CASE 6: SECOND THOMAS SHOAL INCIDENT (2014)

Figure 3.11. Landsat Image of Second Thomas Shoal

Source: NASA (July 28, 2014).

Overview

In May 2013, Chinese coast guard vessels established a near continuous presence near the Philippines’ outpost at Second Thomas Shoal (Figure 3.11) in the Spratly Islands. Beijing accused Manila of seeking to build “new structures” aboard the BRP Sierra Madre—a dilapidated warship deliberately run aground on the reef in 1999—allegedly in violation of multiple guarantees that the Philippines would tow it away. On March 9, 2014, Chinese patrol ships harassed Philippine vessels likely carrying construction materials to Second Thomas Shoal. With U.S. diplomatic support, Manila resupplied the outpost with airdrops and recognized the Sierra Madre as a permanent Philippine installation for the first time. On March 29, another Philippine ship carrying normal supplies and foreign journalists succeeded in reaching Second Thomas while U.S., Philippine, and Chinese aircraft circled overhead. A Chinese coast guard cutter crossed the bow of the supply ship in an effort to block its path, but did not pursue the vessel when it entered the shallow waters around the shoal. Beijing has not harassed Philippine supply missions since, even those carrying construction materials to consolidate the outpost. However, Chinese ships continue to maintain a presence nearby and monitor Philippine vessels entering the shoal.
BOX 3.6. Background on Second Thomas Shoal

Second Thomas Shoal (also known as Ayungin Shoal or Ren’ai Reef) is a disputed coral reef in the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. Located 105 nautical miles northwest of the Philippine province of Palawan, the shoal is claimed by at least the Philippines, China, and Taiwan. Second Thomas consists of a lagoon ringed by coral reefs that together form a teardrop shape, roughly 15 nm north to south and 5 nm east to west. Although there are no proven or probable reserves of oil or natural gas in its immediate environs, Second Thomas Shoal is often described as a “strategic gateway” to the nearby Reed Bank tablemount, which is believed to contain economically viable deposits.¹ The Philippine armed forces considers its outpost at the shoal to be strategically important, in part because Second Thomas is only 22 nm from Chinese-occupied Mischief Reef. Many of the Philippines’ supply lines to the island group also run past Second Thomas Shoal.²

Since it barely rises above water at low tide and sinks below the surf at high tide, the shoal is classified at a “low-tide elevation” under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.³ Under Article 13 of the convention, such a feature does not enjoy any entitlement to sovereignty or other maritime rights, such as a territorial sea, exclusive economic zone, or continental shelf. Since at least 2013, the Philippines has claimed jurisdiction over the natural resources at Second Thomas as part of the 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone and continental shelf generated by the main Philippine archipelago.⁴ Beijing, on the other hand, claims the reef as a “constituent part” of the Spratly Islands and their “adjacent waters,” over which China maintains it has enjoyed sovereignty for roughly two millennia.⁵

Although the South China Sea dispute stretches back centuries, its modern contours were shaped by the 1951 San Francisco Peace Conference. Japan renounced its claims to the offshore islands it occupied during the Second World War, including the Spratlys, but in most cases the treaty failed to designate a sovereign successor.⁶ The next decades saw several waves of unilateral occupation and construction of facilities by Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, China, and Malaysia. Brunei is the only claimant that does not maintain any outposts. Except for Second Thomas Shoal, the Philippines occupied all nine of the features it currently holds in the Spratlys between 1970 and 1980.⁷ In June 1978, Manila claimed these features as the Kalayaan Island Group by arguing they were previously terra nullius, or “nobody’s land,” and also proclaimed a coastal exclusive economic zone.⁸ China, on the other hand, was the last claimant to seize some turf, capturing unoccupied six features in a bloody clash with Vietnam in 1988.⁹

In 1994, China occupied Mischief Reef, setting in motion the events that eventually led to the Philippines’ own occupation of Second Thomas Shoal.¹⁰ In 1995, the Philippines discovered several rudimentary structures on the formerly uninhabited Mischief Reef, which Beijing maintained were simply shelters for its fishermen. By 1998, however, Philippine reconnaissance aircraft observed renewed Chinese construction of military fortifications. With limited support from the United States, mild protests from ASEAN, and Malaysia’s simultaneous occupation of and construction on other disputed features nearby, Philippine officials reportedly felt “orphaned” diplomatically.¹¹ In this context, Philippine president Joseph Estrada decided that “if they have been building structures, then we may as well put up our own structures.”¹²
On May 9, 1999, the BRP *Sierra Madre* was deliberately grounded on the northwest rim of Second Thomas Shoal. A second Philippine tank landing ship, the BRP *Lanao del Norte*, was simultaneously run aground 350 nautical miles to the northeast on Scarborough Shoal, another disputed reef. Chinese officials have repeatedly claimed Manila argued at the time that its vessels were grounded due to malfunction. According to this narrative, Beijing demanded the Philippines immediately tow them away. Manila complied by removing the *Lanao del Norte* from Scarborough Shoal, yet the *Sierra Madre* remained grounded on Second Thomas. China has not been consistent about whether Manila promised to remove the vessel in 1999 and then failed to follow through or, alternatively, if it always refused to do so under a “pretext” of the technical difficulties involved.

In 2002, years of negotiations resulted in the China-ASEAN Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. Although not legally binding, this document pledged all parties to “undertake self-restraint,” including refraining from occupying new features. According to China, Manila then guaranteed in September 2003 that it would not “violate” the Declaration by “construct[ing] facilities” on Second Thomas. China took this to mean that the *Sierra Madre* is not part of the recognized pre-Declaration status quo, and that Manila promised not to convert it into a permanent outpost by undertaking any additional construction. Beijing has also often made a puzzling assertion that the 1999 grounding was a violation of the 2002 agreement.

The Philippines maintained the *Sierra Madre* as an informal outpost until it was declared a “permanent installation” in 2014. Although it no longer appears on official rolls, Manila also asserts that the *Sierra Madre* is still an active commissioned ship in the Philippine Navy. This is significant because the United States’ obligations under the 1951 U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty are triggered by armed attacks against Philippine “armed forces, public vessels or aircraft in the Pacific,” as well as those “on the island territories under its jurisdiction.”

The *Sierra Madre* was built by the United States in 1944 and transferred to the Philippines in 1976; age and the corrosive saltwater environment have left the ship increasingly dilapidated. Seven to 12 Philippine personnel live aboard the pockmarked hull in three- to six-month rotations. The vessel’s bow and fantail each sport a corroded 40-millimeter cannon; otherwise, the marines are armed with rifles only. The vessel produces electricity from a diesel-powered engine and also has a communications room. The soldiers fish for food and get potable water and other supplies by sea every three months, with an additional airdrop every month.

The South China Sea dispute began worsening in the 2008–2010 period. In 2010, the Philippines received a Chinese diplomatic protest accusing it of construction at Second Thomas and also charged the marines there of firing a warning shot at a Chinese vessel nearby, which Manila denied. Around 2011, Western Command began submitting proposals to “build structures” in order to maintain the Philippines’ occupation at the shoal. Following the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff, a senior Philippine military official publicly called for developing Second Thomas and other Spratly outposts for tourism and to improve soldiers’ living conditions. Relations with Beijing deteriorated further in January 2013 over Manila’s initiation of arbitration under Article 287 and Annex VII of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. According to China but denied by Manila, the Philippines also laid cables around the *Sierra Madre* in February 2013 as initial preparations for consolidating the wreck into a permanent outpost.
BOX 3.6. (Continued)

12. Chung, “Southeast Asia and the South China Sea Dispute.”
13. Thayer, “Some Progress, along with Disagreement and Disarray”;
15. Laude, “PHL Lost Panatag Shoal to Chinese.”
29. Kwok, “Last Outpost.” Such statements were not lost on Chinese observers. Chinese state television has claimed that the Philippines began strengthening its occupation of Second Thomas following the 2012 incident. See “菲律宾为何再闯仁爱礁?” (Why Is the Philippines Stirring up Second Thomas Shoal Again?), Southeast Television, April 16, 2014.
<table>
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<th>United States</th>
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<td>Harasses Philippine ships</td>
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<td>Mar 10–11</td>
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<td>Recognizes Philippine outpost for 1st time</td>
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<td>Mar 14</td>
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<td>Recognizes outpost as permanent for 1st time</td>
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<td>Harasses but does not attack supply ship</td>
<td>Sends resupply vessel with journalists on board</td>
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<td>Mar 30</td>
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<td>Protests diplomatically</td>
<td>Conducts major repairs and improvements</td>
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Incident Details

Phase I: China Coast Guard Establishes New Presence

On May 6, 2013, a Chinese fishing fleet departed Danzhou City, Hainan for a 40-day voyage to the Spratly Islands. A supply ship, a transport vessel, and 30 fishing trawlers sailed under the “unified command” of the provincial bureau of the Fisheries Law Enforcement Command. The expedition itself was not novel. Chinese fishermen had been operating in the Spratlys since 1985, and China had been convoysing fishing fleets to both the Spratly and Paracel Islands since 2009. Previously, in July 2012, another 30-vessel fleet had left Hainan for a similar mission near Chinese-occupied Fiery Cross Reef in the western Spratlys. In February 2013, the Fisheries Law Enforcement Command’s South China Sea bureau chief announced he would “speed up” these patrols over the next two years. This annual Hainan fleet would arrive at Mischief Reef (only a few miles from Second Thomas) on May 13, 2013, shortly before China’s annual fishing ban in the northern half of the South China Sea, during which its fishermen operate farther south in the Spratlys. State media said the ships would “split into various groups, fishing in different areas.” Around the same time, a detachment of the PLA Navy’s East Sea Fleet conducted combat exercises in the Paracels before moving deeper into the South China Sea.

