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Beyond Deterrence: The EU's Role in Mitigating Maritime Tensions in the South China Sea

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Photo: Philippine Coast Guard

Philippines • Maritime Security

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About the author, Joy Dianne GUMATAY

Joy Dianne Gumatay is a maritime peacebuilding and strategic communications practitioner who was named one of nine Outstanding Filipinas in Law Enforcement in 2024.

She is in charge of crisis communication and engages with local and international journalists during maritime emergencies in her role as the Senior Strategic Communications Officer of the Philippine Coast Guard. Previously, she co-established the Maritime Industry Authority's pioneering strategic communications function.

As a former broadcast journalist and news anchor at the state-owned television network PTV, she covered peace negotiations between the Philippine government and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines, legislative and judicial proceedings, and ASEAN affairs.

Extending her work into policy research, she independently writes on Indo-Pacific maritime security, regional cooperation, and maritime diplomacy, with articles published by the Lowy Institute, the Australian Institute of International Affairs, and the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

In 2026, she conceptualised the Diplomatic Communication Exercise (DIPLOMEX), a proposed capacity-building exercise designed to strengthen coast guards' capabilities in confidence-building and escalation management in the South China Sea. The views expressed are her own.

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The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), by its nature, carries a distinct humanitarian mandate. Sailing white-hulled capital ships across the archipelago's vast waters, coast guard crews are the forefront of rapidly evolving and increasingly sensitive challenges in the South China Sea.

On 8 October 2026, the PCG sent its 44-meter multi-role response vessel, BRP Cabra, to conduct a medical evacuation for an ailing Filipino serviceman aboard BRP Sierra Madre at the Second Thomas Shoal. The patient was safely extracted after several hours of shadowing and water cannoning involving the China Coast Guard.

Europe and Asia have a vital economic stake in ensuring safer and more secure navigation in the South China Sea as it serves as a critical shipping route that keeps global maritime trade active and moving. Persistent geopolitical crises in the Middle East and heightened state vessel confrontations in the Indo-Pacific threatens the lives of more than 2.5 million seafarers and negatively impacts supply chain transportation, triggering a domino effect of industry disruptions.

The European Union (EU) bears a consequential interest in what happens during these encounters, with approximately 40% of European foreign trade passing through the South China Sea. While the EU continues to expand maritime security and conflict prevention partnerships in Southeast Asia, the next challenge is how the existing EU-ASEAN cooperation could enable the region's coast guards in mitigating maritime tensions in contested waters. The course of these engagements is anchored in how frontline crews convey intent and interpret movements during intense contacts at sea.

The Diplomatic Communication Exercise (DIPLOMEX) aims to address this concern by promoting peaceful and calibrated maritime engagements. DIPLOMEX is a scenario-based simulation that trains commanding officers and radio operators to perform their responsibilities with restraint and resolve. It equips vessel crew to anticipate actions and practise responses across common situations that increase safety and security hazards, including shadowing and using water cannons that were recently observed during the 8 October medical evacuation.

The Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) provides communication procedures for naval vessels, but does not cover coast guards that in recent years have come to operate more closely amid territorial disputes in the South China Sea. DIPLOMEX seeks to resolve this issue through operational exercises that capacitates coast guards in confidence-building and de-escalation.

For instance, participating ASEAN ships could rehearse a water cannoning incident, with a state vessel approaching another ship within precarious proximity. The radio operator would reenact communicating intent and requesting a safe distance. Meanwhile, the commanding officer would assess the nearing ship's trajectory and determine the appropriate navigational adjustments. Their decisions and conduct would then be assessed by ASEAN-EU external evaluators to identify areas for improvement and establish best practices to managing escalation risks at sea.

ASEAN has a direct concern in exploring the concept for potential integration into existing exercises among coast guards and maritime security partners in the region, including the EU. For one, DIPLOMEX could complement the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum's Southeast Asia Protocol of Engagement at Sea for Coast Guard and Maritime Law Enforcement (SEA-PEACE), as its practical application. With the 49th ASEAN Summit taking place in the Philippines in November 2026, the recommendation fits within the peace and security anchors, one of the gathering's three strategic priorities.

