

Visibility as Strategic Leverage: The Philippines' Transparency Initiative and Gray Zone Competition in the South China Sea

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Abstract: *A maritime state with limited material power can improve its position in a gray zone contest by transforming visibility into a strategic resource. This article examines the Philippines' Transparency Initiative under the Marcos Jr. administration and argues that Manila has turned visibility into a strategic resource in the South China Sea. Based on thematic coding of 553 English-language news reports on three high-profile incidents at Second Thomas Shoal between February 2023 and June 2024, the article traces four linked processes: evidentiary visualization, narrative attribution, legal framing, and international diffusion. These processes move an encounter from the sea into public argument: a low-visibility incident becomes public evidence; evidence supports claims about responsibility; those claims are attached to legal standards; and legal claims then travel through media, diplomatic, and alliance channels. The initiative does not alter the maritime balance of power in any direct sense. Its value lies in reducing the ambiguity on which gray zone coercion relies, raising reputational costs, supporting domestic legitimation, building a legal-diplomatic record, and connecting Philippine claims to the language of a rules-based international order. The case suggests that small and middle powers are not only targets of gray zone pressure.*

Keywords: *South China Sea; Philippines; Transparency Initiative; gray zone competition; visibility*

1. Introduction

Gray zone competition in the South China Sea is often presented as a contest among vessels, coast guards, maritime militia, water cannons, lasers, and blockades. That description captures the operational setting, but it misses an important part of the struggle. Incidents at sea also enter an information environment in which images, legal claims, media frames, and alliance statements shape how those incidents are understood. The issue is therefore not only who acts at sea, but also who can make an action visible, define its meaning, and draw audiences toward that interpretation.

This informational dimension matters especially for a state that cannot match an opponent ship for ship, which may still alter the political cost of maritime coercion. It can publicize an incident before it is absorbed into diplomatic ambiguity, attach responsibility to an otherwise disputed encounter, translate the event into legal terms, and give external actors a language through which to respond. Visibility, in this sense, can become strategic leverage.

The Philippines' Transparency Initiative offers a clear case through which to examine this logic. Since 2023, the Marcos Jr. administration has repeatedly publicized incidents in the West Philippine Sea, especially around Second Thomas Shoal (Ayungin Shoal), where the grounded BRP Sierra Madre serves as a Philippine outpost. Manila has released photographs, videos, coast guard statements, and vessel-tracking information. It has also embedded journalists in resupply missions and relied on international media, think tanks, and allied governments to circulate and validate its account.

The article asks two questions: how does the Philippine Transparency Initiative turn maritime gray zone incidents into political and diplomatic resources, and why can a state with limited maritime power gain agenda-setting capacity in an information contest? The answer developed here is that transparency works through a process of strategic conversion. Opaque incidents are made into public evidence, evidence is used to assign responsibility, responsibility claims are tied to legal standards, and legal claims become the basis for international mobilization.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gray zone Competition and Maritime Ambiguity

The concept of "gray zone" stems from the loosening of the demarcation between war and peace after the Cold War. It is used to describe the form of competition between peace and war, below the threshold of traditional armed conflict, and pursuing strategic goals through gradual and deniable means. (Mazarr, 2015) ^[1] The core is that the actor controls the conflict below the critical point that triggers the all-out military conflict, putting the opponent in the dilemma of "overreaction may escalate, and insufficient response will lose benefits". (Brands, 2016) ^[2]

The South China Sea is a classic gray zone environment because law enforcement, sovereignty claims, maritime rights, and military signaling overlap there. Coast guard vessels, maritime militia, fishing fleets, civilian agencies, and naval forces operate in close proximity. Many incidents are tactical in form but strategic in effect. Water-cannon use, close maneuvering, laser illumination, blocking, and boarding can remain below the threshold of war while shaping access, presence, and perceptions of control.

Much of the literature treats gray zone operations as tools of stronger revisionist actors. (Green et al., 2017; Mazarr, 2015) ^[3] ^[1] In recent years, research has begun to pay attention to the counter-reaction logic of small and medium-sized countries, especially the Philippines' shift from a "legal war" to a "public opinion war" represented by "transparency action". This shift shows that vulnerable countries can not only passively bear the pressure of the gray area, but may also actively use low-intensity, low-escalation-risk strategies to achieve their political goals. (Powell & Goirigolzarri, 2023) ^[4] This article re-places the "gray zone" in the conflict spectrum and regards it as a form of strategic competition with the inherent constraints of avoiding the threshold of war. Under this framework, the Philippine Transparency Action can also be understood as an active practice of gray area competition.

2.2 Visibility, Framing, and Strategic Narrative

Visibility is more than the technical act of making something seen. Brighenti treats visibility as a social and political category: what becomes visible, to whom, and under what interpretation is bound up with power. In maritime disputes, visibility changes the audience of an incident. (Brighenti, 2007) ^[5] A confrontation that might otherwise remain within bilateral diplomatic channels can become available to domestic publics, international media, allied governments, and legal communities.

