



**FISHING IN DISPUTED WATERS:
Understanding the Impact of the South China Sea Conflict
Through the Lens of Filipino Fisherfolk**

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List of Acronyms

BFAR	Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources
DSWD	Department of Social Welfare and Development
LGU	Local Government Unit
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

Abstract

Much of the literature on the South China Sea conflict have focused on top down state-centric perspectives of the issue. This study shifts the focus to Filipino fisherfolk operating in the disputed waters who face a multitude of challenges. Utilizing qualitative research methods, it shows how they perceive both the conflict and Philippine government policy affecting their security and the ways in which they cope. Examined through the frames of Human Security and Everyday Politics the findings reveal their livelihoods and dignity have been significantly affected and that they have been pushed by the Government's policy into having to compromise on different elements of these. However, they have maintained their agency in throughout this and through acts of Everyday Politics seek ways to empower themselves and their fellows. The research also discusses how a bottom up approach adds nuance to the research by demonstrating how fisherfolk frame the conflict, brings up debates on Human Security vs State Security and finally, looks at the interplay between advocacy politics and Everyday Politics and whether they can potentially bring about lasting social or structural change.

Relevance to Development Studies

This research contributes to the literature around marginalized groups operating in conflict-affected areas. It does this by providing a bottom up perspective of the experiences of these individuals in the hotly contested Scarborough Shoal through the frames of Everyday Security and Everyday Politics. It aims not only add to the body of literature not just around the South China Sea dispute and its various stakeholders but to that focused on the rise of China as a whole and the ensuing regional and global tensions that this has sparked as part of the discussion on post-liberal order making.

Keywords

Policy; Conflict; Human Security; Everyday Politics, Philippines.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Fisherfolk operating in the South China Sea face a myriad of challenges with one of the most visible being the territorial disputes that currently affects the region. The conflict is an extremely contentious one geopolitically and involves numerous stakeholders and dynamics. Much of the literature on this topic has focused on its state-centric aspects such as international law and national defense. This study aims to view the issue from the perspective of the Filipino fisherfolk who since they operate on the frontlines of the conflict are among the most affected in terms of their livelihoods.

Utilizing the concepts of Human Security and Everyday Politics, it aims to examine how Filipino fisherfolk operating in the South China Sea navigate it in their everyday lives. The first is used to demonstrate how the fisherfolk perceive their security being threatened by the conflict and Philippine government policy around it while the second is used to view the everyday strategies they use to empower themselves. Policy in this context refers to the government's strategy and stances towards China as well as the ways it supports Filipino fishers. It looks to add to the dearth of literature around Filipino fisherfolk particularly focusing on their lived experiences as they operate in the disputed waters.

1.1 Background and Research Problem

Human Security is one of the most widely used frameworks used by the United Nations and other international institutions for understanding vulnerability of populations. First gaining prominence through the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 1994, it was inspired by the work of various authors notably Mahbub ul Haq (Acharya, 2001). Unlike previous models of security that were focused on the state, it is people centered. It encompasses a broad range of with its current iteration in the UN being centered around freedoms namely: freedom from want, freedom from fear and freedom from indignity (UNDP, 2022). Although it has been criticized at times for being vague and all-encompassing (Paris, 2001), scholars have argued that it nonetheless provides a useful framework as a holistic approach in understanding and addressing vulnerabilities (Gasper, 2010). Additionally, it can be enhanced by bottom up perspectives that contextualize its approach more (Den Boer and De Wilde, 2008).

Although the term has been defined in various ways, this study uses the Everyday Politics definition of Kerkvliet (2009) focused on how ordinary people indirectly challenge confront individuals, structures, or systems that disempower them. A number of scholars have done research on how it can create social and structural change as well as pave the way for more direct forms of political action (Yates, 2022).