The Philippines first observed Chinese ships near Second Thomas Shoal on May 8. A military source reported that Filipino fishermen had described the presence of a Chinese “frigate ship” and “naval patrol vessel” five and six nautical miles east of the reef, respectively. He also stated that over the course of that week, Chinese diplomats had once again demanded the Philippines withdraw from its outposts in the Spratlys. A spokesperson for the Philippines’ Western Command

6. China’s State Oceanic Administration stated that one of its cutters actually performed “sentry duty” at the shoal as early as April. Twice over the summer, Kyodo News also claimed that Chinese ships had been deployed to the area since February, but the present authors found no evidence supporting this claim. Elmer Badilla and Jaime Sinapit, “Two Chinese Vessels Reportedly Sighted off Disputed Islands in West Philippine Sea,” InterAksyon, May 8, 2013; Ryan D. Martinson, “Power to the Provinces: The Devolution of China’s Maritime Rights Protection,” China Brief 14, no. 1 (September 10, 2014); “Papers Confirm U.S. Planes Patrolled around Spratlys,” Kyodo News, July 30, 2013; “Chinese Navy Launches New Patrol Route in S. China Sea,” Kyodo News, August 5, 2013.
7. Philippine newspapers published some suspect accounts during this initial period. For example, on May 9 a Philippine defense source stated that five to eight Chinese fishing vessels were in the lagoon of Second Thomas Shoal “unloading big ropes and planting metal structures.” Yet the chief of the Philippine Navy, Vice Admiral Jose Luis Alano, dismissed these assertions a week and a half later. Redempto D. Anda, “2 Chinese Spy Ships Sighted off PH-Held Shoal,” Inquirer Southern Luzon, May 10, 2013; Jaime Sinapit, “Chinese Erecting Structure on Kalayaan’s Ayungin
confirmed the military was on alert and had stepped up patrols to verify these reports. On May 10, another source gave details about two China Marine Surveillance vessels reportedly holding position six nm west of the shoal.9

Manila filed its first formal diplomatic protest over Second Thomas Shoal with the Chinese embassy the same day. Philippine diplomats stated their opposition to China’s “provocative and illegal presence” near the shoal. Manila officially identified the Chinese task force as two China Marine Surveillance patrol ships and one PLA Navy vessel, in addition to the civilian flotilla fishing in the Spratlys. The Philippines asserted its sovereignty over the shoal and charged China with “intruding” into its exclusive economic zone. The Chinese embassy in turn reiterated its own sovereignty claims over the shoal and the Spratly Islands.10

On May 15, a civilian Philippine ship owned by the Kalayaan Municipality, the M/V Queen Seagull, was passing near Second Thomas when it was intercepted by Chinese state vessels. According to Mayor Eugenio Bito-onon, Jr., the Queen Seagull was tailed around 1 am for an hour. One foreign vessel trained a powerful searchlight on the Philippine boat from a distance of about 100 feet, illuminating the Queen Seagull bow to stern. A second ship kept watch farther away. Mayor Bito-onon claimed the vessels belonged to the PLA Navy, but radio contact was never established and Filipino civilians on deck were unable to identify them. The two ships peeled away once the M/V Queen Seagull had left the vicinity of the shoal.11

Philippine officials gave their first full briefing on the situation at Second Thomas Shoal on May 21. A Department of Foreign Affairs spokesperson echoed the Philippines’ May 10 diplomatic protest, calling China’s presence “a violation of international law.” The spokesperson confirmed that 30 fishing trawlers, two China Marine Surveillance cutters, and one PLA Navy warship had been in the area for over a week. Speaking at a naval base that day, President Aquino likewise asserted, “Our

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message to the whole world is clear: what belongs to the Philippines belongs to the Philippines.\(^{12}\) Nevertheless, Philippine Vice Admiral Luis Alano said the same day that the Philippines had “no problem” with Chinese vessels being in the area as long as they were not exploiting any natural resources.\(^{13}\)

Over the next few days, Manila put forward a “peaceful resolution” strategy for Second Thomas Shoal.\(^{14}\) The administration coordinated options with the Department of Foreign Affairs, Navy, Coast Guard, and Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources. Philippine officials helped fishermen “look for other fishing grounds” and had already established some artificial fish sanctuaries closer to the mainland. Following guidance from President Aquino to “de-escalate” the situation, the Philippine military limited its role to monitoring Chinese activities from the air only. The military had no plans of sending more Philippine ships to the shoal, fearing that “if we increase our presence there, then we are just going to escalate the situation.” Deputy presidential spokesperson Abigail Valte likewise said this decision was “deliberate” and that there was no change in the Philippines’ “peaceful path” of resolving maritime disputes through a “rules-based approach.”\(^{15}\) Meanwhile, officials communicated the Philippines’ resolve to defend its interests, with Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin saying the marine detachment at Second Thomas would “fight . . . up to the last soldier standing.”\(^{16}\)

Beijing responded publicly to the Philippines’ protest for the first time on May 23. The Chinese foreign ministry asserted that “China has indisputable sovereignty over the [Spratly] Islands and their adjacent waters.” Around this time, Chinese fishermen were reportedly harvesting coral and endangered giant clams from Second Thomas’s reef. On May 28, the ministry defended Chinese government patrols in the area as “beyond reproach” and called on all parties to “refrain from taking actions that complicate the situation.” The Philippine Navy reported that the Chinese “frigate” and civilian trawlers had left the vicinity of Second Thomas the same day, leaving only two China Marine Surveillance vessels.\(^{17}\)

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\(^{13}\) Sinapit, “PH Navy Chief.”


Some nonauthoritative Chinese commentators aired a view of Beijing’s strategy in its maritime disputes as methodical and aggressive. PLA Navy Rear Admiral Zhang Zhaozhong, an official military propagandist, argued on state television that China had employed a “cabbage strategy” to “seal and control” Scarborough Shoal since its 2012 standoff with the Philippines. While Chinese “fishermen conduct normal production [inside the lagoon],” outside the reef “fishing administration ships and marine surveillance ships are conducting normal patrols while in the outer ring there are navy warships.” In this way, he argued Beijing had secured its sovereign and economic rights at Scarborough without “resorting to war.” Zhang called for applying this approach elsewhere in a general strategy to “recover the islands and reefs and defend them.”

Pointing to foreign outposts in the Spratlys, he suggested China impose a blockade to starve out their garrisons. Zhang noted that these small islands and reefs have no internal sources of food or potable water. If supplies were disrupted “for one or two weeks, the troopers stationed there will leave the islands on their own.” Assuming Beijing then “wrapped” the feature “layer by layer like a cabbage” as it had at Scarborough, the foreign forces “will never be able to come back.” The only diplomatic constraint on this strategy was to “grab the right timing.” Namely, as Zhang claimed Beijing did in 2012, China should deliberately seize opportunities provided by foreign “provocations” to justify its own assertive response.18 Other Chinese experts on CCTV suggested China simply tow away the BRP Sierra Madre if a blockade failed to coerce the Philippine marines to abandon it.19 Swayed by these nonauthoritative sources or not, Philippine officials informed media outlets that they feared “the Chinese ships will block supplies” at Second Thomas Shoal.20

Authoritative Chinese sources, on the other hand, have consistently framed Beijing’s strategy as reactive and status-quo oriented. On May 29, Secretary Gazmin met with Chinese ambassador Ma Keqing on the sidelines of a UN event at Camp Aguinaldo, the headquarters of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. At this time, a Philippine supply vessel was apparently under way to the BRP Sierra Madre. Recounting the meeting, Gazmin said the Chinese were primarily concerned with the possibility that Manila was sending building materials to erect “additional structures” on the shoal. According to Ambassador Ma, Chinese forces were now “continuously monitoring” Second Thomas to guard against any new construction.21 This explanation was repeated by a Chinese Ministry of National Defense spokesperson the following day. While condemning the Philippines’

newsreel displays what is purportedly an image of the PLA Navy vessel sighted near Second Thomas Shoal at the time. However, the partially obscured timestamp indicates the photograph was taken during a separate incident in October 2012, detailed by Mayor Bito-onon in Prashanth Parameswaran, “Interview: A Philippine Perspective from the Middle of the South China Sea,” Diplomat, September 29, 2015.