Framing theory helps explain how visibility acquires political meaning. Entman argues that frames select and emphasize aspects of reality in order to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. (Entman, 1993) ^[6] A video of a maritime encounter does not speak for itself. It becomes useful for strategy only when placed within a narrative about coercion, legality, restraint, or victimhood.

2.3 The Philippine Transparency Initiative

Recent policy and scholarly work identifies the Philippine Transparency Initiative as a significant shift in Manila's South China Sea strategy (Ibarra & Arugay, 2024) ^[7] Rather than treating maritime incidents as matters for quiet diplomacy alone, the Marcos Jr. administration has made public exposure a central tool. The National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea and the Philippine Coast Guard have taken visible roles, while media organizations, civil-society actors, think tanks, and foreign partners have helped circulate the materials.

Existing accounts rightly emphasize the initiative's political effectiveness. (Heydarian, 2024) ^[8] Less developed is the micro-level process through which transparency works. This article addresses that gap by tracing how incident-specific language, images, legal references, and external statements interact across three cases. It does not seek to adjudicate the underlying sovereignty dispute. Its purpose is to show how public discourse turns maritime friction into strategic leverage.

3. Analytical Framework: Visibility as Strategic Leverage

The framework developed here treats visibility as a sequence of political conversion. Visibility becomes strategic when it changes an incident's audience, evidentiary status, responsibility structure,

legal meaning, and capacity for mobilization. Four linked processes are central.

Evidentiary visualization turns a low-visibility maritime encounter into public evidence. Photographs, videos, vessel-tracking data, and embedded reporting give the incident a material form that can be replayed, cited, and circulated. This does not eliminate dispute, but it narrows the space for denial and requires later argument to engage visible material.

Narrative attribution assigns responsibility. The same maritime action may be described as law enforcement, defense of rights, provocation, harassment, or coercion. Attributional language determines whether audiences see a bilateral operational encounter or an asymmetrical act of pressure. In the Philippine case, terms such as “aggressive,” “dangerous,” “harassment,” and “bullying” help turn visual evidence into a responsibility claim.

Legal framing turns responsibility into a question of rules. References to UNCLOS (United Nations 1982), the exclusive economic zone, sovereign rights, and the 2016 arbitral award (Permanent Court of Arbitration 2016) place the incident within a legal vocabulary that external governments and international media can recognize. Legal framing also distinguishes Philippine conduct as routine, lawful, restrained, or humanitarian.

International diffusion expands both the audience and the support structure. International media amplify the conflictual and visual elements of the incident. Allies and partners connect it to regional stability, freedom of navigation, mutual defense, and the rules-based order. A local encounter thereby becomes an international political issue.

Table 1 summarizes these processes and their observable indicators.

Table 1. Mechanism of Visibility as Strategic Leverage

Mechanism	Operational meaning	Indicators in the corpus	Strategic effect
Evidentiary visualization	Turning low-visibility maritime encounters into public, reusable evidence.	image, photo, video, footage, released, posted, statement	Narrows denial space and creates a factual anchor for media and diplomacy.
Narrative attribution	Assigning responsibility and moral meaning to the visible incident.	aggressive, dangerous maneuver, harassment, bullying, blocked, rammed, injured	Frames the encounter as coercion rather than routine law enforcement.
Legal framing	Embedding the incident in international law and rules-order language.	EEZ, UNCLOS, sovereign rights, 2016 arbitral award, illegal, no legal authority	Transforms operational friction into a question of law and order.
International diffusion	Expanding the audience through media, allies, partners, and policy networks.	United States, Japan, Australia, Canada, UK, MDT, rules-based order, freedom of navigation	Turns a bilateral maritime incident into an international issue.

4. Research Design and Data

The empirical analysis focuses on three high-profile incidents at Second Thomas Shoal: the February 2023 laser incident, the August 2023 water-cannon incident, and the 17 June 2024 ramming-and-boarding incident. These cases are useful for mechanism tracing because they vary in intensity while sharing the same strategic setting: Philippine resupply and rotation missions around the BRP Sierra Madre and Chinese efforts, as described by Philippine and international reports, to obstruct or challenge those missions.

The corpus consists of English-language news reports collected from LexisNexis using the

keywords “Ayungin” and “Second Thomas Shoal.” For each incident, the collection window covered the first three days after the event, when framing is most concentrated and official statements are most likely to enter news coverage. After deduplication and relevance screening, the final corpus contains 553 texts: 127 on the laser incident, 165 on the water-cannon incident, and 261 on the ramming-and-boarding incident.