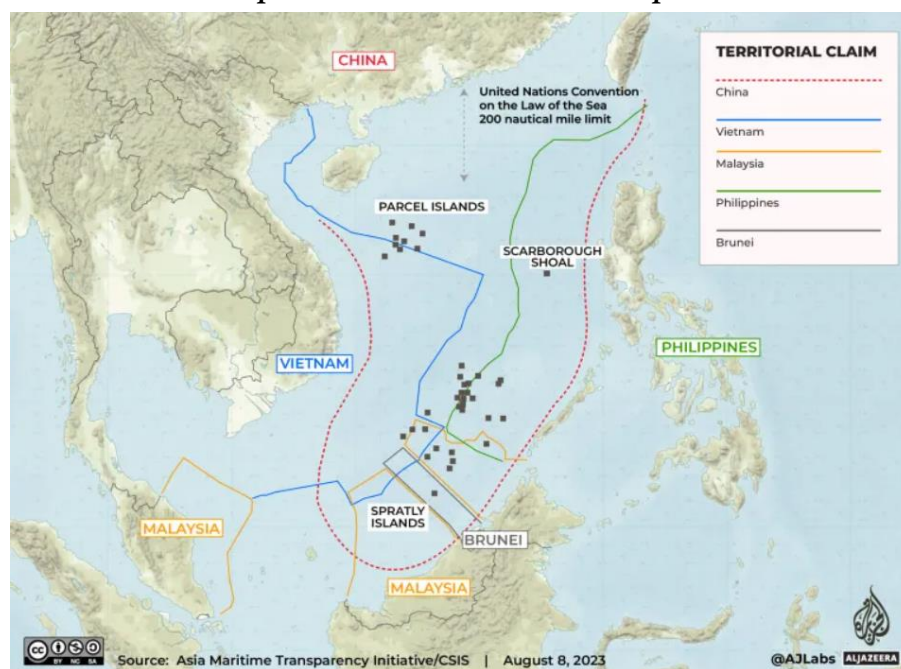
The South China Sea Territorial Dispute provides a useful context for understanding these frameworks through the experiences of vulnerable populations. It has featured marginalized groups who are caught in the middle of the geopolitical forces and must therefore find ways to adapt. The focus of this study is on a population affected by the territorial dispute between the Philippines and China.

The South China Sea has seen conflict ever since ships began plying its waters over 2000 years ago. An extremely resource-rich area, the sea contributes to over 12% of global fish catch and significant oil and natural gas reserves have also been discovered in the area. Additionally over 50% of global maritime trade passes through it with one study in 2016 finding estimated value of 3.5 trillion USD worth of trade that year (Tønnesson , 2021). The resurgence of China and building up of its military forces beginning in the 1980s and continuing until today means that it is once more a dominant player in the region potentially putting it on a collision course with its neighboring countries (consisting of Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Taiwan) and the United States which remains the main Western power in the region with the exit of the other European countries in the 20th century (Ibid).

Being first a Spanish colony from the 1500s until the late 19th century and a US colony from that period until the end of the Second World War, the Philippines as a nation did not emerge as a player on the scene until the mid-20th century (Rosen, 2014). Roughly a decade after its independence from the United States, the Philippines laid claim to parts of the Spratly Islands parts of which were also claimed by other countries including China (Ibid).

After a number of incidents in the 1990s, tensions began to escalate once more in the 2010s which saw more confrontations between the navies and coast guards of both countries; a state of affairs that continues to this day. Additionally, the Philippines remains an ally of the United States and the latter has a presence in several military bases in the country potentially amplifying geopolitical tensions in the region.

Map 1: The South China Sea Dispute



Source: Al Jazeera (2023)

The dispute between China and the Philippines is focused on two main areas (as illustrated in the image above). The first is the aforementioned Spratly Islands which are to the west of the Philippine Island of Palawan. Besides their strategic location, the islands are seen to potentially hold oil and natural gas reserves. The islands contain the Philippine municipality of Kalayaan which has a civilian population of around 250 people (Municipality of Kalayaan, n.d.) as well as a Philippine navy vessel the *BRP Sierra Madre* that has been run

aground and used to place territorial claims (Himmelman, 2013). The second area is the Scarborough Shoal to the North which is around 200km away from the Philippines' largest island Luzon which will be the focus of this study.

In 2009, China submitted a map of the South China Sea to the UN Secretary General which included a 9-dash line encompassing over 80% of the South China Sea (in 2023 a new map was shown including a further dash that encompassed Taiwan), rather ambiguously claiming these areas as part of its territory (Bhat, 2024). The move was protested by Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines as in the case of the latter the dashes included both the Spratlys and the Scarborough Shoal. The legitimacy of the 9-dash line was one of the main issues brought up during the arbitration case of the Philippines which will be discussed later. Since 2012 the Philippine government has been using the term "West Philippine Sea" to describe the waters West of the country within its Exclusive Economic Zone (De Castro 2024).