20. Mogato, “South China Sea Tension Mounts near Filipino Shipwreck.”

21. Ibid.
illegal" grounding of the Sierra Madre in 1999, as well as its prolonged refusal to remove the warship, the ministry dismissed as “groundless” any accusation “that Chinese vessels have threatened to cut off supplies of water and food for Philippine military staff at the reef.”

Philippine officials denied that the supply ship was transporting construction materials to Second Thomas Shoal or that Manila had any ambition to do so. Secretary Gazmin reassured China’s ambassador that the Philippine vessel was conducting a routine resupply mission. He claimed it only carried food and water and a new “rotation of troops.” Gazmin also promised that Manila would “not violate the agreement not to construct new structures.” The next day, a Philippine spokesperson seconded Gazmin’s remarks, calling it the military’s “sovereign and humanitarian duty” to resupply Philippine troops on the Sierra Madre. The Department of Foreign Affairs insisted that China had no right “to dictate on whatever we want to do within our maritime domain” and reiterated this position during a dialogue the following month.

In June, U.S. officials and their Philippine counterparts held alliance consultations in Manila, partly on the issue of Second Thomas Shoal. U.S. Pacific Command’s Admiral Samuel Locklear visited the Philippines following his trip to the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, where Second Thomas Shoal had received some attention. Admiral Locklear met with Secretary Gazmin, General Bau-tista, and Vice Admiral Alano for discussions that included the South China Sea. Locklear expressed opposition to any “change of the status quo by force,” but no specifics about Second Thomas Shoal were disclosed. Then on June 18, U.S. Navy secretary Ray Mabus visited Manila for talks with the same group. Asked whether Mabus had discussed the South China Sea, U.S. ambassador to the Philippines Harry Thomas, Jr. said the dialogue revolved around “ensur[ing] freedom of navigation and no economic coercion,” keeping “sea lanes . . . open,” and the “need to adhere to a code of conduct.” Secretary Gazmin, on the other hand, was unequivocal that the Second Thomas issue had been raised and that U.S. officials were “concerned and want to be sure that this will be resolved without use of force.”

23. Frances Mangosing, “China Raises Concerns over PH’s Reported Development Plans on Ayungin Shoal,” Global Nation Inquirer, May 29, 2013. It is unclear whether the Philippine defense secretary was referring to the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties or some other bilateral understanding.
On June 19, Secretary Gazmin and Philippine Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Emmanuel Bautista both announced that the Sierra Madre had been successfully re-provisioned. Bautista said the resupply mission took place “this month,” and Gazmin stated that it had happened earlier that week. If this was the same re-provisioning mission described by Philippine officials on May 29, then the whole operation took nearly three weeks, despite Second Thomas Shoal being less than two days from Palawan by sea. Whatever the explanation, the Philippines reported “no interference” from Chinese vessels. General Bautista said China made no “aggressive moves” like attempting to impose a blockade. As long as this remained the case, he stated, the Philippines had “no problem” with an enduring Chinese presence and Manila would persevere in its “nonconfrontational” approach. One Philippine Navy official stated that the Western Command had begun using nonmilitary ships that year to resupply the Sierra Madre in order to “avoid confrontation” with China. The Chinese foreign ministry denounced the Philippines’ occupation of Second Thomas Shoal on June 21 and again on June 24 in response to Manila drawing attention to the resupply mission.

Second Thomas Shoal figured prominently in the ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Brunei on June 29. The Chinese People’s Daily ran a blistering front-page commentary the opening day, condemning Manila’s “sins” in the South China Sea and warning of a possible Chinese “counterstrike.” Philippine foreign affairs secretary Albert del Rosario was highly critical of China’s behavior at sea during the meeting. He condemned the “massive presence of Chinese military and paramilitary ships” at Scarborough and Second Thomas, describing them as “threats to efforts to maintain maritime peace and stability in the region.” Secretary del Rosario also accused China of violating the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties and militarizing the South China Sea dispute. Del Rosario did extend an invitation for Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi to visit Manila for bilateral consultations, but the raised tensions led to “testy exchanges”

29. For Philippine resupply vessels, sailing to Second Thomas typically takes around 16 hours from Thitu Island or 36 to 40 hours from Palawan. “Grounded Ship Is PH’s Last Line of Defense vs. China,” Agence France-Presse; Rupert Wingfield-Hayes, “China’s Island Factory,” BBC, September 9, 2014.
31. Secretary Gazmin had earlier described the “protocol” for unarmed logistics ships traveling to the Spratlys as one of “avoidance of dangerous maneuvers . . . [and] confrontational moves.” Mangosing, “AFP Confirms Re-Provisioning”; Victor Reyes, “No Chinese Interference as AFP Rotates Troops in Ayungin Shoal” Malaya Business Insight, June 20, 2013; Mangosing, “China Raises Concerns over PH’s Reported Development Plans.”
between the two ministers during closed sessions. 36 Reportedly, when del Rosario cited technical and financial obstacles to removing the grounded warship, Wang offered to have Chinese forces “do it themselves.” 37

Throughout July, Philippine officials reported that at least one Chinese coast guard cutter remained positioned near Second Thomas Shoal. The new leader of Western Command, Lieutenant General Rustico Guerrero, observed on July 11 that the Chinese presence was “dynamic” and varying from one to three vessels. Guerrero contended that the two sides were only engaged in mutual “monitoring” rather than a “standoff,” and that there had been no disruption to the Philippines’ supply lines. 38 Chinese vessels also reportedly began patrolling closer to the shoal around this time, coming as close as three nautical miles. 39

Although no major changes occurred at sea, Second Thomas remained on the minds of both Manila and Washington. On July 12, the commander of U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Pacific described in detail a possible role for the U.S. military in a contingency over the shoal. 40 Three days later, Manila issued an eight-point statement saying China’s assertiveness at sea had made it “impossible” to continue bilateral negotiations, which it suspended indefinitely. Beijing responded with “dissatisfaction” and “regret” the following day. 41 Up to 2,000 Filipino demonstrators then forced China’s consulate in Makati City to close as they protested China’s maritime activities. Toward the end of the month, the U.S. Senate adopted a resolution criticizing China’s behavior in the South China Sea, including at Second Thomas Shoal. It was also leaked that U.S. P-3C Orion aircraft had conducting surveillance on Second Thomas from Clark Air Base north of Manila. 42

China’s posture became slightly more assertive in August. Multiple patrol ships from the newly unified China Coast Guard were present without interruption, and they sailed closer to the Sierra Madre than ever before. On August 24, Filipino fishermen taking shelter at Second Thomas reported two “stationary” Chinese cutters. 43 In a press conference a few days later, General Bautista confirmed that Filipino fishing boats were operating at the shoal without interference, but that China was keeping up a “continuous presence” of two to five PLA Navy, China Coast Guard, and civilian fishing vessels at a distance of two to five miles. Indeed, photography showed a China

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39. Tordesillas, “China Offers to Remove Sierra Madre from Ayungin Shoal.”
Coast Guard ship patrolling only 300 to 400 yards beyond the breakers of the reef.\(^{44}\) Philippine mayor Eugenio Bito-onon claimed the Philippine Navy and Air Force flew maritime patrols “weekly” to monitor the situation.\(^{45}\)

Also in August, the *Sierra Madre* welcomed a Western journalist for the first time in a Philippine bid to gain greater international recognition. Joined by Mayor Bito-onon, a *New York Times* reporter rode aboard a small vessel to the shoal. As they approached from the south, the crew sighted one China Coast Guard cutter “stationed at either side of the reef.” The Chinese vessels did not move as the Philippine ship sailed north into the shoal. They eventually left their positions and patrolled in half-circles within eyeshot of the *Sierra Madre*. One Chinese ship steamed close enough for the Philippine marines to identify its bow markings. The cutters surveilled the Philippine outpost in this fashion for at least two days. At one point, they were seen chasing off a fishing vessel of unknown nationality. A Philippine soldier stationed on the *Sierra Madre* also informed the media that a U.S. P-3C often flew overhead, especially “whenever the Chinese made a significant tactical shift.”\(^{46}\)

This same month, Manila also accused Beijing of demanding it abandon both its arbitration case and Second Thomas Shoal in return for Beijing allowing President Aquino to attend the annual China-ASEAN Expo.\(^{47}\)

Typhoon Haiyan (known as Super Typhoon Yolanda in the Philippines) made landfall on the main Philippine archipelago in November. It was one of the strongest tropical storms ever recorded, claiming over 6,000 lives in the Philippines before moving on to China and Vietnam. According to the Philippine military, the Chinese vessels stationed near Second Thomas Shoal withdrew sometime in the first week of November rather than brave the onslaught.\(^{48}\) On the other hand, the garrison itself reported to Western media that the China Coast Guard actually departed the shoal on October 16 but had continued to return twice a week for patrols lasting two to five hours each. The marines and the dilapidated hull of the *Sierra Madre* managed to survive the storm.\(^{49}\)

The detachment on the *Sierra Madre* believed this marked the end of China’s continuous presence. Yet that did not mean China was not still engaged in regular maritime surveillance of the shoal, presumably from nearby Mischief Reef. On November 12, a civilian Philippine logistics ship arrived at the shoal with provisions, rotational personnel, and “roofing and good lumber for repairs” to the ship’s hull, which had been damaged during the typhoon. No Chinese vessels were in

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visual range when the supply vessel arrived, but within 45 minutes a China Coast Guard cutter was patrolling the breakers near the *Sierra Madre*. This was the last rotation of marines to Second Thomas before the March 2014 incident.

