

Marvin Hamor Bernardo

Friend or foe, China's maritime coercion and the problem with accommodation

For China's maritime neighbors, maintaining friendly relations with Beijing does not necessarily mean escaping its coercive pressure. The methods remain remarkably consistent, even as the intensity varies.

China's maritime disputes are often understood through the lens of increasingly confrontational relations with the Philippines, Japan, and Taiwan. Frequent encounters involving Chinese coast guard (CCG) vessels, maritime militia, and survey ships have reinforced the perception that Beijing reserves its most coercive tactics for states that openly challenge its territorial claims. Yet upon closer examination, countries that have maintained relatively cordial relations with Beijing, including Malaysia and Indonesia, have also experienced persistent maritime pressures.

The distinction, therefore, may not be between countries Beijing considers friends and those it regards as adversaries. Rather, China appears willing to employ many of the same instruments of coercion regardless of the broader state of bilateral relations. What changes is the intensity and political context in which these instruments are deployed. This consistency raises an important question: If maintaining good relations with Beijing does not necessarily insulate a country from coercion, what does accommodation actually achieve?

Malaysia

Malaysia offers a particularly revealing example. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has pursued closer relations with China, emphasizing economic cooperation and avoiding confrontation. Historically, Malaysia has preferred [quiet diplomacy](#), avoiding public disagreements. Yet this approach has not prevented CCG vessels from maintaining a presence near Malaysia's offshore energy operations. On 16 August 2026, as PM Anwar stated Taiwan was "[a part of China](#)," China's [Monster](#) Coast Guard ship was approximately 180km off the coast of northern Sarawak. China maintains a near-constant presence in Malaysia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

The location is hardly incidental. Sarawak has some of Malaysia's most valuable offshore oil and gas resources, making the continued presence of Chinese law enforcement vessels strategically consequential. This was not an isolated episode. In 2024, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reportedly delivered a [diplomatic note](#) demanding Malaysia cease activities in oil-rich waters off Sarawak. China's maritime coercion does not always require confrontation; persistent coast guard presence near economically significant infrastructure communicates Beijing's objections and establishes a new status quo vis-à-vis effective administration without resorting to overt threats or physical interference.

Regardless of the cordiality of Malaysia's broader relationship with China, Beijing continues to exert pressure. The pressure may be less confrontational than that experienced by the Philippines, but it has not disappeared. The threat does not have to be explicit; it just has to be ever present.

Indonesia

Indonesia presents a similar pattern. Jakarta has sought to preserve productive relations, given China's importance as a trading partner and investor. Indonesian officials have traditionally avoided framing their maritime disagreements with China as part of the wider South China Sea disputes. Nevertheless, Chinese activities around Indonesia's North Natuna Sea have repeatedly challenged Jakarta's maritime interests. In 2021, an Indonesian navy ship confronted a Chinese survey vessel with a CCG vessel near the [Noble Clyde Boudreaux](#) offshore drilling rig. During the same period, Beijing delivered a diplomatic letter demanding Indonesia halt drilling activities at the Tuna Block. The pressure continued in 2024, when a CCG vessel interfered with survey activities associated with Pertamina's offshore [energy operations](#). These incidents demonstrate how Beijing combines different instruments of pressure. Diplomatic objections establish its official position, while coast guard deployments and survey activities reinforce those claims operationally.

What makes the Indonesian case particularly interesting is that Jakarta does not recognize itself as a claimant in the South China Sea. Jakarta has repeatedly affirmed it has [no dispute](#) with Beijing. Yet this distinction has not prevented Beijing from challenging Indonesian activities in waters where China's expansive maritime claims overlap. Indonesia's refusal to acknowledge a dispute has therefore not eliminated the underlying disagreement.

Selective enforcement as a strategic instrument

Comparison across Malaysia and Indonesia reveals a recurring pattern that has been observed in the Philippines, Japan, and Taiwan. Beijing employs a recognizable set of instruments: persistent coast guard deployments, diplomatic objections, maritime surveillance, interference with resource exploration, and the use of civilian or ostensibly nonmilitary platforms. The intensity of these activities differs considerably. Some states encounter aggressive maneuvers and highly publicized confrontations, while others experience prolonged but relatively quiet pressure.

This variation matters. It allows Beijing to tailor its approach to the political and strategic circumstances of individual countries while pursuing similar underlying objectives. Selective enforcement complicates regional cooperation. Countries experiencing less immediate pressure may see little reason to adopt a more confrontational approach pursued by those facing frequent incidents. Conversely, states subjected to more aggressive Chinese behavior may perceive their neighbors' restraint as an unwillingness to defend shared maritime interests.

The result is a fragmented regional response to practices that share operational characteristics. Rather than confronting a unified group of maritime states, Beijing can manage disputes individually, adjusting the intensity of pressure while limiting the emergence of a common regional position.

The problem with political accommodation

These patterns raise a broader question about the value of political accommodation. States often pursue cordial relations with China with the expectation that diplomatic goodwill and economic cooperation will help manage disagreements. There are sound reasons for doing so, but this compartmentalization has been weaponized. China is an indispensable economic partner for much of the region, but economic cooperation and diplomatic accommodation should not be mistaken for guarantees against coercion.

Beijing's maritime interests may remain relatively consistent even as its relations with individual governments improve or deteriorate. A government may receive favorable diplomatic treatment

while Chinese vessels continue to challenge their maritime activities. However, political expectations attached to a cooperative relationship may change over time. Because Beijing repeatedly redefines its objectives and enforces it selectively, deference to Beijing becomes something that has to be demonstrated continuously.

A position regarded as sufficiently accommodating today may not satisfy Beijing tomorrow, particularly as its strategic priorities and interpretations of acceptable conduct evolve. This creates a potentially unequal relationship in which smaller states must repeatedly demonstrate their willingness to accommodate Chinese preferences without necessarily receiving corresponding restraint in return.

The Philippines under former President Rodrigo Duterte illustrates the limitations of such an approach. In pursuit of closer relations with Beijing, his administration [suspended](#) offshore exploration activities. It changed nothing. The decision demonstrated how the prospect of confrontation influences domestic policy even without sustained direct interference at sea. Such outcomes point to a subtler dimension of maritime coercion: its capacity to influence decisions before a confrontation occurs. When governments begin adjusting their behavior in anticipation of Beijing's objections, coercive pressure may already have achieved part of its purpose.

A key feature of China's approach is the uncertainty it creates. Smaller states often struggle to anticipate when and where Beijing might intensify its pressure, and what form that pressure might take. This uncertainty forces governments to consider not only China's present actions but also the possibility of future escalation. Changing political lines created permanent uncertainty, as the definition of correct behavior repeatedly changes. The threat does not always need to be explicit. Its persistence can be sufficient to influence political calculations.

The experiences of Malaysia and Indonesia challenge the assumption that China's maritime coercion is reserved primarily for governments that openly oppose Beijing. Friendly relations may influence the intensity of Chinese pressure, but they do not necessarily alter the underlying objectives driving maritime activities. States should be cautious about assuming that political goodwill alone will protect their maritime interests.