

The Philippines' Strategic Ambiguity Over Taiwan Strait

To counter the rising interference by Chinese in its waters Manila need to reflect on its political or military ambiguity.

Manoj Kumar Panigrahi

August 28, 2026



Photo credits: Taiwan Economic Cultural Office in the Philippines

The Philippines' "[One China](#)" policy finds its base from the 1975 Joint Communiqué between the Philippines and China, resulting in the non-recognition of Taiwan as a sovereign state. With the subtle growth of military actions in and around Taiwan by China, it has left the Philippine leadership at a crossroads, of whether it will be affected or be involved in a cross-strait conflict. This question has come up several times and seen varied responses. With the politician and security establishment each agreeing and disagreeing with each other at different situations. Such situation sends a mix signaling on the Philippines strategic ambiguity. For the Philippines it can be referred as mixed signaling to certain policies which needs careful considerations. This article argues that the strategic ambiguity of the Philippines on Taiwan issue can see a change under the rising military coercion from China.

The recent discussions on the Philippines' role in a Taiwan Strait conflict reignited when Philippine Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro Jr. [stated](#), "any (Chinese) action against Taiwan will involve the northern Philippines to challenge our hold over the Bashi Channel". His statement acknowledged the presence of almost [200,000 Filipinos](#) living and working in Taiwan, whose safety and security and safe return will be the priority for Manila during a conflict. On the other hand, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in May 2026, reiterated that the Philippines "[will not interfere](#)" in cross-strait matters which is an "internal matter". The engagement between Manila and Taipei largely focused on the areas of trade, investment, and tourism. The statement from Secretary Teodoro asks for an active engagement, whereas President Marcos calls for non-interference during a Taiwan

contingency. Such opposite remarks by policy planners sends a mix signaling on the Philippines actual approach to the issue.

The Philippines and China in recent years have found themselves at a crossroads in the South China Sea also known as the West Philippine Sea. In certain conditions, there have been aggressive maneuvers by the Coast Guards leading to [injuries](#). One of the major clashes occurred near Scarborough Shoal on 11 August 2025; two Chinese naval vessels collided with each other leading to severe damage. It was only a year after that the China's People's Armed Police, which oversees the China Coast Guard, acknowledged the [loss of life](#) of two soldiers during the incident. These incidents force the Philippines to abandon its "strategic ambiguity" and to side more with other major powers in the region to achieve its policy goals.

The delay in acknowledging the loss of life by the Chinese authorities follows a similar pattern to the 2020 border clash with Indian soldiers in Ladakh. During the clash, twenty Indian soldiers lost their lives, whereas after a significant delay of a year Chinese authorities claimed there was [loss of only four lives](#) on their side after a year of the incident. The continuation of the same pattern reflects China's cautious approach in dealing with external military operations causing its own loss of life. Another reason that can be understood is that by "not acknowledging" the deaths, it leads to creating a "moral strong point" over its soldiers and citizens on their losses.

The rise of military actions around the Philippines and Japan, along with Taiwan, has led to a slow but gradual cooperation among the three. Having a flexible approach to the Taiwan issue, in 2025, the Philippines and Taiwan coast guards carried out joint patrols along the Taiwanese coasts and the Bashi Channel. Taiwanese naval officials were also acting as observers during the trilateral joint exercise between the United States, Philippines, and Japan. Defense Secretary Teodoro had also endorsed the "[One Theater](#)" concept, which meant to combine the Korean Peninsula, East China Sea, and South China Sea as one operational and war zone. Parallely, Japan and Taiwan are also formulating a plan to [normalize joint coast guard training](#) with each other.

Such institutionalization of closer military-to-military ties has seen a response from China. Beijing launched a "[law enforcement operation](#)" in the east of Taiwan, responding to a joint agreement between the Philippines and Japan, "to delimit the maritime boundary" of their respective economic zones and continental shelves. Prior to the special operation, Beijing also claimed Batanes (which has been under the Philippines' territory for centuries) belongs to China as a "[natural geographical extension](#)" of Taiwan. These actions reflect an increasing "salami slicing" approach by Chinese including a "lawfare campaign" to start a new narrative on territories. However, the growing military actions by China around Taiwan, the Philippines, and Japan can lead to a new mini regional coalition among the affected parties. With the leaders slowly accepting the changing nature of China in the high seas, it needs further coordination to act together and respond to such actions.

Manila has strongly tried to keep its position on Taiwan "apolitical," while recognizing the importance of "safety and safe evacuation" of its citizens from Taiwan in case of a direct conflict or a major blockade in the Taiwan Strait. Nevertheless, Manila won't be alone in such a situation, as Indonesia and Vietnam also have significant number of citizens working in Taiwan, and their safe departure will also cause them to work together with Manila. But the military establishment has rightly put its views on having stronger military-to-military connections with Taiwan and Japan. To counter the rising interference by Chinese in its waters Manila need to reflect on its political or military ambiguity. The political ambiguity might have served Manila interests so far, but it has done quite the opposite on its territorial waters. Such actions will only steer the political actions of Manila towards the opposite direction of Beijing.

Dr. Manoj Kumar Panigrahi is an Associate Professor at Jindal School of International Affairs, OP Jindal Global University, India. He is currently a 2026 MOFA Taiwan Fellow at National Chengchi University, Taiwan.