How did CMM activities, tactics, or strategy develop recently?

What are the explanations for CMM activity, posture, or absence?

How can special operations or irregular warfare contribute to countering the CMM problem?



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## APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW REPORT EXAMPLE

Anonymous Philippine Sources (senior government official + analyst [PhD]) 11/09/23, Manila.

### KEY FINDINGS:

1. The CMM intent is to exploit the threshold of violent response by 1) staying below the threshold while 2) simultaneously provoking the adversary to cross the threshold. Both are related to exploitation of physical events in the information domain.
2. The PCG has several ways to monitor and expose the CMM. Due to limited Ph capabilities to compete with the CMM in the physical dimension, recent policy changes with the Transparency Initiative challenge the CMM in the information and human dimensions.
3. The second resupply for the Second Thomas Shoal demonstrates the success of this new approach. It demonstrates that strategic escalation can substitute tactical escalation dominance. However, tactical escalation by way of increasing the Ph willingness to resist also contributes to success, simply by outmaneuvering the CCM and the CCG at sea.
4. Tactical (local) escalation is not feasible because there is no sufficient political will or international support.

### NOTES:

- PCG monitors two areas: Sc Shoal (BdM) en Pa-gasa (NE part of Spratlys)
- Noticeable difference last year in PAFMM activities
- BdM: Ch routine
  - o 2x CCG block SW entrance (the only into the shoal) – 8-week rotation
  - o 2x CCG roaming around – outside = 4-week rotation
  - o 2xCMV
- CMV different types, aligned with their district. Sansha types are prof CMV
  - o Type determines harbor and thus reach, sustainability, and command -type of orders
  - o CMV = steel hulls, grey blue color, not commercial fishing capable
  - o CFV = wooden hull
    - Regarding BdM: 10–15 vessels each nov + feb to sea shell harvest (Leswe), fishing season. Approx 1 month duration.
    - 2022/23: CFV stayed to June. Possible as a reaction to Ph initiative to support and supply Ph FV in the area.
  - o Ch MSRs: Maritime Surveillance Research vessel
    - Jogging type 9 vessels

- Sail strict patrons at sea in EEZ Ph.
  - Surveillance task
- KAG area
  - Significant changes
  - PCG is aware due to IAS monitoring, physical monitoring (overt mission) and covert monitoring [by “teams,” not further specified]
  - during bad weather, Ch MFV activate IAS for safety (which makes them “visible”) and take shelter in the shoals (and thus physically observable). This provides the PCG a sufficient Situational Awareness. Eg. 165 CFV were reported at Mischief Reef
- Bloomberg report Dec 22
  - Prior 2014: Ch land reclamation overtly
  - After 2015: Ch land reclamation COVERT, “patience, slowly and not noticeable”
- “China is not concerned about Ph,” but is more concerned about international backlash.
  - Example is resupply BPR Sierra Madre. First attempt on 5 Aug: Ch blockade successful. Following days: very strong international response/condemnation. Second attempt: less Ch vessels were seen at location [*confirm: specific differences*]
  - Resup execution / procedure: [*same as on 5 aug*]
    - 1 indigenous boat + 1 PCG escort
    - “4 on one CCG, 5 on other PLAN”
    - “5xPLAN op 5NM out”
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> resup
    - Ch used smaller vessels to maneuver better. Note: large ship is not always better in blockade because smaller vessels can maneuver better.
    - “no Ph Navy, 2 PLAN 30 NM out”
  - PCG capabilities
    - 3 CCG vessels on Palawan, one often docked/waiting to be docked.
  - PCG calls this the “Transparency Initiative.”
    - Started after laser incident
- Policy and presidency
  - BBK did not led to significant change in policy for CCG or ROE
  - Suggested that this is due to:
    - 1) larger/more/higher interests regarding dependence on PRC
    - 2) internal disputes within PH GOV/society on relationship PH-CH
  - Though, extra authority was given to intercepting foreign vessels in TTWs
- Notes:
  - “Difficult to choose a response because PCH does not know what kind of vessel it is”
  - PCG: Rules on the use of force
  - AFP: Rules of engagement (more details can be asked at WESCOM)

