# Hunter becomes hunted at Panatag

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From Beijing’s vantage point, the events of Aug. 11 near Panatag Shoal must have seemed unthinkable. Two of its own ships collided with each other while chasing down a lone Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) vessel, leaving a number of Chinese personnel missing or presumed dead.

The news wasn’t just unusual; it was unheard of. How often do we hear reports of the Chinese sustaining such losses in a maritime skirmish with Filipinos?

For once, the hunter became the hunted, so to speak.

Yet the outcome, while poetic, could just as easily have been tragic had the BRP Suluan failed to outmaneuver its pursuers. For that alone, its 43 crew members deserve the medals awarded to them last week for remaining “professional yet unyielding in the face of whoever they are” are up to, as PCG chief Adm. Ronnie Gil Gavan put it.

While it’s something to applaud, the Suluan’s narrow escape was a testament to the escalating nature of Beijing’s harassment in the contested waters.

On Wednesday, a Chinese J-15 fighter jet swooped dangerously close to a PCG Cessna Caravan aircraft on a maritime domain awareness flight over Panatag, coming within 500 feet laterally and 200 feet vertically above the water, according to Commodore Jay Tarriela. On Friday, a China Coast Guard (CCG) vessel was spotted tailing a PCG ship “pretty close” to Manila Bay, said Ray Powell, founder of maritime tracker SeaLight.

## Shared fishing ground

Meanwhile, following the collision, the United States reportedly deployed two warships, the destroyer USS Higgins and the littoral combat ship USS Cincinnati, about 30 nautical miles from Panatag, also known internationally as Scarborough Shoal and locally as Bajo de Masinloc.

China claimed through its Southern Theater Command that it had “expelled” the Higgins, but both the US and Philippine sides refuted this. The PCG said the US ships were conducting lawful freedom of navigation operations, which Manila supports, as these directly challenge Beijing’s now ten-dash-line claim.

In 2016, an arbitral ruling voided that claim and affirmed Panatag as a shared fishing ground among claimants in the South China Sea. China, however, refuses to acknowledge the decision and has implemented what experts call “exclusion zone enforcement” by blocking PCG vessels and Filipino fishers from approaching the lagoon since its effective takeover in 2012.

The Aug. 11 incident marked a dangerous turn. Armed Forces of the Philippines chief Gen. Romeo Brawner Jr. said it was the first time the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLA-N) directly joined in blocking a Philippine maritime mission there. According to Denny Roy, senior fellow at the East-West Center, using a destroyer to threaten to ram a PCG vessel was already “a significant escalation.”

## US message to Beijing

Except, it was China’s forces that got a dose of their own medicine. While attempting to corner the Suluan, the PLA-N warship with hull number 164 collided with CCG-3104, crushing the latter’s bow. Tarriela said four personnel were visible on the CCG ship’s forecastle before impact, but were not seen afterward. Their fates remain unknown.

Roy suggested it was “reasonable to think” the US deployment was an answer to China’s use of a naval warship against a Philippine vessel. The Philippines sits on the “first island chain,” a critical arc in US strategy to contain Beijing’s expansion in the Pacific. “The US message to Beijing seems to be: we see you testing us, and here’s your answer,” Roy said.

That answer, however, must go beyond symbolism, especially as President Marcos has acknowledged that the country will be dragged “kicking and screaming” in any war over Taiwan.

## A credible deterrent

China’s hostile actions are part and parcel of its campaign to impose its will in the West Philippine Sea. The outcome might have been an accident, but its prior actions were calibrated and deliberate. Unfortunately, the volatile nature of such sea clashes makes miscalculation on either side not only likely but inevitable.

For a country like the Philippines, the solution lies in building contingencies into its alliances: faster coordination with friendly forces under agreements like the Mutual Defense Treaty and the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement with the US and the soon-to-be-effective Reciprocal Access Agreement with Japan, joint sails and drills with other allies, and stronger capabilities to secure our waters.

For years, China has counted on the Philippines to be unprepared, isolated, and unwilling to risk confrontation. It was only in June last year when a Philippine Navy sailor lost a thumb during a violent run-in with the Chinese near Ayungin (Second Thomas) Shoal.

Last week, it was the Chinese’ turn to be caught off guard.

But while it is tempting to gloat at China’s misfortune, the Philippines cannot afford to rely on luck and the nimbleness of its forces alone. What it needs more than ever is a credible deterrent—to put itself beyond the reach of any so-called hunter in the contested sea.