The method is computer-assisted manual thematic coding. Recurrent words, phrases, and representative expressions were extracted from the corpus and then grouped into themes according to their narrative function: visual evidence, coercive danger, personnel safety, lawful resupply, legal rights, diplomatic protest, crisis escalation, and external mobilization. The coding unit is not the objective truth of an event but the public framing of that event in English-language reporting.

The analysis is interpretive rather than statistical. High-frequency terms are treated as indicators of salience, not as proof of causal effects. The article therefore makes a bounded claim: it shows how the Philippine transparency strategy is represented and reproduced in public discourse, and how that representation supports a plausible mechanism of strategic leverage. It does not measure audience reception or claim that visibility alone changed Chinese maritime behavior.

The detailed coding tables appear in the Appendix. The body of the article uses the coding results to trace the mechanism across the three incidents.

5. Findings: The Mechanism Chain

5.1 Evidentiary Visualization

The Philippine strategy begins by making maritime friction visible. Gray zone encounters benefit from distance and uncertainty. If a confrontation is seen only by the actors directly involved, it can be treated as a disputed operational claim. Once images, videos, statements, and third-party media accounts circulate, the incident becomes a public object that officials can cite and media can reproduce.

The February 2023 laser incident illustrates this process. In the corpus, terms such as “laser,” “military-grade laser,” “temporary blindness,” “photo,” “image,” “video,” and “statement” appear frequently. The incident was therefore anchored in material that could be seen, reported, and recirculated.

The strategic effect was not to settle the dispute. China could still characterize its conduct as lawful action in disputed waters, and the Philippines could still describe it as dangerous obstruction. Even so, the contest shifted from assertion to interpretation around visible material. Once images and official statements were available, the incident could be reported, protested, and referenced by external actors. The event moved from the maritime scene into a wider public evidentiary space.

The pattern became more pronounced in the August 2023 water-cannon incident and the June 2024 ramming-and-boarding incident. In the water-cannon case, repeated references to “video,” “photo,” “footage,” “released,” and “posted” suggest that visual material remained central to the reporting frame. In the June 2024 case, visual evidence carried greater force because reports referred not only to collision and boarding but also to high-intensity details such as knives and axes. The incident consequently acquired a stronger visual and emotional charge.

5.2 Narrative Attribution

Making an incident visible does not by itself determine its meaning. Images have to be interpreted, and interpretation requires attribution. Philippine narratives consistently pair visual evidence with language that assigns responsibility to China while presenting Philippine conduct as restrained and lawful.

Across the three incidents, the corpus repeatedly uses terms such as “dangerous maneuver,” “harassment,” “aggressive,” “unsafe,” “blocked,” “rammed,” “boarded,” “seized,” and “injured.” These terms do more than describe movement at sea. They establish a moral and political relationship between the actors: China appears as the source of coercive pressure, while the Philippines appears as the target of unsafe conduct.

Philippine actions are also normalized through the vocabulary of resupply and humanitarian support. Terms such as “routine resupply mission,” “rotation and resupply,” “supplies,” “BRP Sierra Madre,”

and “humanitarian mission” appear across the corpus. This language distinguishes Philippine conduct from escalation. Manila is not presented as initiating a confrontation; it is presented as maintaining a limited outpost and supplying personnel.

The Philippines often puts itself in the position of “small country”, “democratic country” and “rule-abiding”, embedding the friction between China and the Philippines into the story framework of the weak facing pressure from the strong. One side is framed as coercive and escalating; the other as routine, restrained, and legally entitled. (Ramadhani, 2025)^[9] This contrast is powerful for external audiences because the identity structure lowers the threshold for understanding complex maritime disputes, so that external audiences do not have to first enter into historical rights, island and reef ownership and maritime demarcation disputes, and can understand events through the moral pattern of “the weak are coerced”.

Therefore, narrative attribution assumes the function of “determining the direction of responsibility” in the mechanism chain. It transforms the public facts of image evidence into a judgment of responsibility with moral evaluation and political orientation, laying the foundation for subsequent legal standardization and international diffusion.

5.3 Legal Framing

Legal framing then changes the standard by which the incident is evaluated. If a maritime encounter remains at the level of competing national assertions, external audiences may treat it as another bilateral dispute. Legal language gives them a different basis for judgment.

Philippine statements contain repeated references to the exclusive economic zone, sovereign rights, international law, UNCLOS, and the 2016 arbitral award. This legal vocabulary draws on UNCLOS (United Nations 1982) and on the South China Sea arbitral award (Permanent Court of Arbitration 2016). The June 2024 incident shows the strongest legalization: “exclusive economic zone,” “international law,” “sovereign rights,” “illegal,” “UNCLOS,” and “arbitration ruling” appear prominently. These terms translate a high-intensity maritime confrontation into a question of lawful activity and unlawful obstruction.