Although there are multiple stakeholders in the conflict within Philippine society including those in tourism, energy defense frontliners and local governments among others, the focus of this study will be on one of the most vulnerable groups: Philippine fisherfolk. As an island nation, seafood is an important part of the Filipino diet contributing approximately 50% of families' protein sources. The fisheries sector also contributes approximately 1.3% to Philippine GDP and employs about 4% of the country's labor force (World Bank, 2023). Because it contributes roughly 20% to commercial fisheries production every year, the West Philippine Sea is an extremely important fishing source (Arceo et al., 2020). Fisherfolk thus play a crucial role in both feeding the population and contributing to the economy. They are also among the poorest members of Philippine society (next to farmers) with average earnings which places them below the poverty line (Gietzen et al., 2022).

Although the Philippine government and various media outlets have focused on Filipino fisherfolk portraying them as hapless individuals caught up in the conflict, a more nuanced understanding of their experiences and the ways in which they exercise their agency within the limitations of their situation is necessitated. In light of this, Human Security and Everyday politics are useful tools to frame this perspective. Because of its closer proximity and thus ease of access for research, this study focuses on the fisherfolk operating at Scarborough Shoal.

1.2 Research Questions and Sub-Questions

In light of the above the research questions of this paper are the following:

I. Main Research Question

How do Filipino fisherfolk navigate the interplay between Philippine government policy and the South China Sea conflict in their everyday life?

Under this are the following sub-questions:

1. How do Filipino fisherfolk perceive the conflict and Philippine government policy affecting their security?
2. What everyday strategies do Filipino fisherfolk use to empower themselves to deal with the insecurities they face?

1.3 Structure of the Paper

Chapter 2 is focused on related studies as well as the theoretical and conceptual framework (everyday security and everyday politics) that this paper uses. Chapter 3 is dedicated to the context of the study namely the background of the conflict, major triggering events in it as well as the objects of the case who are the fisherfolk who operate in the area. Chapter 4 discusses the methodologies used for data gathering and analysis. Chapter 5 presents the findings and analysis of the fieldwork in the form of themes. Chapter 6 is focused on a discussion and synthesis of the themes developed for Chapter 5 situating them in the context of existing literature and the concluding remarks on the study.

Chapter 2

Literature Review and Frameworks

2.1 Empirical Review: Fisherfolk and the State in The South China Sea Conflict

While much research on the South China Sea conflict has focused on its legal, military and issues, less focus has been given to the agency and sentiments of the fisherfolk themselves. Given the tense geopolitical dynamics surrounding the locations, their plight has often been used by the media and their own governments to further national causes (Heydarian, R. J. 2018; GT Staff reporters, 2023). However, as research has shown, the situation is more complex.

Fabinyi (2020) discusses how both the Chinese and the Philippine governments have utilized their fisherfolk in the conflict to support claims. In the case of China, they are well provided with subsidies and technical resources. This includes basic military training and has led to the creation of fishing militias. Their expansion in the area has also received public political support with President Xi Jinping visiting some of the fishers in the past and encouraging them to continue their activities in the South China Sea. The Philippines because of the power disparities between the two utilizes them differently primarily by evoking sympathy from the public regarding their plight. This was the case for both the Aquino and Duterte Administrations (which will be discussed in the following chapter) who both made the loss of access to Scarborough Shoal a main point in their messaging for different strategies towards China.

However, authors disagree to what extent the fisherfolk themselves share in nationalist sentiments. For example, Roszko (2015) argues that there are strong drivers in Vietnam and China that make fisherfolk there express nationalist sentiments where “...customary fishing practices in the SCS have been increasingly used by China and Vietnam as a technology of mapping and counter mapmaking to formulate legal arguments *for maritime territorialisation* – the inclusion of the sea and its resources into state territory” (p. 245). Fisherfolk thus consequently connect traditional fishing grounds that their ancestors had used with the country’s territorial sovereignty and see themselves as representatives of the nation. There are incentives for them too. In her book *Fishers, monks and cadres : navigating state, religion and the South China Sea in central Vietnam* (2020), she gives an example where in Lý So’n island near the coast of central Vietnam residents represented their island as central in Vietnam’s territory containing part of the disputed Spratlys and Paracel Island chain (China has also laid claim to them). When the Vietnamese government used a cultural project to tie sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly islands to the nation’s historical identity this came a chance for as residents of the island to gain recognition and prestige through tracing their ancestors on the island who had engaged in patriotic service in the past. If one’s ancestors fell into this category, it gained them state recognition and funds to restore traditional sites as tourist attractions.