- Harassment: ACK
- Provocation: ACK. PAFMM intends to provoke PCG, PCG is provoked to escalate, for example, by causing Collision. 2<sup>nd</sup> Th Sh incident: CCG deliberately puts itself on sailing route to cause collision with the intent to exploit “PH aggression” in media and political.
- Unique characteristics of PAFMM (according to source)
  - Unclear identity, so unclear response option
    - [Obs: so the PAFMM ambiguity leads to “dis-action” or to a, to quote Adm rtd “decision paralyze” (OODA loop stops at D)]
  - Numbers: e.g. 600 PAFMM vessels in W Ph Sea (multiple missions)
  - Well organized: e.g.
  - Inexpensive
  - Provides options: for example, to operate within EEZ. PAFMM is calibrated to conduct different types of operations.
- Tactical escalation
  - Not violent (PCG is ordered not to escalate or cause an incident)
  - Therefore, PAFMM must be outmaneuvered, for example, by crossing a blockade (2<sup>nd</sup> Th Sh)
  - Tactical level (PCG): the will to escalate exists.
  - Political level: no will to escalate.
- Strategic escalation
  - Strategic escalation mainly occurs through international support of partners.
  - By: diplomatic action, political action, strategic communication (media eg)
    - Political statements have some effect. International support is most significant.
  - Info domain:
    - Significant development is the Ph GOV authorization to embark journalist/media on board; “great impact” according to source
    - there is a difference in effect/credibility between a report issued by the PCG or by media.
- Reclamation:
  - PAFMM holds disputed territory and then builds. So, hold & build.
  - Example was given of Bloomberg report/Ch patience/suspected below waterline construction.
  - Example was given of Reed/recto Bank (next to Iroquois Reef):
    - Reed bank is important due to oil reserves. Ph has service contracted but Ch blocks the Ph exploitation of natural energy resources.
    - Bloomberg/PCG: slowly/patiently underwater construction by dumping “stones/boulders” in water, by night, unobservable.

- “CH incremental land reclamation”: historic example is Mischief Reef: as a reaction after BPR Sierra Madre beaching in 99, build ‘00-’10, first FV outpost, now Ch military base.

## APPENDIX C. CODING EXAMPLE

Location	Date	Source	Colour	Code
Okinawa	Sept 5, 2023	Anonymous sources	Dark blue	O1
Okinawa	Sept 6, 2023	Anonymous source	Light blue	O2
Okinawa	Sept 7, 2023	Anonymous sources	Light green	O3
Manila	Sept 11, 2023	Anonymous Philippine sources	Dark red	M1
Manila	Sept 12, 2023	Anonymous Philippine source	Light red	M2
Manila	Sept 13, 2023	Anonymous Philippine focus group	Yellow	M3
Puerto Princessa	Sept 14, 2023	Anonymous Philippine focus group	Purple	P1
Puerto Princessa	Sept 14, 2023	Anonymous Philippine source	Pink	P2
Monterey, CA	Feb 16, 2024	Anonymous Philippine source	Dark green	C1

### THREAT: CAPABILITY-TASKS/ACTIONS

- [CH action] “harassment and dangerous maneuvers, actions that are in direct violation of the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (COLREGs).” (Manila, 2023, p. 4)
- Harassment
  - When conducting harassment/coercive action, PAFMM vessels maneuver on distances up to 10 meters—exceptionally close distances in the maritime sector. The primary concern of a ship captain is the seaworthiness of his ship. Close encounters are perceived as exceptionally threatening by captains.
  - *[obs: this thus illustrates how PAFMM threatens other vessels with maneuvers]*
- Harrassment:
  - “are always on standby to drive away Filipino Fishing Boats (FFBs)” (Manila, 2023, p. 6)
- Swarming
  - to saturate sensor capacity and also response capacity.
  - This is most noticeable during a “significant event,” then the PRC is able to rally and direct swarms of CMMVs.
- Stalking
  - perhaps another way to express the harassment and shadowing because in the specific term of stalking, “we don’t know what the CMM intent is.”