**Phase II: Offers De-escalation If Manila Suspends Arbitration Case**

Tensions over Second Thomas Shoal steadily rose once again in early 2014 over the submission deadline for a written plea in the Philippines’ arbitration case in March. In January, Manila reportedly received a Chinese offer for an agreement to de-escalate the South China Sea dispute “through a lawmaker who acted as a backdoor negotiator.” It is unknown whether this was Senator Antonio Trillanes IV, who was President Aquino’s personal back channel to Beijing during earlier negotiations over Scarborough Shoal.

The bargain China allegedly offered was substantial. In return for the Philippines not submitting its memorial to a specially constituted arbitral tribunal at the Permanent Court of Arbitration, Beijing pledged to withdraw its coast guard from Scarborough Shoal as long as Manila guaranteed the disengagement would be mutual. In effect, China would forfeit the control it had gained over the shoal in the 2012 standoff—which had been the arbitration case’s raison d’être in the first place, or at least the straw that broke the camel’s back. Beijing also held out other “incentives,” including investment in the Philippines. A second account asserted that China only requested that Manila delay its suit, with a senior Chinese official telling Senator Trillanes, “We don’t expect the Philippines to withdraw the suit because we understand that national pride is at stake.” A senior Bruneian official also communicated his own government’s hope that the Philippines would hold off.

The Philippine cabinet was divided when President Aquino informed them about the proposed deal during a full meeting of the cabinet in late January. Secretary del Rosario stood firmly against it. The president’s office was initially undecided, but the foreign secretary’s objections eventually won out. Officials remarked that the Scarborough Shoal issue “did not start” with the 2012 standoff, which was “just a manifestation of an earlier problem.” There were also concerns about the credibility of such an offer coming through a backdoor negotiator.

As Manila debated the deal in mid-February, Chinese government ships reestablished a continuous presence at Second Thomas Shoal. There were conflicting reports about their affiliation and behavior. One Filipino media account put the Chinese presence at four China Coast Guard cutters, but another observed that only two were coast guard vessels while the others looked like PLA Navy “frigates.” Similarly, Filipino fishermen operating in the vicinity of Second Thomas reported no interference from the Chinese ships, yet the officer in charge of the *Sierra Madre*

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50. Sinapit, “Philippine Marines on Grounded Ship Safe.”
52. Esmaquel II, “China Offers PH ‘Carrot.’”
55. Esmaquel II, “China Offers PH ‘Carrot.’”
marines claimed that the Chinese cutters had become more aggressive. Between December 2013 and March 2014, the Philippine detachment observed at least eight instances of Chinese vessels “bullying” Vietnamese and Filipino fishermen, which included chasing them away from the shoal.

Philippine officials never spoke on the record about the alleged deal or Manila’s ultimate decision. Some lawmakers had expressed interest, and neither was President Aquino totally against considering the bargain. Nevertheless, on February 25 Philippine spokespersons announced that Manila had decided to proceed with its memorial. Local media published stories about the rejected deal the very next day. Asked about the story, a Chinese embassy spokesperson said he had “no information to offer,” and Philippine officials likewise declined to comment. On February 28, Secretary del Rosario then definitively affirmed that Manila was “working with full resolve” to submit its written pleading before the end of March. The same day, Manila asked the tribunal to amend its Statement of Claim to include the status of Second Thomas Shoal, which the court granted. The Philippines’ solicitor general soon announced that Manila had asked “Malaysia, Vietnam and two other governments” to join the Philippines’ arbitration case or to file their own separately.

Also on February 28, officials in Beijing answered questions on the case and the leaked offer. Calling the reports “sheer fabrication,” a foreign ministry spokesperson said Beijing would “never trade away [Chinese] sovereignty and territory.” He underscored China’s unshakable resolve and firm opposition to the Philippines’ initiation of arbitration proceedings. Philippine officials soon began worrying about a possible backlash. On March 6, a former Philippine minister claimed China was privately “threatening” Manila not to file its memorial, “or else.”

Phase III: Chinese Vessels Harass Philippine Supply Ships

On March 9, 2014, China disrupted a Philippine supply operation to Second Thomas Shoal for the first time since the Sierra Madre was run aground in 1999. Beijing broke the news on March 10. Responding to a question, a foreign ministry spokesperson described the incident and the rationale behind China’s actions in detail. Two China Coast Guard cutters were said to have been “on routine patrol in waters off” Second Thomas when they “spotted two Philippine-flagged vessels” headed to the shoal. The Chinese ships allegedly identified that the Philippine ships “were loaded with construction materials.” The coast guard then “spoke through [an] amplifier with these two

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[Philippine] ships,” which in turn left the same afternoon. Beijing justified this “necessary response” by reiterating China’s core objections to the Philippines’ “illegal” occupation of Second Thomas Shoal. The ministry spokesperson argued Manila had “blatantly violated” the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties by attempting to “carry out construction work” on the shoal, provoking China’s harassment.62

Other Chinese sources soon expanded on this description. Xinhua painted the China Coast Guard’s actions as more aggressive than just using loudspeakers, with China said to have “expelled” or “driven away” the Philippine ships. Then again, the article stated the Philippine vessels had left after merely being “warned.”63 In other press conferences a week later, a spokesperson from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained in more detail China’s view that the two Philippine ships “were loaded with concrete and rebar rather than food,” asking rhetorically, “[Are] concrete and rebar edible?” He called this “an out-and-out provocation” that warranted China’s response to “send away” the vessels.64 Another official said the Philippines was violating its “own commitment” to China never to undertake further construction at the shoal.65

The message Beijing communicated here—as it had previously in May 2013—was that it had no intention of disrupting the supply of basic provisions to Philippine military personnel. However, China would not accept the shipment of construction materials. This view has been echoed by Chinese media commentators, PLA academics, and university scholars, as well as by some U.S. analysts. One Chinese military expert noted that even if the Philippines was just shipping materials to carry out repairs, Beijing saw Manila’s ultimate goal as “consolidating” the wrecked ship into a “permanent settlement.”66

Manila was slow to react to a confrontation it probably did not anticipate. A defense spokesperson initially said China Coast Guard vessels had “blocked” two Philippine vessels on their way to “re-provision” Second Thomas Shoal.67 After digesting full reports from the military, Manila then made two official statements on March 11. First, a Department of Foreign Affairs press release

condemned Beijing’s “interference with the efforts of the Philippines to undertake rotation and resupply operations.” The two “civilian vessels contracted by the Philippine Navy” were said to be merely conducting routine operations.68

Second, a department spokesperson gave the Philippines’ full account of the episode. At 9:30 am on the day of the confrontation, two China Coast Guard vessels reportedly began tailing the Philippine civilian ships, and around 10:00 am, they tried to “block and prevent” them from reaching Second Thomas. Then at 12:40 pm, the Chinese cutters used a “digital signboard, sirens, and megaphones” to demand the Philippines “leave the area,” claiming the shoal as “part of their jurisdiction.”69 Manila offered no information about what occurred during next two hours, but at 2:30 pm, the Philippine vessels apparently yielded and returned to Palawan.70 The department also announced that it had summoned the Chinese chargé d’affaires in Manila to formally protest the incident.71 Responding to the Philippines’ account, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs rejected its “unfounded countercharges” and demanded that the Philippines “make good on its commitment [to] tow away the ship.”72

The Philippines publicly asserted that it was only trying to “bring provisions” and “resupply” its troops stationed aboard the Sierra Madre. However, numerous Philippine sources suggested that was not the full story. One Philippine Navy official soon told the media, “We only intend to improve the conditions there, we have no plans to expand or build permanent structures on the shoal,” with the implication that the transport ships were carrying more than food, water, and new marines. Two other security officials rejected the label of “construction materials,” but admitted the vessels had carried “items for the improvement of the living condition of our troops there, the habitability of the place.”73 A third official stated that the Philippines was in the process of “conducting repairs inside the ship to keep it from disintegrating,” and a fourth acknowledged that it had “sent supplies and equipment for repair[s].”74 Despite the public denial, Manila thus unofficially acknowledged it was consolidating its outpost. This was justified by differentiating the erection of

70. Around this time, a Filipino media outlet also published an image obtained from the Kalayaan local government that purportedly depicted “three Chinese ships . . . patrolling the seas” at Second Thomas, yet the photographed ships are clearly fishing trawlers, if Chinese. “PHL Protests China’s Shooing Away of 2 Boats on Ayungin Shoal,” InterAkyson, March 11, 2014.
73. “Philippines Protests Ayungin Shoal Incident,” Philippine Daily Inquirer; Mogato, “Manila Air-Drops Supplies to Troops”; Fonbuena, “PH Sending Ships to Ayungin despite Blockade.”
“new” structures from “repairs” or even “improvements” to existing facilities. Yet Beijing did not accept this distinction, in part because up to this time neither party publicly recognized the Sierra Madre as a permanent Philippine outpost.