Zhang (2016) studying Chinese fisherfolk in Tanmen is of a different opinion. While admitting that the Chinese government has built up its fishing fleet seeing it as essential to sea power, he recognizes the agency of the fisherfolk themselves and the nuances with which they perceive the conflict. He discusses the complicated relationship fishers have with the Chinese Navy saying that before 2000 they were actually the ones most feared and how they used to board their fishing vessels and confiscate their catch. In contrast, the fisherfolk revealed that they are friendly with the fisherfolk from Vietnam and the Philippines

(regularly exchanging personal goods with them and helping each other in accidents at sea) with this friendliness extending to foreign navies as well. Contrary to the fishing militia narrative of armed and militarized fisherfolk, those interviewed at Tanmen stated that they would not enlist in the navy if war were to break out saying that there was no need because of the disparity in military strength but also because they held no animosity towards the Vietnamese or Filipinos.

Similarly, in their study on fisherfolk from Hainan, Liu et al (2024) show that the state does not completely control fisherfolk and the interests of the two do not always align. They discuss how the latter are also identify with the fisherfolk of Vietnam and the Philippines and are sympathetic to the difficulties they face. When practicing cross border fishing that avoids maritime patrols, they in fact employ fisherfolk of other nations meeting at pre-designated locations to collect and pay for the catch forming patron client relationships of a sort. They also do this occasionally with military officials from other nations who in exchange for goods allow them to fish in disputed areas. These relationships are not always stable and are sometimes disrupted by geopolitical events, but they demonstrate the independence of fisherfolk from the interests of their governments.

This study thus adds to this literature in the context of Filipino fisherfolk in terms of how their interactions also shape their views of the conflict.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The two frameworks used for this study are everyday human security and everyday politics. The former is used to identify the lived experiences of security in the life of the fisherfolk while the latter seeks to examine the ways in which they exercise their agency and deal with in their everyday lives. These frameworks were chosen in the context of the Filipino fisherfolk as they were seen to capture the way they experienced the South China Sea conflict as well as their responses to it.

2.2.1 Human Security

The key concept that will be used to frame the experiences of fisherfolk regarding the conflict and Philippine government policy will be human security. It is broadly defined by the United Nations as “an approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people” (United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, n.d. b). The term was first brought to fore in 1994 by the UNDP in its Human Development Report to create a concept that better encompassed the threats faced by vulnerable people and groups. For the report, characteristics of Human Security were highlighted namely that it was universal, people-centered, interdependent and early prevention. In addition, identified seven elements of security were economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political (United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, n.d. a). This definition has since evolved to include freedom from fear, freedom from want and freedom from indignity (UNDP, 2022).

In a comprehensive discussion on the topic, Gilder (2022) talks about how human security grew out of the initial concept of national security wherein the state was seen as the source of order within its borders to protect against internal and external threats. Additionally, it was a provider as seen in its role and conception as the welfare state and its provision of social security. However, after the Second World War, the belief in the centrality of the state in the discussion on security was increasingly criticized as it had been shown that that entity itself could be a danger to the safety and wellbeing of both communities and individuals. Out of this came the discussion on and development of human rights and humanitarian

law. “The second half of the 20th century saw the referent object of security shifted from the state to the individual” (Gilder, 2022, p. 45). Boer and de Wilde (2008) for example discuss how this more “bottom-up approach” necessitates the human security perspective when talking about peacekeeping, enforcement and peacebuilding. There are debates on this issue however, Acharya (2001), for example discusses how the concept had difficulty taking root in an Asian context because it clashes with the dominant statist-based notion of “Comprehensive Security” and begs the question “If the values of the person conflict with the values of the state, which prevail? And who defines what the values of the community are?” (p. 454). This discussion becomes particularly relevant in the context of the South China Sea conflict when discussing the the actual role and contribution of the Philippine state in the provision of security to fisherfolk.