The EU already has an institutional pathway to support this initiative through the ASEAN-EU's strategic partnership that provides a foundation for maritime diplomacy. In 2027, both regions will commemorate 50 years of dialogue relations and formulate a new five-year Plan of Action, presenting an opportunity to broaden security cooperation at sea.

For the Philippines, the newly appointed PCG Commandant, Admiral Rommel Supangan, recently engaged with EU Ambassador to the Philippines Massimo Santoro to reaffirm their shared commitment to advancing maritime security and stability in the Indo-Pacific. The two officials highlighted areas for collaboration, such as information-sharing and capacity-building, towards a peaceful and rules-based maritime environment.

To augment the pilot implementation of DIPLOMEX, the EU could explore forming a designated team of specialists who will share perspectives to ASEAN commanding officers and radio operators manning state vessels that conduct routine patrols and other crucial coast guard missions in the South China Sea. Through the third phase of the Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific (CRIMARIO) programme until January 2028 with €11.2 million worth of overall budget, the proposal could also be augmented by a two-week intensive training at the European Security and Defence College situated in Brussels, Belgium, to foster multilateral engagement and expose ASEAN coast guards to European culture and context within the field of security, defence, and diplomacy.

The initiative could also involve a visit to the European External Action Service for an hour-long dialogue with EU diplomats on the challenges ASEAN commanding officers and radio operators have experienced firsthand during their deployments at sea. The capacity-building pursuit could end with a debriefing among participants and facilitators to determine learned approaches that could smoothly be integrated into existing regional maritime operations, as well as mechanisms that were deemed not applicable within the Asian context given the prevailing operational, political, and cultural settings.

There is precedent for treating communication as a security capability. Manila demonstrated this through the "Sea Angels," female radio operators who reassured anxious mariners through calm and disciplined communication amid piracy attacks in the Sulu and Celebes Seas. Demonstrating the potential of communication as a maritime security capability, the successful mission also applied the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda into the ASEAN maritime practice.

Coast guards are primarily responsible for escalation management, especially when routine interactions unintentionally trigger a broader friction that exposes frontline personnel to life-threatening risks. DIPLOMEX readies them for these time-critical situations by minimising the likelihood of hostile contacts that could make a shipping route "high-risk," increasing vessel insurance premiums, sea transport costs, and consumer goods prices.

DIPLOMEX could also reference insights from DiploMatrix, an analytical tool developed by Asia Centre. Commanding officers and radio operators could utilise DiploMatrix in preparation for the tabletop

exercise, specifically in determining patterns of common incidents that increase security and safety uncertainties at sea, such as unanswered or aggressive radio challenges, dangerous manoeuvres, and collision. Examining these circumstances as verbal or material expressions of tension would then shape the scenario-based simulations rehearsed through DIPLOMEX. Moreover, variations of the DiploMatrix index could also guide understanding of the wider strategic geopolitical and diplomatic environments in the South China Sea.

Ultimately, it is important to mention that some confrontations involve deliberate coercive actions that cannot be resolved solely through diplomatic communication. DIPLOMEX must not be evaluated whether or not it could settle sovereignty competitions. It aims to accomplish a simple, yet practicable objective: to enhance the capabilities of coast guards in upholding maritime safety by managing vessel conflicts within the limits of their authority. Every engagement requires diplomatic judgment, but not every contention warrants a formal protest. DIPLOMEX would allow frontline personnel to handle vulnerabilities and preserve evidence for subsequent government action, as the need arises. Commanding officers would remain responsible for reporting incidents, especially those involving violations of international law.

Expanding ASEAN-EU collaboration, through DIPLOMEX, would equip Southeast Asian coast guards before the next heightened interaction in the South China Sea. Commanding officers and radio operators shoulder immediate responsibility for managing standoffs and preventing further escalation, with DIPLOMEX strengthening their ability to exercise frontline maritime diplomacy to ensure future humanitarian missions are conducted peacefully without progressing into geopolitical crises.

Acronyms

ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CRIMARIO: Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific
CUES: Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea
DIPLOMEX: Diplomatic Communication Exercise
EU: European Union
PCG: Philippine Coast Guard
SEA-PEACE: Southeast Asia Protocol of Engagement at Sea for Coast Guard and Maritime Law Enforcement
WPS: Women, Peace and Security

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