Filipino media then disclosed that after the March 9 confrontation, the Philippine military immediately acted to resupply the garrison at Second Thomas with basic provisions. On March 10, a Philippine Navy BN-2 Islander utility aircraft dropped sacks of food and a few gallons of water to the troops. It flew about an hour from Puerto Princesa City airport in Palawan, maneuvering at an altitude of 500 feet to land packages on the warship’s deck. Sources differ on whether this resupply mission would tide the marines over for days or weeks, but all agreed that relying solely on airdrops was unsustainable. At one point the marine rotation actually ran out of potable water, leaving them less than a week to get resupplied or evacuate. Manila ultimately conducted two airdrops of basic supplies between March 10 and 29. There are no reports of China attempting to interfere. One Chinese military commentator later argued that Beijing “did not take [any] countermeasures” because it “would never let [Manila’s] people starve.” During this time, the Philippine detachment at Second Thomas reported Chinese activities back to Western Command every four hours.

According to officials, the Philippines’ strategy for resolving the confrontation and broader dispute would rely on “the power of diplomacy and international support.” A presidential spokesperson emphasized Manila’s “rules-based approach” of seeking international arbitration. Another said the Philippines would continue lobbying for support from ASEAN, the United States, Japan, and other partners.

On March 12, Manila received its first signal of U.S. support. A State Department spokesperson condemned China’s harassment as a “provocative move that raises tensions.” She asserted that “there should be no interference with the efforts of claimants to maintain the status quo,” and that “freedom of navigation . . . must be maintained.” The U.S. deputy chief of mission in Manila also

78. “(Why Is the Philippines Stirring up Second Thomas Shoal Again?),” Southeast Television.
79. Dizon, “Mission Possible to Ayungin Shoal.”
81. Mogato, “Manila Air-Drops Supplies to Troops on Disputed Reef.”
explained that in Washington’s view, “the regular resupply and rotation of personnel positioned in the South China Sea at locations that have existed since before the [2002] Declaration . . . is consistent with the maintenance of the status quo.” He clearly identified “the Philippine outpost at Second Thomas Shoal” as one such installation.\textsuperscript{82}

This recognition of the BRP \textit{Sierra Madre} as a part of the pre-2002 status quo had important implications for both regional diplomacy and U.S. treaty commitments. First, at this point not even Manila had officially recognized the \textit{Sierra Madre} as a permanent outpost, and up to the present the U.S. Department of Defense still classifies it inconsistently—sometimes as an “outpost” and sometimes as a naval “presence.”\textsuperscript{83} The \textit{Sierra Madre} did not appear alongside other permanent Philippine installations in the Pentagon’s August 2015 Asia-Pacific maritime strategy paper. Second, Washington identified the Philippines’ activities as consistent with the status quo, leaving unanswered whether repairs or improvements were also legitimate. Responding to these statements, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson accused the United States of “taking sides” and speaking “in disregard of the facts.”\textsuperscript{84}

The Philippines released its own pivotal statement on the status of the \textit{Sierra Madre} on March 14. For the first time, Manila acknowledged publicly that the vessel had been “placed” on the shoal deliberately in 1999 to “serve as a permanent Philippine Government installation.” This was said to be in direct reaction to “China’s illegal occupation of Mischief Reef in 1995.” Manila noted that the \textit{Sierra Madre} had been grounded prior to the 2002 Declaration and also reiterated the Philippines’ claim to the shoal on the basis of its continental shelf.\textsuperscript{85} This was a departure from Manila’s historical stance, but Philippine officials never addressed whether they or previous administrations had agreed to pull out the vessel.\textsuperscript{86}

China reacted to the Philippines’ “shocking” announcement three days later. A foreign ministry spokesperson said Manila had made an “unequivocal commitment to China on many occasions that it would tow away the ship ‘grounded’ on [Second Thomas] due to ‘malfunction,’” and in 2003 separately “made another solemn commitment that it would not become the first country to violate the [2002 Declaration] regarding” the shoal. He allowed that the “sitting Philippine government was not the one of 15 years ago,” but demanded that “as a country the Philippines should honor its commitment” or else risk losing its “credibility.” Finally, Beijing warned of “consequences” to any “further possible provocations in the South China Sea by the Philippines.”\textsuperscript{87} Other nonauthoritative


\textsuperscript{84} Gan, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Remarks” (March 13, 2014).

\textsuperscript{85} Philippine DFA, “The Department of Foreign Affairs’ Statement on China’s Allegation That the Philippines Agreed to Pull out of the Ayungin Shoal,” press release, March 14, 2014.

\textsuperscript{86} Rodel Rodis, “Gazmin’s Twit,” \textit{Global Nation Inquirer}, March 26, 2014.

\textsuperscript{87} Hong Lei, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Regular Press Conference on March 17, 2014.”
Chinese sources likewise insisted in subsequent weeks that Manila’s “dissembling has finally come to an end.” One People’s Daily op-ed asserted that “any future moves by the Philippines . . . can be understood [to mean] that they intend to maintain their illegal presence.” PLA academics speculated that the Sierra Madre’s deteriorating conditions had finally forced Manila to consolidate its occupation openly.88

The commander of the U.S. Seventh Fleet arrived in Manila aboard the USS Blue Ridge on March 18 as the Philippines prepared to reattempt a supply mission to Second Thomas by sea. Vice Admiral Robert Thomas was asked in a press conference what involvement the United States might have in a contingency over the shoal. He stated, “Without going into hypotheticals, the Seventh Fleet is going to support this alliance, period.”89 Despite the deliberate ambiguity, Manila publicly called this a signal that Washington “would abide by [its] treaty obligations.”90

U.S. president Barack Obama and Chinese president Xi Jinping held a private meeting in The Hague on March 24. President Obama made mild remarks before the bilateral meeting, suggesting the two countries could “work through frictions” like “maritime issues in the South China Sea.”91 However, Daniel Russel, the assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific, later suggested that Obama may have been quite firm with Xi over Second Thomas Shoal. Assistant Secretary Russel said President Obama had made clear to his Chinese counterpart “that the use of force, the use of coercion, the threat of force and other means of intimidation are unacceptable as vehicles for advancing China’s territorial claims.”92

Diplomatic tensions rose further as Manila prepared to submit its memorial to the arbitral tribunal by the end of March. On March 18, the Philippines wrote to the court that China’s actions to “prevent the rotation and resupply of Philippine personnel stationed at Second Thomas Shoal . . . seriously aggravates and extends the dispute.” The tribunal welcomed comments from China the following day.93 On March 26, a Chinese spokesperson stated, “China will never accept nor participate in the international arbitration unilaterally initiated and pushed by the Philippines.” Beijing voiced its hope that Manila would return to bilateral negotiations but said its resolve to defend Chinese sovereignty was “unswerving.”94 The next day, a Chinese defense ministry spokesperson declared the Philippines’ approach to be “doomed to failure.”95

93. Permanent Court of Arbitration, Award on Jurisdiction and Admissibility, 18.
Phase IV: With U.S. Support, Manila Resupplies Shoal and Files Case

On March 29, 2014, a Philippine supply vessel carrying provisions, new marines, and both foreign and Filipino journalists successfully reached the Sierra Madre. The ship endured harassment by Chinese vessels, but was eventually able to pass through. Philippine, Chinese, and U.S. surveillance aircraft all closely monitored the operation from above.

