# Smooth sailing in the West PH Sea

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With the decrepit and rusting BRP Sierra Madre reflecting the country’s lack of resources to mount a credible defense of our territorial waters, two recent developments have sparked hope for a stronger assertion of our rights in the West Philippine Sea (WPS).

On Tuesday, President Marcos approved the acquisition of 40 fast patrol boats that will increase four-fold the Philippine Coast Guard’s (PCG) fleet by 2026, strengthening its capability to enforce maritime laws and safeguard our interests in the WPS amid aggressive Chinese incursions.

Under the P25.8 billion project funded through official development assistance from the French government, 20 of the 35-meter boats will be built in France, and 20 will be assembled locally.

“It is the largest single-purchase so far in the modernization of the [PCG]. It is a game-changer for us,” noted PCG Commandant Admiral Ronnie Gavan. This will enable the coast guard to deploy at least two patrol boats for the 13 coast guard districts from Batanes to Tawi-Tawi that are “fast enough to reach the edges of our exclusive economic zone (EEZ),” Gavan added.

## Timely intervention

The additional boats are expected to boost the PCG’s efforts in search and rescue operations and in curbing maritime crimes, among them smuggling, drug trafficking, piracy, and illegal fishing. Boats deployed at the WPS will address threats to the country’s territorial integrity, Gavan said.

Five 97-meter ships from Japan are also expected between 2027 and 2028, with four more larger ships to be built locally. In all, the PCG will have nine large ships in its fleet.

Beefing up the PCG’s fleet is a minimum requirement to defend our EEZ, with the additional ships a timely intervention, given recent maritime incidents. On Aug. 31, a China Coast Guard ship rammed and inflicted damage on BRP Teresa Magbanua that, along with BRP Melchora Aquino, is the PCG’s biggest and most modern ship. Magbanua was then anchored on Escoda (Sabina) Shoal about 140 kilometers off Palawan and firmly within the country’s 370-km EEZ. Earlier in August, two other PCG vessels—BRP Bagacay and BRP Cape Engaño—also sustained damage after Chinese ships made dangerous maneuvers and collided with them on Escoda Shoal.

## Innocent passage

On top of the necessary upgrading of the PCG and the Philippine Navy fleet, the Philippines also made its strongest move yet in asserting its territorial rights in the WPS with the enactment of two laws defining the country’s maritime zones, archipelagic sea-lanes, and air routes.

The President signed Republic Act No. 12064 or the Philippine Maritime Zones Act which identifies the country’s internal waters, archipelagic waters, a 22.22-km territorial sea, a 44.45-km contiguous zone from the baseline, a 370-km EEZ, and continental shelf in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Unclos) and other international laws and treaties.

Mr. Marcos also signed RA 12065 or the Philippine Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act which designates the country’s archipelagic sea-lanes and air routes that foreign military and foreign-registered vessels and aircraft can use for expeditious and innocent passage as prescribed under Unclos and other international laws, subject to the country’s enforcement of its internal security.

These two laws emphasize the country’s maritime and archipelagic identity in accordance with Unclos and the 2016 arbitral ruling, the President said.

“Maintaining the primacy of the Unclos and the 2016 Arbitral Award as our beacons in the maritime domain, the Philippines reaffirms its sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction in our waters,” he added.

## Hostile stance

While our 370-km EEZ entitlement is already established in accordance with Unclos and further validated by the arbitral ruling, the two recently signed laws provide the solid, legal standing for its claim in the country’s domestic laws. The two laws’ impact is undeniable, as it prompted Beijing to summon the Philippine ambassador to Beijing, Jaime FlorCruz, to register its condemnation and protest.

China can protest all it wants, but the Philippines has all the legal and moral rights to defend its territorial waters which are clearly way too far from China’s coastlines for them to be included in China’s ridiculous nine-dash line. It is thus only proper for the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs to lodge another diplomatic protest against China’s insistence on drawing “baselines and base points” around Scarborough, which is about 222 km off Zambales and about 850 km off mainland China.

The new laws and the infusion of maritime might through the additional PCG and PN vessels represent the country’s staunch determination to show the world that it will not tolerate bullying neighbors that act like pirates in the high seas. Despite China’s hostile stance, we are ready to stand up to defend our sovereignty and maintain peace in the region.

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