



By: The Editorial Board

Environmental arrogance – Beijing turns nature into an instrument of power



Scarborough Shoal, just over 200 kilometres off the Philippines' coast, is once again in the **spotlight**.

The Chinese coast guard **fired** water cannons at Philippine vessels, accusing them of "illegal intrusion" and colliding with a Chinese vessel. Manila rejects the accusations and says its ships were on a routine mission to help fishermen.

More than a dozen Philippine vessels were involved in the operation, while China responded with aggressive manoeuvres in an attempt to gain full control over access to the shoal.

The incident itself would not have carried so much weight had it not been preceded by Beijing's **decision** to declare Scarborough a "nature reserve" just a few days earlier.

Officially, this step was presented as a concern for the ecosystem and the protection of coral reefs. In reality, it makes way for a new form of control – one that hides behind environmental rhetoric but has a clear political meaning.

Ecology as a cloak for sovereignty

China has been employing this tactic, the so-called grey area, in the South China Sea for years. Instead of open conflict, it resorts to gradual measures: blocking fishermen, imposing navigation rules, and sending patrol boats. The decision on the "nature reserve" introduces a new level to this strategy.

The environmental argument enables China to present itself as a responsible power that is orientated towards global nature conservation goals. This neutralises some of the international criticism, as any dispute can be interpreted as opposition to environmental protection.

Behind the façade, however, there is a concrete objective: de facto control over the disputed area. Environmental regulation

becomes an instrument of sovereignty through authorisations, fishing bans, and the right to inspection.

For Filipino fishermen, the dispute over Scarborough means that their daily work is becoming increasingly difficult. Every fishing ban and every displacement from traditional areas leads to a direct reduction in their catches and their income.

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For the government in Manila, the incidents on the shoal are a constant reminder that the 2016 **decision** of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague has no practical enforcement mechanism. That court **ruled** at the time that China had no "historic right" to the vast areas of the South China Sea within the so-called nine-dash line.

This line, which is **marked** on Chinese maps, covers almost 90% of the sea surface—from the coasts of Vietnam to the Philippines and Malaysia—and serves as the basis for China's territorial claims.

Although the ruling was clear, China simply refused to recognise it. This shows that without political and military support, international law only exists on paper.

This is an important experience for the international community: Beijing does not use open force but "soft" methods – reserves, environmental bans, and control measures at sea.

Such measures are not formally an act of war, but they are gradually changing the situation on the ground and creating a new normality.

It is precisely this grey area, in which the rules are shifted without firing a shot, that poses the greatest challenge for Manila and its allies.

Legal powerlessness and strategic manoeuvring

The Philippines finds itself in a desperate situation between legal arguments and the reality at sea.

Manila refers to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. But anyone who has followed the dispute knows that China **rejects** the ruling as "null and void", which is precisely why the establishment of the reserve is so subtle.

Beijing is creating a new legal grey area in which the Philippines is forced to explain why it opposes measures that at first glance appear to affect ecology

It is not a military occupation or a unilateral declaration of sovereignty but a move that fits into the discourse of nature conservation.

Beijing is thus creating a new legal grey area in which the Philippines is forced to explain why it opposes measures that at first glance appear to affect ecology.

In this way, China is not only complicating Manila's diplomatic narrative but also imposing its own definition of acceptable behaviour on the ground.

Testing the limits of an alliance

The United States, a traditional ally of the Philippines, immediately condemned China's move. Washington has repeatedly **reaffirmed** its obligations under the 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty.

However, incidents of this nature raise a serious question: where is the limit to the application of this agreement? Are water cannons and clashes with fishing boats an act of aggression? Or do these actions fall below

the threshold, preventing the activation of collective defence mechanisms?

China is testing how ready the Philippines and its allies are to respond to "soft" forms of coercion

Beijing's advantage lies precisely in this ambivalence. China is testing how ready the Philippines and its allies are to respond to "soft" forms of coercion.