As in the past, Philippine leadership handed down strict rules of engagement. The new Western Command leader, Lieutenant General Roy Deveraturda, gave orders for a policy of “maximum tolerance.” According to an official involved in the operation, “We monitored everything through our radio, but we are under orders to keep our distance.” Another officer explained, “No amount of China’s bullying or provocation will draw us to move first against them.”96 To this end, the main resupply vessel was an auxiliary research ship in the Philippine Navy operated by the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources. This was the 102-foot BRP Fort San Antonio (AM-700), manned by four navy officers and 20 enlisted personnel all wearing civilian clothes. A smaller civilian vessel, the M/V Unnaizah May, was also part of the expedition, but it suffered mechanical issues halfway through the trip and never made it to Second Thomas.97 After the mission, a Philippine spokesman explained that the purpose of using civilian ships was “to avoid a confrontation . . . and to show them our intent, which was to re-provision and rotate our personnel, and nothing more.”98 Lieutenant Ferdinand Gato, the Philippine Navy officer in command of the Philippine supply vessel, said his instructions defined Chinese “harassment” as a “very obvious . . . blocking [of] our ship’s path. If we change course and they follow, then we change course again, go ahead and report it.”99

This resupply mission was planned weeks in advance in secrecy to avoid alerting the Chinese. Western Command operations centers limited their use of cell phones and computer ports. Some military offices were disconnected from the Internet, so official communications were printed and hand-delivered rather than sent by e-mail. Officials also spoke in codes and regional dialects. The journalists traveling aboard the government vessels were not allowed to call, text, or upload information after the launch.100

Despite these precautions, Manila believed that the mission was “compromised” from the start. On March 26, a Philippine Navy installation on Palawan “lost all communications signals” with no

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98. Ramos, “AFP: Civilian Ship Sent to Avoid Standoff.”
disruptions reported elsewhere.\textsuperscript{101} The next day, Philippine marines at Second Thomas reported that the China Coast Guard was practicing using water cannons within sight of the \textit{Sierra Madre}. Manila interpreted this as preparations for the arrival of Philippine vessels.\textsuperscript{102} One Filipino journalist claimed the China Coast Guard used water cannons to drive Filipino fishing boats away from the shoal on March 28, yet another reported that Chinese forces did not harass any fishermen around the time of the mission.\textsuperscript{103}

A central aspect of the Philippines' strategy was having foreign journalists accompany the mission. Eighteen journalists joined the trip, including the Associated Press. Explaining the decision, a Philippine military spokesperson said they were “invited to observe for transparency.” General Bautista conveyed a more calculated logic, noting “we are executing a strategy. [This is] all part of it.”\textsuperscript{104} The journalists inferred that the mission was coordinated with the United States, but their handlers would not confirm it.\textsuperscript{105} Afterward, Manila let these journalists report on the mission rather than give an official detailed account itself.\textsuperscript{106}

The two Philippine supply vessels left their jump-off point near Puerto Princesa on Palawan around 3 am on March 28. The crew ultimately journeyed 36 hours before reaching the \textit{Sierra Madre}. The BRP \textit{Fort San Antonio} and M/V \textit{Unnaizah May} carried approximately 10 tons of food supplies, including rice, canned goods, and drinking water. When the \textit{Unnaizah May} was disabled by a broken propeller shaft during the day on March 28, all the journalists on board piled into the \textit{Fort San Antonio} while the \textit{Unnaizah May} remained behind.\textsuperscript{107} A U.S. Navy aircraft may have appeared when the two vessels stopped to inspect the \textit{Unnaizah May}’s mechanical failure, flying directly above the Philippine ships. That night, an unidentified foreign helicopter also flew close by, but it was too dark to make an identification.\textsuperscript{108}

On the morning of March 29, the Philippine supply ship began noticing military aircraft circling overhead. Reporters first spotted a gray-colored aircraft, followed by a different aircraft several

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103. Zambrano, “\textit{Mission to Ayungin Shoal};” Dizon, “\textit{AFP Uses Couriers to Foil China Spies}.”
105. Dizon, “\textit{AFP Uses Couriers to Foil China Spies}.”
hours later. Although some could not be identified, U.S., Philippine, and Chinese aircraft were all recognized. Photojournalists captured aircraft with “U.S. Navy” markings at least twice, including a P-8A Poseidon maritime surveillance aircraft. According to sources, the P-8 deliberately made “low passes” near the shoal to make its presence obvious to all parties. The Philippine ambassador in Washington, Jose Cuisia, Jr., stated that the United States “assisted the Philippine Navy in being able to evade the Chinese ships” as part of “the strategy that was discussed” beforehand. This has been confirmed by other Philippine leaders, but never by the United States itself publicly. Philippine military officials may also have identified an additional Chinese airborne early warning and control aircraft during the mission. Finally, one Chinese official later claimed that a U.S. Navy vessel was also positioned nearby at the time.

As the BRP Fort San Antonio approached the shoal from the northeast around 1 pm, a 229-foot Shuke I–class China Coast Guard ship appeared on the horizon. The ship kept some distance off the Fort San Antonio’s port side until a second coast guard cutter, a larger 328-foot Zhaoli-class vessel, arrived when the Philippine ship was about 7.5 nautical miles from the reef. Reporters only photographed these two vessels. However, Lieutenant Gato allegedly observed one additional Chinese vessel during the mission, and a foreign journalist traveling aboard a Philippine Air Force aircraft circling above the area reported four total Chinese ships. Another reporter asserted that two PLA Navy warships were also deployed 10 nm from the shoal.

The larger China Coast Guard ship then steamed within 200 yards of the Fort San Antonio while the smaller vessel held back. Some Philippine military officials speculated that it was waiting for

110. Dizon, “Sleepless on Ayungin Shoal”;
114. Filipino journalists took photographs of the aircraft during the mission. Military officials who viewed photos later said they believed it was Chinese, likely a Chinese KJ-2000 aircraft. Dizon, “Sleepless on Ayungin Shoal.”
116. These were the CCG 1127 and CCG 3401, respectively. Gomez, “Philippine Supply Ship Evades Chinese Vessel”; De Castro and Ng, “Philippine Ship Dodges China Blockade”; Spratlys: The Islands of Freedom, directed by Chiara Zambrano.
the M/V Unnaizah May, not knowing it had turned around the day before. As the Sierra Madre came into view five nm away, the larger Chinese cutter hailed the Fort San Antonio at 1:17 pm and radioed in English, “Please identify yourself.” Lieutenant Gato responded, “This is [a] Republic of the Philippines ship. This is a civilian vessel.” A long pause followed, after which the Chinese officer responded, “Your vessel has entered the sea area under the jurisdiction of China. May I know what is the purpose of your entering the sea area?” Gato answered that they were “proceeding to re-provision our vessel.” Several terse exchanges followed, during which the Philippines was ordered to stop its mission and leave the area. Finally, the Chinese radioed back, “You will take full responsibility for the consequences of your actions.”

This vessel began blaring its air horn continuously and crossed the Fort San Antonio’s bow over to its starboard side. Now only 70 yards away, it kept repeating its radio message to “stop immediately, stop all illegal activities and leave” while a Chinese crew member standing on the deck gestured for the Fort San Antonio to turn around. The Chinese officer also claimed the Philippines “action here has infringed upon the marine rights and the interests of the People’s Republic of China” as well as its “laws.” The marines aboard the Fort San Antonio waved the peace sign at the Chinese vessel as journalists recorded the event. This standoff lasted an hour until the ship turned back to cross the Fort San Antonio’s bow once again and the Fort San Antonio was forced to cut its engine to avoid a collision. The Chinese vessel then resumed sailing alongside the Philippine ship’s port side.

Seizing this opportunity, the Fort San Antonio suddenly veered off to the right and quickly reached shallower waters around the reef, into which the larger Chinese vessels could not follow safely. In some places, the waters surrounding the Sierra Madre are only five feet deep. Media reports later described the Fort San Antonio as having “slipped past” or “evaded” a “blockade,” but the Chinese cutters actually seem to have made no movements whatsoever to pursue. By 2:13 pm, the Philippine ship had put some distance between it and the China Coast Guard, which stopped hailing. Navy personnel hoisted the Republic of the Philippines flag atop the mast as the ship

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entered Second Thomas Shoal through one of the gaps in the coral rim. The supply boat reached the *Sierra Madre* at 3:02 pm, and offloaded its supplies using pulleys that afternoon.\(^\text{126}\)

That evening, two China Coast Guard vessels were observed patrolling along the western side of the reef near the *Sierra Madre*, as well as a third vessel beyond the eastern rim at least five nautical miles away. Around midnight, one switched a spotlight on what appeared to be a small fishing boat entering the shoal. Unidentified aircraft with red blinking lights also flew past and “hovered over” the *Sierra Madre* throughout the night. When the *Fort San Antonio* departed the shoal the following day, the Chinese did not move to intercept it as feared.\(^\text{127}\)

The Philippine military and president’s office were triumphant about the mission’s success. On the evening of March 29, the Department of Foreign Affairs “condemn[ed] the harassment by the Chinese coast guard of our civilian vessels” and demanded that China “cease taking actions that are a threat to our security.” A presidential spokesperson also suggested Manila would file a new démarche with Beijing over its threatening behavior during the resupply operation.\(^\text{128}\) The Chinese commented that night, accusing the Philippines of intentionally using foreign journalists to “hyp[e] up the issue of the South China Sea.” Beijing also made clear its “will and resolve” to prevent Manila’s attempt to “seize” Second Thomas Shoal and “undermine” the 2002 China-ASEAN Declaration.\(^\text{129}\)

Manila submitted its 4,000-page memorial detailing its position to the arbitral tribunal the next day on March 30. General Bautista rejected charges that Manila had an ulterior motive for the submission, noting that the resupply “was very much delayed already.”\(^\text{130}\) Along with other military officials, President Aquino personally vowed that the Philippines would continue to re-provision its soldiers in the Spratlys. He observed that the recent operation “didn’t pose a threat to any other country,” a view echoed by Secretary del Rosario. Vice President Binay stated that at least he believed Beijing had shown it was unwilling to risk a conflict over the issue.\(^\text{131}\) Manila also wrote to the tribunal once again regarding China’s behavior during the mission.\(^\text{132}\)

Around this time, Chinese vice foreign minister Liu Zhenmin summoned the Philippine ambassador in Beijing. Liu lodged “solemn representations” over the Philippines’ “unilateral promotion of

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international arbitration,” of which China’s rejection and nonparticipation “did not and would not change.” He also expressed opposition of Manila’s “organization of the reporting trip to waters off [Second Thomas Shoal]” as well as any further attempts to “build any facilities” there. Beijing would continue its approach, Liu argued, of resolutely defending its sovereignty while also promoting bilateral negotiations, even though Manila had abandoned the “consensus repeatedly affirmed by the two sides.”

