

Keeping the Scarborough Shoal discourse alive

By Collin Koh



Coming 12 July 2026 marks the 10th anniversary of the South China Sea arbitral award, which dealt a massive legal blow to Beijing's expansive claims. It is worth noting that the arbitral proceedings, initiated by Manila in 2013, was in no small part motivated by what happened at Scarborough Shoal in April 2012. And so poignantly, the current key flashpoint between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Philippines is at this very feature ever since tensions shifted from Second Thomas Shoal after both countries agreed to the "provisional arrangement" on Filipino rotation and replenishment (RoRe) missions to the BRP Sierra Madre outpost in July 2024.

Seizure of a Vantage Point

Located well within the Philippine exclusive economic zone, Scarborough Shoal, or Panatag Shoal to Manila, is an atoll that comprises several terrestrial outcrops that remain elevated above sea level at high tide, and characterized by a vast lagoon that nurses a thriving marine ecosystem. Its geostrategic location is also significant. It faces Subic Bay, which is strategically important from the military perspective to the east. And perhaps even more crucially, the shoal provides a useful springboard to the Bashi Channel in the north. To the Philippines, given Luzon already sits astride this highly strategic waterway that connects the northern part of the SCS to the Philippine Sea, Scarborough Shoal does not necessarily come across as significant

from this standpoint beyond the issue of national sovereignty and jurisdictional rights, especially those concerning fishing activities.

However, Huangyan Dao, as Scarborough Shoal is known to PRC, occupies a very strategic location in Beijing's eyes. It is closer to the Bashi Channel compared to Paracel Islands to the west. In times of conflict, the Bashi Channel serves as one of those strategic waterways through the First Island Chain for PRC military forces to break out into the open western Pacific Ocean, especially the Philippine Sea where PRC military planners long envisaged as a major campaign theatre to fight American intervention in the regional flashpoints, such as over Taiwan. Bashi Channel also serves a sea denial role; it is one the chokepoints that could forestall or keep out American forces seeking entry into what PRC defines as near-seas, including the SCS, enclosed west of the First Island Chain.

If one agrees that the ongoing tensions between Beijing and Manila since early 2023 has not to do solely with the latter's assertion of its West Philippine Sea (WPS) interests but also in no small part, the Taiwan factor, then it helps clear a little bit of the muddy waters why Beijing is now so fixated on Scarborough Shoal.

Quest for Control with a Limited Playbook

After agreeing to the "provisional arrangement" on Second Thomas Shoal, PRC authorities have not responded to the [Philippine push to expand such arrangement for other WPS features](#). Sabina Shoal, the site of a prolonged faceoff between PRC and Philippines forces in 2024, is useful insofar it serves as a midway station for PRC forces to monitor the Filipino RoRe missions bound for the *Sierra Madre* outpost. Scarborough Shoal is therefore uniquely special. Besides Mischief Reef, also within the Philippine EEZ where it maintains a sprawling artificial island outpost, Scarborough Shoal is the only other feature Beijing could claim to have exercised for an appreciable duration de facto administration – albeit an increasingly tenuous one at that compared to the immediate years following the April 2012 standoff.

Continued Philippine presence around Scarborough Shoal including fishing activities and maritime patrols, backed by consistent diplomatic demarches backstopped by the 2016 arbitral award, undermines the legitimacy of this so-called PRC "administration". Manila's [assertive transparency](#) also brings to public limelight the illegal nature of Beijing's control over the feature, thus helping to ensure that Scarborough Shoal would not be doomed to oblivion over time. There is only so much the PRC authorities could possibly do without triggering an armed conflict. The June 2024 clash at Second Thomas Shoal was the closest the parties – potentially including the United States, were brought to the brink of a shooting war. Beijing assiduously sought to avoid similar repeats elsewhere, including Scarborough Shoal.

This is also why Beijing is reaching deep inside its toolkit of coercion, though the tools available are increasingly limited. "Control measures" typically undertaken to date include close-in surveillance, and non-kinetic actions including vessel ramming, water cannon. Yet these have increasingly reduced returns on investment. For one, Philippine presence continues to persist despite Beijing's attempt to demonstrate its escalation dominance in the area, such as

deployment of gray hulls – the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) – for active “sovereignty and rights protection” alongside the China Coast Guard (CCG). Unlike other contested SCS areas, by far WPS, not least Scarborough Shoal has witnessed the most intense PLAN posture.