The 2016 South China Sea arbitral award functions as a standing legal reference for Philippine discourse. The award does not resolve every political dimension of the dispute, and China rejects it. For Manila and its partners, however, it provides a recurring point of reference. Each new incident can be placed into a familiar legal storyline: Philippine rights under UNCLOS and the arbitral award are being obstructed by coercive action.

Legal framing also creates an interface between the Philippine narrative and external support. Allied governments can more easily issue statements when an incident is framed not as a bilateral quarrel alone but as a challenge to international law, freedom of navigation, and rules-based order. Legal language links the local event to a wider normative structure.

5.4 International Diffusion

International diffusion is the final link in the chain. The Philippines cannot rely on its own communication capacity alone. Its narrative gains force when international media, think tanks, allies, and partners reproduce it in their own institutional language.

The coding results show external actors becoming increasingly visible across the three incidents. The laser incident already contains references to the United States, Japan, Australia, allies, the Mutual Defense Treaty, rules-based order, and freedom of navigation. The water-cannon incident brings in a wider set of actors, including the United Kingdom and Canada. The June 2024 incident shows the highest degree of internationalization, with dense references to the United States, Japan, Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and the Mutual Defense Treaty.

International diffusion is more than broader coverage; it also recodes the incident. International media emphasize its conflictual and visual elements. Allied governments translate it into the language of regional stability, deterrence, mutual defense, and rules-based order.

Through this process, the Philippines gains borrowed discursive power. This does not mean that external actors support Manila for altruistic reasons alone. U.S. and allied amplification also serves their strategic interest in maintaining influence in the Indo-Pacific and constraining Chinese maritime assertiveness. The Philippine narrative travels because it fits this larger geopolitical discourse.

(Misalucha-Willoughby, 2023)^[10]

6. Strategic Payoffs, Risks, and Scope Conditions

The Transparency Initiative generates four strategic payoffs. It raises reputational costs by making alleged coercive behavior harder to ignore and more costly to justify. Even when reputational pressure does not immediately alter maritime behavior, it shapes diplomatic image, media coverage, and regional perceptions.

Transparency also supports domestic legitimation. The Marcos Jr. administration can show Philippine audiences that it is defending sovereign rights and maritime entitlements while avoiding overt military escalation. The vocabulary of lawful resupply and restraint allows the government to appear firm without appearing reckless.

Transparency further builds a legal and diplomatic archive. Repeated releases of images, statements, protests, and allied responses create a record that can be reused in future diplomatic exchanges, policy debates, and legal argumentation. Each incident becomes part of an accumulating pattern rather than an isolated event.

Finally, transparency facilitates alliance mobilization. Public incidents provide concrete focal points for statements, consultations, exercises, capacity-building, and reassurance. The Philippines can use visibility to draw allies into a more active role without necessarily provoking immediate military escalation.

These payoffs have limits. Visibility is not the same as deterrence. Public exposure may increase reputational costs, but it may not prevent the next blockade, interception, or dangerous maneuver. Allied statements do not guarantee automatic intervention in a crisis. Domestic mobilization can raise public expectations and reduce room for compromise. Transparency can strengthen Manila's position while also narrowing its crisis-management flexibility.(Bautista & Candelaria, 2025)^[11]

The strategy also depends on favorable external conditions. Philippine narratives travel effectively because they align with U.S. and allied discourse about the rules-based order and a free and open Indo-Pacific. (Homolar & Turner, 2024)^[12] That alignment amplifies Manila's position, but it also embeds the dispute in broader great-power competition. As the Philippines benefits from external amplification, its crisis management may become more closely entangled with the strategic agendas of its partners.

7. Conclusion

The Philippine Transparency Initiative shows how visibility can become strategic leverage in gray zone competition. Manila has not materially changed the balance of power around Second Thomas Shoal. It has changed the political visibility of maritime encounters and the interpretive structure through which those encounters are judged. By moving incidents from evidence to attribution, from attribution to legal claims, and from legal claims to external mobilization, the Philippines has made ambiguity less useful for its opponent and more useful for itself.

The case has broader implications for international relations. Small and middle powers are not merely objects of gray zone pressure. They can contest the informational and normative conditions that make such pressure effective. In doing so, they may use tools that also remain below the threshold of armed conflict: publicity, legal language, media access, and alliance signaling. These tools do not replace material capability, but they can alter the political environment in which material capability is used.(Long, 2017)^[13]

At the same time, transparency is not a neutral good. It is a political technology. It can expose coercion, mobilize support, and strengthen legal claims; it can also harden narratives, raise escalation pressures, and bind local disputes to larger strategic rivalries. As an innovative means of gray area competition, the real meaning of transparency action is not whether it can "win" maritime confrontation, but in showing that gray area competition is extending from physical space to narrative competition around visibility, credibility and mobilization.

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