On March 31, the United States commented on this latest Second Thomas Shoal incident as well as the arbitration proceedings for the first time. A State Department spokesperson characterized the incident as a “routine resupply and rotation of personnel at the Philippines’ presence at Second Thomas Shoal,” which was “not a change in the status quo.” China’s “harassment” and “attempt to block Philippine vessels,” on the other hand, was “a provocative and destabilizing action” that “raises tensions and is inconsistent with the important principle of freedom of navigation.” She stated that as the Philippines’ “treaty ally,” the United States urged China “to refrain from further provocative behavior by allowing the Philippines to continue to maintain its presence.” The State Department identified the Philippine presence as one of the “previously established outposts” and called on China to “clarify its ambiguous [maritime] claim,” move forward on negotiation with ASEAN on a binding Code of Conduct, and refrain from taking any other “escalatory actions.”

Beijing responded by reiterating its positions on March 31 and April 1. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs charged that Manila “deliberately schemed” to resupply the Sierra Madre just one day before it submitted its memorial to the arbitral tribunal. In Beijing’s view, this demonstrated that the Philippines’ true intentions were to “cover up its illegal occupation” through “political provocations” and “abusing international legal means.” Responding to critical statements by the U.S. State Department, Beijing urged the United States not to take sides on matters of territorial sovereignty and instead to “respect facts, stop making irresponsible remarks, and cease to encourage the provocative and risky actions of” its ally. China’s chargé d’affaires in the Philippines also announced to the press that Manila had “seriously damaged bilateral relations” with Beijing. China then sent the Philippines a 12-page position paper on its legal claims and rejection of the arbitration proceedings.

A senior U.S. State Department official gave an authoritative description of Washington’s position and involvement on April 3. During Senate testimony, Assistant Secretary Daniel Russel criticized China’s “intimidating steps” in deploying large numbers of coast guard vessels to the shoal and making “efforts to interfere with and interdict the routine resupply of the small garrison at that outpost.” Without “treading on the treacherous ground of answering a hypothetical question,”

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134. Harf, “Daily Press Briefing” (March 31, 2014); De Castro and Ng, “Philippine Ship Dodges China Blockade.”
Russel stated that President Obama was “firmly committed to honoring our defense commitments to our allies” and had recently communicated U.S. resolve to the Chinese leadership. He acknowledged that Manila’s submission of its memorial to the arbitral tribunal “is perhaps the proximate reason why the Chinese are expressing the anger and discontent on the sea,” but he hoped the “net effect of the Philippine filing and the tribunal will be to encourage China to clarify its own claims in ways that are consistent with international law and remove the ambiguity that is destabilizing in our view.” Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel’s visit to China in early April also seems to have included tense discussions on Second Thomas Shoal and the Philippines’ arbitration case.

Chinese commentators expanded on Beijing’s official position in the following days and weeks. While nonauthoritative, the arguments of Chinese military academics and foreign affairs specialists—many of whom are official “external propaganda experts” authorized by state organs—do provide insight into how Beijing’s actions (and inaction) were justified to its domestic audience. On March 31, experts from the PLA Academy of Military Sciences and Chinese Academy of Social Sciences accused Manila of “looting a burning house” by staging the supply mission while China was busy helping the international community search for the missing Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370. In April, other maritime specialists sought to explain away China’s failure to stop the Philippine supply ship. One argued that by “sensationalizing the issue” and holding foreign reporters as “hostages,” Manila had compelled Beijing to “choose among two dilemmas.” If the coast guard had used force, then the Philippines would secure a public relations victory. Alternatively, if China did not intervene, Manila could claim it enjoyed effective control over the shoal. Another international legal expert cast Manila as hoping to “entrap” China into taking actions it could report to the arbitral tribunal. Still others claimed Chinese forces had the ability to use force and prevail, but Beijing showed restraint due to its “humanitarian” outlook. Finally, some PLA scholars and retired officials assessed that despite its alleged objective of containing China, the United States would not risk an armed conflict with Beijing over the Philippines’ narrow interest in Second Thomas Shoal.
Phase V: Beijing Maintains Patrols but Ends Harassment

After March 2014, there have been no further reports of specific coercive actions such as blocking the path of Philippine supply ships.\textsuperscript{143} By April 5, the Western Command and Naval Forces West had reduced their threat level to “white alert,” meaning all normal. Two China Coast Guard ships remained in the vicinity of the shoal but only conducted “routine monitoring.”\textsuperscript{144}

The Philippines organized another media trip to Second Thomas in late April. Journalists from CNN, BBC, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation were invited to join a voyage led by the Kalayaan mayor. The M/V Queen Seagull spent seven days touring Philippine outposts in the Spratlys before arriving at Second Thomas Shoal on May 2. The Philippine vessel approached the reef from the northwest under the cover of darkness because the captain believed the Chinese coast guard would expect them to come from the southwest. The Philippine crew had been ordered to try to “outmaneuver the Chinese” unless they felt “in danger of being rammed.” Indeed, two China Coast Guard ships steamed toward the vessel, but they arrived after the Philippine vessel had already navigated the shallow coral rim into the lagoon. Three more Chinese ships arrived in the vicinity, coming as close as 200 yards.\textsuperscript{145}

Supplies were airdropped to the Sierra Madre the next day. In a carefully coordinated operation, Western journalists observed the airdrop from the sea while Filipino media watched from the air. The marines aboard the Sierra Madre claimed this small Philippine Navy utility plane was shadowed by a Chinese aircraft, but they seem to have mistaken a Philippine Air Force escort for a PLA aircraft. While it was in the area, this second Philippine aircraft observed three additional Chinese government ships.\textsuperscript{146} In addition to food and water, the airdrop also included letters of encouragement from Filipino students. According to General Bautista and Lieutenant General Deveraturda, this operation took weeks of planning and was meant to boost the morale of the troops and “promote awareness” among the public about the situation at Second Thomas Shoal.\textsuperscript{147} Despite their success, military officials expressed concern that China might be more aggressive during the next sea-based resupply operation.\textsuperscript{148}

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\textsuperscript{143} The only exception is one unconfirmed account from August 2014, when a vessel contracted by the Kalayaan municipality reported that the CCG 3111 had stopped 20 to 30 yards in front of it in an apparent attempt to block its path. The Philippine was vessel was then apparently able to enter the shoal without further harassment. “Chinese Coast Guard Harass Kalayaan Municipal Officers,” ABS-CBN News.


\textsuperscript{145} Foreign reporters only photographed two of these ships: the CCG 3111, a 262-foot Shuke III–class patrol ship, and the Xiang Yang Hong 10, a 305-foot oceanographic research vessel operated by China’s State Oceanic Administration. Campbell, “Reef Madness”; Etzler, “Wrecks, Rats, and Roaches”; Wingfield-Hayes, “China’s Island Factory.”


Second Thomas Shoal attracted regional attention in May, beginning with the 24th ASEAN Summit in Myanmar on May 11. President Aquino updated his counterparts on the Philippines’ case before the arbitral tribunal. Aquino claimed that he found support from Vietnam and others at the meeting, which took place just after the Chinese placed an oil rig near the Paracel Islands. On May 31, Secretary Hagel raised these issues and Chinese land reclamation at the 2014 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe and the Philippine president also discussed Second Thomas Shoal later in June during a dialogue on Chinese activities in the East and South China Seas.

