

Malaysia-Philippines Diverge on China in South China Sea

Philippines shows if ASEAN, set to be led by Malaysia in 2025, fails to back its position against China it will look elsewhere for support

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At the recent 37th Asia-Pacific Roundtable in Kuala Lumpur, differences between Southeast Asian nations on the South China Sea issue played out across panels, speeches and off-the-cuff comments, even as delegates discussed regional cooperation opportunities and ASEAN centrality in an environment of worsening great power tensions.

Malaysia's National Security Council director-general **Raja Dato Nushirwan Zainal Abidin** said the South China Sea constitutes 4% of the bilateral relationship between Malaysia and China at best. This statement comes as Malaysia has de-emphasized the South China Sea issue and reiterated its willingness to negotiate with China.

In April last year, **Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim** [said](#) he was willing to engage with China over its concerns that Petronas, a Malaysian energy state-owned enterprise, was developing a carbon capture project in the Kasawari gas field, an area to which both countries lay claim.

Anwar was criticized by the domestic opposition for allegedly validating China's claim to the area, a charge that Anwar defended by insisting that he was simply open to negotiations. True or not, Anwar continues to stress the need to negotiate with China and for Beijing to abide by the rules outlined in the ASEAN Code of Conduct.

The problem is other claimant countries, certainly the Philippines, may not see negotiations as the best way forward in countering China's activities in the South China Sea. Under the leadership of **Ferdinand Marcos Jr**, Manila has u-turned from its previously closer ties with China under the Duterte administration.

An escalation in confrontations between Manila and Beijing in recent months has been reflected in increasingly worrying rhetoric from both sides. Marcos [warned](#) that the death of any Philippines citizen due to a "willful act" would be treated as very close to an act of war, referring implicitly to recent Chinese maneuvers around the Second Thomas Shoal.

Philippine **Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro** [added](#) that the South China Sea issue was "existential" for the country – a far cry from Malaysia's attitude toward the dispute.

The stark divergence between Kuala Lumpur's and Manila's approaches and, by extension, between Manila's more forthcoming position and ASEAN's non-interference stance is

generating critical implications for intra-ASEAN ties and the relevance of the organization.

Manila is no doubt diversifying its sources of security and seeking the support of regional and global powers that might support its claims when ASEAN has shown itself to be hesitant to.

The Philippines is increasing defense training with the US and purchasing more weapons from the Americans, as the US has reestablished itself as a key security partner for Manila following a brief withdrawal during the Trump administration.

At the same time, Manila is [wooing](#) the EU as European Commission president **Ursula von der Leyen** has pledged to strengthen maritime security cooperation with the Philippines. This statement was punctuated by discussion of defense deals with the Netherlands and Norway.

In the region, Teodoro has also been hard at work, [meeting](#) with the South Korean and Singaporean defense ministers on the sidelines of the 21st Shangri-La Dialogue to strengthen security ties.

Manila has shown that if ASEAN, and especially an ASEAN led by Malaysia in 2025, will not back its position, the country will sidestep it and look elsewhere for concrete support.

These crevices are also not temporary or specific to current leaders in power. As nationalism in the region grows over South China Sea claims and global powers like the US and China prepare to court allies in their budding confrontation, differences among ASEAN member states on how to manage the disputes will only widen.

These differences may eventually resign ASEAN to inaction and impotence as the region scrambles to find new security arrangements.

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