



CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

In Focus

New Delhi

CAPS InFocus: 16/2024

24 April 2024

India Delivers BrahMos to Philippines: What does it mean for South China Sea Geopolitics?

Mr Gaurav Sen

Research Associate, Centre for Air Power Studies



Source: brahmos.com



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Keywords: India, BrahMos, South China Sea

India is poised to strengthen its position in the global Defence market by delivering BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles to the Philippines, signifying a significant advancement in bilateral defence collaboration. The deal, valued at US \$374.96 million and agreed upon in January 2022,¹ highlights India's aspirations as an emerging Defence exporter. According to sources within the Directorate General of Civil Aviation, three civilian freightliners departed for Manila on April 18, 2024, accompanied by an Indian Air Force (IAF) C-17 Globemaster.² This arrangement underscores the multifaceted logistical approach employed in this operation, integrating both civilian and military transportation. Such cooperation underscores the strategic and operational significance of the missile delivery.

This development carries significant weight, especially amidst the ongoing maritime tensions in the West Philippine Sea, where the Philippines has been dealing with maritime challenges from China. The delivery of BrahMos missiles is anticipated to greatly enhance the Philippines' naval strength, serving as a strong deterrent in the region.

China's Increasing Pressure on Philippines

China continues its persistent endeavor to assert control over the South China Sea, relying on its disputed 'historical claims' (which were discredited by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016) and the ambiguous ten-dash line.³ These efforts involve constructing artificial islands on coral reefs and employing legal maneuvers, particularly through the China Coast Guard, as well as utilising grey zone tactics by leveraging its significant maritime militia to pressure other claimants in the region.⁴

Ayunyin Shoal, also known as Second Thomas Shoal, is a location in the South China Sea where Filipino service men are stationed. On March 5, Chinese coast guard ships clashed with a Philippine patrol vessel and used water cannons against another boat carrying an admiral from the Philippines and supplies. Manila, which refers to the region as the West Philippines Sea, has been opposing China's ten-dash line claim, which asserts Chinese sovereignty over significant sections of the sea, including numerous land features.⁵

China's recent moves aimed at preventing the Philippines from resupplying its marines stationed at Second Thomas Shoal represent a dramatic increase in the country's use of force and

aggression. The information at hand indicates that China intends to evacuate the Philippine marines, and recent months have seen a noticeable increase in the urgency of achieving this objective.

Beijing skilled at coordinating joint operations utilising People's Liberation Army Navy ships, Chinese coast guard ships, and maritime militia boats that pose as fishing boats. When harassing Philippine warships, the PLA Navy's 'Gray hulls' usually stay in the background while the fishing boats and 'white hulls' take centre stage.⁶ China can apply military pressure using this tactic while staying just short of going all-out war. While Beijing has previously attempted to disrupt Manila's resupply efforts, the recent actions represent a qualitative shift in China's behavior, resembling intensified grey zone operations.

Strategic Implications for South China Sea

By acquiring supersonic cruise missiles, which the Philippine Marines Coastal Defence Regiment would employ, the country hopes to strengthen its coastal defence capabilities. The agreement includes logistical support and operator training. The main goal of this project is to protect the country's territorial claims in the disputed West Philippine Sea, often known as the South China Sea.⁷

The BrahMos is an unmatched weapon in the field of present-day missile technology. Its incredible Mach 3 speed is sustained throughout its trajectory, giving adversaries a much shorter window of opportunity to respond. The BrahMos can travel 300 kilometres in five minutes, which is a very fast reaction time when compared to other sophisticated missile systems. Although the BrahMos missile in the Philippine arsenal currently has a 290-kilometre range, its operational reach may be increased through possible integration with large naval vessels. When installed on the nation's warships, some analysts even predict that this combination might boost the missile's range to almost 450-500 kilometres.⁸

Moreover, the deliberate placement of these missiles among the Philippine islands accomplishes two goals: it creates a responsive staging area to deal with any future attacks on the country's islands and serves as an effective deterrence. However, the BrahMos missile pact represents a strategic alignment in a geopolitical landscape that is evolving quickly, not just a defence purchase. Partnerships like the one between India and the Philippines, as evidenced by accords like the BrahMos deal, are crucial for bilateral relations as well as the stability and peace of the Indo-Pacific region, given China's assertive posture in the region.⁹

Southeast Asian claimant nations feel more and more exposed as a result of China's accelerated development of its military might. As a result, they are attempting to reach out to like-minded nations like India in order to deepen bilateral ties, especially in the defence sector. The Philippines is making an effort to broaden the scope of its primary armaments suppliers and look into export destinations other than the US and South Korea. India is responding to China's naval incursions in the Indo-Pacific and its incursions on the disputed land frontier with India by implementing 'proactive defence diplomacy'.¹⁰ This agreement will undoubtedly impact the relationship between the Philippines and China, as well as that between India and ASEAN.

NOTES:

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⁹ Premesha Saha, "How India's BrahMos deal is not just about Philippines but gives a stronger message to the region", Observer Research Foundation, February 12, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/how-indias-brahmos-deal-is-not-just-about-philippines>. Accessed on April 20, 2024.

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