# Repelling a ‘monster’ in our waters

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It could easily be dismissed as a pro forma farewell call by the outgoing leader of the United States, but President Joe Biden’s reassurance of continued American support must still hold water for allies facing China’s intimidation in the disputed South China Sea, particularly in Philippine waters.

Biden held a video conference call with President Marcos and Japan Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba on Monday, a week before he steps down and transfers power to his successor, president-elect Donald Trump. The call, he said, was meant to “advance our cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.”

The White House statement on the phone call said the three leaders “discussed trilateral maritime security and economic cooperation, as well as the People’s Republic of China’s dangerous and unlawful behavior in the South China Sea.” The three, it added, “agreed on the importance of continued coordination to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific.”

President Biden was “optimistic” that his successor would see the value of continuing US partnership with the Philippines and Japan, the US embassy in Manila added. Both the Philippines and Japan are in conflict with China over the latter’s sweeping claims of vital regional waters.

## Bolder intrusion

“Simply put, our countries have an interest in continuing this partnership and institutionalizing our cooperation across our governments so that it is built to last,” Biden said, with Marcos and Ishiba sharing his optimism.

But these warm ties and commitment to fend off China’s aggression in the South China Sea are rendered almost futile by the continued presence of Chinese ships in the West Philippine Sea, in direct contravention of the 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration nullifying China’s claims over areas within the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone.

China’s coast guard ships and militia vessels continue to swarm shoals and islands in the West Philippine Sea, intimidating the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and driving away Filipino fishermen from their traditional fishing grounds, even as the Philippines has been strengthening its security alliances with the US, Japan, and other western countries vehemently opposing China’s actions.

Of utmost concern is the bolder intrusion of China Coast Guard 5901, dubbed the “monster ship” for its gigantic size, in the country’s territorial waters this month and several times last year.

## Alarming scenario

At 12,000 ton, the CCG 5901 is said to be the largest coast guard ship in the world and is five times bigger than the PCG’s biggest ships. The 165-meter ship is reported to be armed with anti-aircraft guns and can stay at sea for up to 45 days.

Security analyst Ray Powell reported that the monster ship arrived on Jan. 1 near the Scarborough Shoal to boost China’s claim over the area which it seized during a standoff with the Philippines in 2012. The monster ship, which came as close as 100 kilometers off Capones Island in Zambales, left on Wednesday after being challenged by the PCG, but returned on Jan. 4. As of Sunday, the ship was seen some 176 km off Zambales’ coast.

“Their goal is to normalize such deployments, and if these actions go unnoticed and unchallenged, it will enable them to alter the existing status quo,” PCG spokesperson Commodore Jay Tarriela said on Sunday.

That is indeed the alarming scenario should China’s latest move remain feebly protested. Having lost Scarborough, and with its arbitral victory ignored and trampled upon by its giant neighbor, the Philippines must not allow China—through its behemoth ship—to gain any more foothold in the country’s waters.

## Freedom of navigation

Apart from maintaining its coast guard ships in the West Philippine Sea, the Philippine government should operationalize all security arrangements that purport to strengthen the country’s defense and claim of its territorial rights, and protect the freedom of navigation in this crucial international waterway.

It is time to put to the test those verbal commitments for ensuring a “free and open Indo-Pacific” region by translating them into action that would deter and prevent any act of escalation in the West Philippine Sea. What’s the use of all those enhanced defense cooperation agreements with the US and a new reciprocal access agreement with Japan if such blatant intrusion deeper into the Philippines’ coastal waters were left unchallenged?

Mr. Marcos has the moral and legal imperative, as well as crucial international support, to make a stronger move to stop this latest mockery of our sovereignty by repelling China’s monster ship off our waters.

After all, didn’t he promise quite unequivocally back in 2023 that the country “will not lose an inch of territory” in the West Philippine Sea? It’s time to redeem that promise, and soon. Because if the situation continues without any concrete action countering it, we might as well resign ourselves to losing another Scarborough and more to China.