

Global Minds Roundtable: Tensions in the South China Sea

The host quotes a 2016 [white paper](#) that detailed how the Philippines verbally promised to remove the BRP Sierra Madre from the Second Thomas Shoal. China sees the BRP Sierra Madre as a de facto military outpost. Prof. [Anna Rosario Malindog-Uy](#) quotes from the book, “[On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea](#)” by [Gregory B. Poling](#) of CSIS. Poling’s source is from the book, “[Rock Solid: How the Philippines Won Its Maritime Case against China](#)”, by [Marites Dañguilan Vitug](#) (is/was an editor of Omidyar-funded Rappler).

On Dangerous Ground

was transferred to the Philippine Navy and rechristened the *Sierra Madre* in 1976. In 1999, it approached Second Thomas Shoal, about 20 miles from Mischief Reef. The captain steered through the only passable channel into the lagoon, turned around, and intentionally grounded his ship on the reef. The Philippines had its ninth, and most precarious, outpost in the Spratlys.

The *Sierra Madre*’s grounding raised tensions with Beijing, which was irate. When the Chinese government demanded that the ship be removed, President Estrada, feigning ignorance, promised to tow the vessel away as soon as it could be safely floated off the reef. But it was an act. The whole idea had come from senior leadership, particularly Philippine Navy chief Eduardo Santos. A few days after the grounding, he rode a helicopter out to the *Sierra Madre* for a congratulatory briefing with the crew.<sup>37</sup> The episode raised new questions about the U.S. treaty commitment. After all, this was a commissioned Philippine Navy vessel in Philippine waters.

What if China decided to take matters into its own hands? When asked, Ambassador Hubbard assured Secretary Siazon that Cohen had meant what he said the year before.<sup>38</sup> Philippine defense secretary Orlando Mercado was given similar assurances when he visited Washington soon after. And in December, in a thinly veiled reference to China, Cohen reiterated American neutrality on territorial disputes but said Washington “[rejected] very strongly any country taking unilateral action to assert sovereignty over the Spratlys.”<sup>39</sup>

This period of bilateral tension coincided with Beijing’s first real attempts to contest Manila’s administration of Scarborough Shoal. The isolated reef, located 120 miles west of Luzon, had been under Philippine control since independence. Chiang Kai-shek’s cartographers had originally dubbed it Sika-bale—a transliteration of its English name—in 1935. They categorized it as part of the Nansha Islands along with Macclesfield Bank, which sat 200 miles away. That relationship, at least on paper, continued

Lines: The Next Spratly Legal Dispute,” March 21, 2019, <https://amti.csis.org/reading-between-lines-next-spratly-dispute/>.

30. United Nations Treaty Collection, “Declarations and Reservations: China,” 1996, [https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetailsII.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg\\_no=XXI-6&chapter=21&Temp=mtdsg3&clang=\\_en#EndDec](https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetailsII.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XXI-6&chapter=21&Temp=mtdsg3&clang=_en#EndDec).

31. Hayton, “The Modern Creation of China’s Historic Rights,” 9–10.

32. People’s Republic of China, Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf Act, June 26, 1998, [https://www.un.org/Depts/los/LEGISLATIONANDTREATIES/PDF-FILES/chn\\_1998\\_eez\\_act.pdf](https://www.un.org/Depts/los/LEGISLATIONANDTREATIES/PDF-FILES/chn_1998_eez_act.pdf).

33. Scott W. Harold, Derek Grossman, Brian Harding, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Gregory Poling, Jeffrey Smith, and Meagan L. Smith, *The Thickening Web of Asian Security Cooperation: Deepening Defense Ties among U.S. Allies and Partners in the Indo-Pacific* (Washington, DC: RAND, 2019), 298.

34. Larry Niksch, “Philippine-U.S. Security Relations,” CRS Report for Congress, October 10, 2000, [https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20001010\\_RS20697\\_8fcd-](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20001010_RS20697_8fcd-b8a5e8c9b131e9cd85f17e0c53ee2d56ccb0.pdf)

[b8a5e8c9b131e9cd85f17e0c53ee2d56ccb0.pdf](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20001010_RS20697_8fcd-b8a5e8c9b131e9cd85f17e0c53ee2d56ccb0.pdf).

35. Greg Austin, “Unwanted Entanglement: The Philippines’ Spratly Policy as a Case Study in Conflict Enhancement?,” *Security Dialogue* 34, no. 1 (March 2003): 49–50.

36. “DFA Chief Clarifies US Support under Mutual Defense Treaty,” *Philippine Star*, May 10, 2012, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2012/05/10/805080/dfa-chief-clarifies-us-support-under-mutual-defense-treaty>.

37. Vitug, *Rock Solid*, 15–16.

38. “DFA Chief Clarifies US Support under Mutual Defense Treaty.”

39. Austin, “Unwanted Entanglement,” 51.

40. See Zou Keyuan, “Scarborough Reef: A New Flashpoint in Sino-Philippines Relations?,” *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin* (Summer 1999): 71.

41. 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, <http://cimsec.org/model-maritime-militia-tanmens-leading-role-april-2012-scarborough-shoal-incident/24573>.

42. Baviera and Batongbacal, *The West Philippine Sea*, 33.

## [Poling’s Book Launch](#)

Poling’s department, the [Southeast Asia Program and Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies](#), is linked to IO [Project Myoushu](#). The Center for Strategic and International Studies receives funding from the [US government](#) (as does [Project Myoushu](#) via [Stanford University](#)) and other corporate [donors](#).

A novel concept emerged from a relatively new and little-known corner of Stanford University in the United States. Project *Myoushu*, an all-volunteer effort operating under a methodology taught by Stanford's Gordian Knot Center for National Security Innovation, began using commercially available technology to regularly report on South China Sea incidents.<sup>19</sup> Inspired by the success of the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative in illuminating China's artificial island-building campaign during the previous decade, Project *Myoushu* undertook to use open-source intelligence to fill the voids frequently left when a country's overly bureaucratic, cautious or politically constrained government agencies are slow to release important information into the public.<sup>20 21</sup>



[ADRI Special Study: “Game Changer: The Philippines’ Assertive Transparency Campaign Against China \(How the Philippines Rewrote the Counter Gray Zone Playbook\)”](#)

[By Ray Powell and Ben Goirigolzarri, PhD](#)

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