- Shadowing – Question: what do you mean with shadowing?
  - Answer = mirroring movements, following on close distances.
- Cordon area:
  - thereby posing a threat or uncertainty for other actors who prefer to enter that area. Effect is denial.
- Holding seized maritime terrain.
- Logistics and surveillance
- “The CRSV seems to have been escorted by CCGV 5202, with three (3) suspected CMMVs.7” (Manila, 2023, p. 12)
- [ISR]. ISR
  - Each vessel is a sensor. Vast number of FVs with radio, thus results in a vast dispersed network of single but connected sensors. PAFMM thus contributes to PLAN MDA (maritime domain awareness)
  - EWS (early warning): surveillance role.
- [ISR] Survey (by MSR):
  - Plausible objective is to survey the seabed for future exploitation.
  - Also, first week Feb 2022, CH MRSV shadowed US/PH exercise East of Brook point (east from Palawan), e.g., with USS Essex.
- PAFMM extends the PLA’s reach. *[Obs: same statement as OI-source made]*
  - *[perhaps we can interpret “extended reach” as performing tasks for the PLAN, which the PLAN would rather not perform, due to its mil character, the risk of escalation, and attribution. Seems a plausible definition or explanation.]*
- Other conventional and future tasks.
  - Known PAFMM rehearsals of mine laying capability.
  - Suggests that counter air capability for PAFMM wouldn’t be hard.
  - Likewise, counter drone capabilities.
  - These possible capabilities would enhance the PAFMM threat and thus contribute to deterrence (or denial) from Ch perspective towards U.S. in INDOPACOM.
- “regular patrols” (Manila, 2023, p. 6)
- “conducting relief operations to aid fishermen” (Manila, 2023, p. 6)

### THREAT: INTENT

- “China is expected to continue asserting its claims unilaterally in the WPS, employing not just China-state vessels but also CFVs playing the role of maritime militia.” (Manila, 2023, p. 4) *(Manila, 2023, p. 4)*
- Plausible deniably:
  - PAFMM gives China Pl Den to enforce territorial claims. PRC acts, and PAFMM operates, as if the SCS is PRC territory.
- Conceal/hide/cover:
  - Key problem identified: how to PID PAFMM between the “clutter.” Seemingly, finding and specifically also fixing an identified PAFMM

vessel is hard between many other similar vessels. Ch FV deliberately turn of self-identification systems.

- *[Obs: this aligns with my thoughts on hiding in clutter within modern warfare. But interestingly, you see a combination of two future trends: 1) outfitting merchant vessels with modern weapons system, and 2) then hiding within clutter.]*
- **Provoke:**
  - PAFMM aims to provoke escalation from the Philippine side with the aim to exploit the escalatory action in the media
- **Provocation: ACK. PAFMM intends to provoke PCG, PCG is provoked to escalate, for example, by causing Collision.**
  - **Example: 2<sup>nd</sup> Th Sh incident: CCG deliberately puts itself on sailing routes to cause collision with the intent to exploit “PH aggression” in media and political.**
  - *[obs: important point regarding intent within threat: a Ch intent is provocation. Of note: the intent is not to stay below the threshold of violence, but on the other hand, to provoke escalation. The intent is to exploit the threshold of armed response by remaining below threshold yourself (the CMM) but provoke others (PH) to cross the threshold.]*
- **Provocation** *[note: three sources confirming “provocation”]*
  - They confirmed that China uses the CMM to provoke and confirmed they considered it as a credible threat.
- **Signaling** *[Discussion on different interpretations of the INTENTION of a threat]*
  - Colonel explained how Ch and Ph responses are interpreted by both sides. Duterte send CCG to deescalate and for law enforcement. However, Ch has a different interpretation because the CCG is technically under military command. “we think we are deescalating, but



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