In August, the new Philippine military chief of staff announced that he would promote Philippine cruise ship tours to the Spratlys, including Second Thomas Shoal, and consider visiting the Sierra Madre himself. At least four China Coast Guard vessels kept up a constant presence around Second Thomas at this time. Aware of this reality, Manila noted it sought “to outsmart the Chinese” by reporting on supply missions only after their completion. In response to China’s land reclamation activities in the Spratlys, Secretary del Rosario also called for all parties to halt reclamation, construction, and other coercive behavior. Secretary Gazmin then announced a halt to all construction on Philippine-held features in the Spratlys later that year. Yet despite this public commitment, Philippine Navy officials have stated that in late 2014 Manila began shipping “light construction materials” such as “cement, settle, cabling, and welding equipment” to the Sierra Madre “using wooden fishing boats and other small craft,” perhaps relying on the active assistance of civilian Filipino fishermen.

Gazmin confirmed in October that the Philippines had “access” to Second Thomas Shoal and that the two most recent supply missions “were not bothered by China.” In December before the Philippine Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, he cited the deterrent effect of the new U.S.-Philippines Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement inked in April as the reason why Beijing ceased its harassment. The chairman and vice chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations disagreed, alternatively citing the “bravery” of the Philippines’ own troops. Other Philippine officials argued China had stopped because it was fully occupied with its land reclamation activities in the Spratlys. One Filipino journalist also noted that the last two operations had been conducted with less fanfare than those in March and May.

The Philippines conducted another supply mission by sea in March 2015. Filipino media reported that two China Coast Guard vessels flanked the Philippine supply ship as it approached the shoal, while blaring their sirens and steering close in an apparent attempt to intimidate the Philippine crew. However, the coast guard ships “made no move to block the Filipinos’ path” and pulled away once they reached the shallow waters of the coral reef. Nevertheless, Manila grew increasingly worried about Chinese land reclamation at Mischief Reef, only a few miles away from Second Thomas. A military spokesperson said the Philippines felt that resupplying the *Sierra Madre* was “becoming increasingly . . . difficult,” even though Chinese forces had not recently committed any “hostile acts.” Secretary Gazmin stated the Philippines was still studying how to get provisions to its outposts in Spratlys under Chinese pressure. Manila also announced updated plans to turn its outposts into tourist destinations.

The Philippines observed one China Coast Guard vessel “acting rather differently” at Second Thomas Shoal in May 2015. It took up a stationary position five nautical miles away rather than circling the shoal as usual and did not move for 19 days, until another cutter replaced it. The ship appeared to be guarding a Chinese civilian trawler that had entered the lagoon and that on May 28 was photographed harvesting endangered giant clams. The Philippine defense department questioned whether the crew were “actually civilians.” Security experts worried it might be the start of a Chinese move to occupy the reef, but no such action occurred.

In June 2015, a “special unit of the Philippine Navy” replaced the marine detachment aboard the *Sierra Madre*. Sources eventually revealed that is was actually a team of “demolition experts” tasked with renovating the dilapidated warship. Using materials amassed since late 2014, the soldiers “quietly” reinforced the hull and deck, laid concrete foundations, and improved the living quarters. Military officers said they would finish construction by the end of 2015. When this became public on July 13, the Department of Foreign Affairs again emphasized Manila’s view about the distinction between repairs and construction of new structures. One military spokesperson characterized the activities as “minor repairs” aimed at ensuring a “minimum survivable condition,” while another argued that “any vessel at sea [like the *Sierra Madre*] can conduct repairs on their own.” The Western Command chief again rejected the term “construction” by saying the...
Philippines was not “creating something new,” but just “sustaining” and “maintaining” an existing outpost. Other Filipino media reports carried an apparently false claim that Manila planned to build a helipad on the warship’s bow. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs quickly criticized Manila’s activities, accusing it of “hypocrisy and duplicity.” A spokesperson warned that “China reserves the right to take further actions,” yet Beijing took no steps to disrupt the Philippines’ consolidation efforts.

The United States and the Philippines held alliance consultations that included discussions of Second Thomas Shoal later that summer. On July 18, 2015, the U.S. Pacific Fleet commander visited Manila but declined to comment on hypothetical questions about U.S. treaty commitments, leaving them to the “State Department and the Department of Justice.” The Pacific Command chief, Admiral Harry Harris, also traveled to the Philippines in late August. Manila explicitly requested that U.S. reconnaissance aircraft “watch over our ships” during resupply missions on a regular basis, because “if there are Americans flying around there, we won’t be troubled.” Secretary Gazmin stated that Harris had “assured him of U.S. readiness to provide assistance,” but the admiral made no specific commitment to deploy U.S. aircraft or vessels.

The next year, reports surfaced in March 2016 that China Coast Guard vessels had been blocking Filipino fishermen’s access to Jackson Atoll, an unoccupied reef in the eastern Spratlys. Beijing confirmed this story, but explained that a Filipino fishing vessel had been grounded and abandoned on the atoll. Chinese officials argued that its rescue and salvage bureau was forced to send salvage ships to tug the grounded boat away, during which it temporarily urged foreign fishing boats to stay away. Manila corroborated some of these details and noted that “there are no indications China will build structures or develop it into an island.” Several Chinese foreign affairs experts lauded Beijing for towing the vessel away immediately and so “foil[ing] a trap” similar to the Philippines’ 1999 grounding of the *Sierra Madre* at Second Thomas.

Most recently, on May 23, 2016, footage was published of a British reporter traveling aboard a Philippine supply vessel carrying food and water supplies to Second Thomas Shoal. As it approached, a China Coast Guard cutter steamed to intercept them but made no moves to block the Filipinos’ path and turned around after reaching shallow water. On June 5, in an apparent


diplomatic overture from Beijing, a Filipino security expert then asserted that the navy had been allowed to “conduct patrols” near Second Thomas Shoal “without harassment from the China Coast Guard” since the May election of a new Philippine president, Rodrigo Duterte.166

Conclusions

First, despite concerns about the Philippines’ ability to resupply its forces on Second Thomas Shoal, Chinese actions fell short of a blockade. Since 2013, China has maintained coast guard and other vessels near the reef and has intercepted Philippine supply ships on several occasions. In March 2014, Chinese vessels twice conducted harassment operations but did not resort to force by using tactics such as ramming or firing water cannons.

Second, U.S. and Philippine actions may have helped to deter China from further escalation. Manila’s willingness to reattempt a supply mission was a clear demonstration that the Philippines was willing to accept risk to maintain its presence at Second Thomas. Given its limited interests in other countries’ territorial disputes, Washington is unlikely to shoulder risk if its allies do not to take the lead. In this case, the U.S. military was not directly involved in resupplying the Sierra Madre, but the United States sent an unarmed reconnaissance aircraft in an overwatch capacity. In so doing, the United States signaled that it was monitoring Chinese actions closely, particularly since U.S. reconnaissance flights over Second Thomas Shoal were by then a common occurrence. The presence of a U.S. assets at a decisive moment may have communicated the potential for direct intervention to Beijing, given earlier diplomatic warnings sent by Washington.

Third, the presence of journalists during resupply efforts raised the reputational stakes for both sides. In March 2014, a strategy that counted on the deterrent effect of public pressure appeared to work in Manila’s favor. The costs to Beijing of using force against a civilian vessel carrying foreign reporters would have been high. Yet, making the Chinese government lose face could also have backfired. Transparency increases reputation costs, including the domestic costs of inaction. Facing nationalist backlash after the encounter, Chinese experts spent as much time defending Beijing’s failure to stop Manila as they did justifying its initial assertiveness. When challenged publicly, China’s concern about its reputation for resolve has been substantial.

Fourth, divergent perceptions of the status quo contributed to insecurity. Identifying the status quo in territorial disputes is not a simple task. Claimants will evaluate elements of the status quo differently as actions that appear typical or defensive to one party may be seen by others as atypical or aggressive. China and the Philippines maintain conflicting narratives on the status quo at Second Thomas Shoal. Beijing claims Manila promised to withdraw the Sierra Madre prior to the signing of the 2002 China-ASEAN Declaration, so its recent actions to reinforce its “permanent installation” are revisionist. Alternatively, Manila has defended its activities as mere “repairs” or “improvements” to a long-established outpost. The security impact of these divergent perceptions also featured prominently in the Senkaku crises, when Chinese and Japanese leaders both felt that the other party was attempting to alter the status quo.

166. It is unclear whether he was referring to normal civilian resupply operations or some other type of naval patrol. Minnie Chan, “China Eases off Philippine Fishing Boats in Overture to Incoming President Duterte,” South China Morning Post, June 5, 2016; Katie Stallard, “Exclusive: Unseen Battle for South China Sea,” Sky News, May 23, 2016.
Finally, China has demonstrated superior, if imperfect, maritime domain awareness capabilities in the Spratly Islands, particularly near Second Thomas Shoal. Chinese coast guard vessels sometimes arrived at the shoal within minutes or hours of Philippine missions there, and Chinese intelligence services apparently compromised Manila’s secretive preparations for the March 29 mission. With its completion of large dual-use facilities in the Spratlys, China’s asymmetric advantage over other claimants will likely grow, especially if the United States does not provide intelligence to regional states.