“Environmental Guardian”?

If deploying gray hulls fails to convince Manila to stop maritime activities around Scarborough Shoal and fails to impress upon the international community its “effective administration” of the feature, now Beijing seems to tap a new narrative to legitimize its actions. The month following an embarrassing incident last August at Scarborough Shoal that saw the collision between PLAN and CCG vessels, Beijing declared a “national nature reserve”. Then in November 2025, the PRC Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE) released the [2025 Investigation and Assessment Report on Marine Ecology and Environment Status of Huangyan Dao](#).

This move is in fact part of an evolving PRC narrative that seeks to mitigate the humiliating 2016 arbitral award that, amongst several key findings, highlighted the massive marine ecological damage brought about by Beijing’s land reclamation and island-building work in the Spratly Islands. This narrative comprises two pillars. The first is to [portray](#) the PRC as an active contributor to the SCS marine environmental well-being. The second is to villainize its rivals. So far, Beijing has chosen to target only the Philippines, by [accusing](#) the latter of causing marine environmental damage at Second Thomas Shoal and Scarborough Shoal for instance. The crosshairs are thus far not laid upon other Southeast Asian parties (Vietnam in particular, despite its ongoing massive island-building work) to avoid inflaming tensions with them, and perhaps more importantly, to isolate Manila within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The MEE has been on the forefront of positioning the PRC as an “environmental guardian” in the SCS, with its [official website](#) extolling Beijing’s contributions to the Scarborough Shoal marine environment and ecology through the publication of not only reports but videos. Since last December, the PRC authorities have commenced a series of what appears to be marine scientific research activities at Scarborough Shoal, including the deployment of floating platforms alongside research and survey vessels for the purpose. These activities were reportedly halted, soon after Manila publicized them. Shortly after, the MEE released the [2025 Survey Report on Huangyan Dao Blue Hole](#).

If anything, this “environmental guardian” narrative has become part of the standard PRC playbook for creeping maritime jurisdiction. Recent PRC maritime activities off Taiwan’s eastern seaboard, including a [“marine environmental survey”](#) should be viewed as part of an overall strategy Beijing uses to legitimize its actions.

Persistent Vigilance amid Stalemate

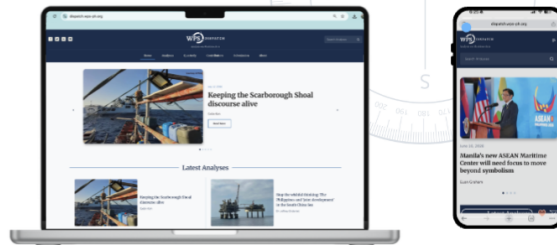
The reinvigorated move by Manila in recent times to institute some form of persistent presence at Scarborough Shoal is a welcome rebuttal that takes into proper account the need to enforce a legal award and to demonstrate the illegitimacy of Beijing's control of the feature. That said, however, it is necessary to recognize the situation as a stalemate of sorts: on the one hand, there is no way Manila would regain the feature by force or diplomacy. On the other hand, despite asserting de facto administration of the shoal, Beijing has limited means – short of outright force to expel and deter Philippine maritime presence in the area or to build a permanent outpost similar to those in the Spratlys – to legitimize its control without interruption.

Keeping the Scarborough Shoal alive in public discourse is one way to prevent the legitimization of PRC control over the feature. Publicly responding with facts and objectivity to Beijing's attempt to position itself as an "environmental guardian" of the shoal, for that matter other features across the SCS, not least in the West Philippine Sea, would be necessary. This is also the reason why, despite criticism about the desired "end game" for assertive transparency, this strategy would continue to stand the test of time and should be continued even if Manila looks set to remain the only ASEAN party to the SCS disputes utilizing this technique. For Scarborough Shoal at least, the end game would realistically be to demonstrate the tenuous, illegitimate nature of PRC control and to prevent Beijing from constructing a permanent outpost. Persistent maritime domain awareness, information sharing and intelligence exchange, which could be done in concert with likeminded external actors, would help forestall further creeping PRC moves to further consolidate its hold of the shoal.

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