If the response remains in the form of diplomatic notes and ritual condemnations, this provides scope for further steps: a permanent coast guard presence, restrictions on fishing and even infrastructure that would cement China's presence under the guise of research stations.

Regional resonance

What is happening on Scarborough Shoal is not only being **observed** in the Philippines. Vietnam, Malaysia, and Taiwan are also apprehensive about the potential application of similar methods to other disputed reefs and islands.



Each new Chinese restriction increases insurance costs, shipping premiums and risks for small economies that do not have the capacity to insure their vessels

If "environmental regulation" becomes the standard of Chinese behaviour, the small

ASEAN states could find themselves in a dilemma: either they keep quiet and accept "nature reserves" as the new reality or they risk conflict if they try to challenge them.

For the region, this means a new kind of uncertainty. Each of these countries is dependent on fishing and free shipping routes. Each new Chinese restriction increases insurance costs, shipping premiums and risks for small economies that do not have the capacity to insure their vessels.

Economic consequences that are not immediately visible

Incidents at sea are usually **presented** as a political and security issue. However, their economic impact is just as important.

Filipino fishermen, who have depended on Scarborough's resources for decades, are facing increasingly difficult working conditions. Every new ban or the threat of water cannons drives them out of their traditional areas and reduces their catches. In the long term, this leads to a loss of income and increased pressure on local communities.

Any additional premium is reflected in the price of goods, so an incident that starts as a local dispute between fishermen ends up affecting global supply chains

However, the effects extend beyond the local level. The South China Sea is a major artery of world trade, through which more than a third of the world's maritime traffic flows.

The increased risk of incidents has an impact on insurance and shipping companies, which are calculating new costs and considering whether to change their routes. Any additional premium is reflected in the price of goods, so an incident that starts as a local dispute between fishermen ends up affecting global supply chains.

What does "reserve" actually mean?

China's move should be seen as part of a wider transformation in the way power is exercised at sea. While warships and fixed bases used to dominate, "soft" forms of control are now more effective. The declaration of a nature reserve seems harmless, but in practice, it allows China to determine who can move around, who can fish, and who can explore.

It is a new kind of occupation, quiet and gradual. Instead of a military conflict, a system is created, in which the opponent is exhausted by daily pressure, economic losses, and legal powerlessness. The nature reserve becomes an instrument that legitimises the presence, while the opponent functions as a disruptive factor because it opposes "environmental protection".

What can be expected?

If observing the Chinese behaviour patterns so far, the next steps could be anticipated. Beijing will probably try to institutionalise the protected area: introduce fishing permits, set up permanent patrols, and carry out inspections under the pretence of nature conservation. This will permanently change the status quo and leave Manila with less and less room for manoeuvre.

Despite limited options, the Philippines will seek support from allies. The US Navy can increase its presence through freedom of navigation operations, but this does not solve the fundamental problem: the daily lives of fishermen and de facto control over the area. Legal initiatives before international courts may serve as documentation, but they do not change the situation on the ground.

Scarborough Shoal is a reflection of the way power is exercised today – not through weapons and armed conflict, but through law, ecology and the constant pressure

Unless there is a stronger response, a scenario in which Scarborough comes under permanent Chinese control—under the green framework of the reserve—is not unrealistic. This precedent could potentially extend to other disputed areas, thereby altering the dynamics of the entire South China Sea.

Scarborough Shoal is more than just a dot on a map. It is a reflection of the way power is exercised today – not through weapons and armed conflict, but through law, ecology and the constant pressure that is becoming the new normal over time. The incident shows that China is not abandoning its strategy but is upgrading it with sophisticated instruments that seem harmless at first glance.

For the international community, and especially for the Philippines' allies, this is a moment of decision. If the declaration of the reserve is accepted as a normal act, then the future of the South China Sea will not be determined by the power of law but by the power of a tenacious and creative force that knows how to use everything, including ecology, as a weapon.