Gilder (2022) goes on to note another important distinction that may be made is between narrow and broad definitions of human security. The former discusses the concept as purely related to the threat of physical violence such as in areas of armed conflict or organized crime. What is naturally excluded from this definition are other sources of potential damage to human life that have nothing to do with violence. These often stress the underlying structural root causes of conflict and focus on the reduction of vulnerabilities and argue that a narrow definition of security is not needed, and a more flexible definition is needed. Proponents of each perspective therefore would debate whether armed conflict and its accompanying rhetoric should still be the main focus of the discussion on security (Ibid).

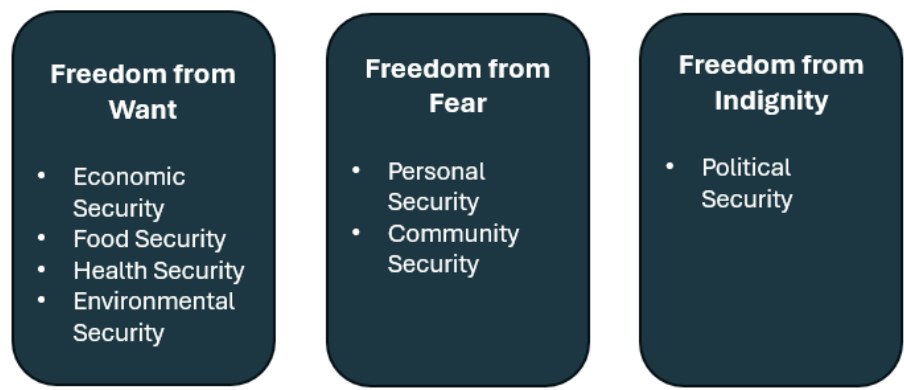
The discussion on human security has also been linked to the topic of vulnerability. Although originally studied as part of the focus on disaster risk reduction (albeit from a purely hazard-focused standpoint), the term has expanded into other disciplines such as economics and environmental change as its reduction was linked to the improvement of human wellbeing (Sumner and Mallet, 2013). The two have been connected as “human security can be conceived as the capacity to overcome vulnerability—but also as opposite ends of a common continuum” (Ibid. p, 677). In the context of vulnerability to environmental change for example, O’Brien and Barnett (2013) discuss how a human security approach is connected with individuals’ and groups’ potential for tackling the systems and structures that are at the root of this vulnerability like drivers of environmental degradation and for the contributors to social vulnerability, human rights issues and lack of voice and access to resources.

However, in application, Human Security still produces many top-down approaches with an emphasis on the state and larger institutions (Den Boer and De Wilde, 2008). In light of this, there have been calls to focus even further on studying Human security from the bottom up particularly through the lens of everyday life and how it is actually experienced by people (Ajil, et al, 2020). Crawford, A. and Hutchinson, S. (2016) for example, discuss the concept of “everyday security” in which involves the understanding of and actions (particularly mundane ones) by individuals and groups around security. They discuss how it is at the intersection of time (when it occurs), space (the places it occurs in) and emotion (the feelings like fear, anxiety etc. it brings up). Building on this, Nyman (2021) gives three dimensions for the everyday where she situates security namely “mundane spaces (the spatial everyday), routine practices (the temporal everyday), and lived experiences (the affective everyday)” (p. 317).

This study’s usage of Human Security will thus encompass a broad definition of the term and while it utilizes the economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political components as defined by the UNDP, (United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, n.d. a) these will be examined through perspectives of the fisherfolk also taking into account their lived experiences and emotions as they attempt to navigate a situation that has greatly affected their livelihoods. The diagram below (although admittedly imperfect as there

are overlaps in reality between categories) adapted from the UN model provides a guide how the concept is utilized in this study.

Figure 1: Human Security



Freedom from want:	“conditions that allow for protection of basic needs, quality of life, livelihoods and enhanced human welfare.” (UNDP, 2022, p. 35)
Freedom from fear:	“conditions that allow individuals and groups protection from direct threats to their safety and physical integrity, including various forms of direct and indirect violence, intended or not.” (UNDP, 2022, pp. 35-36)
Freedom from indignity (human dignity):	“conditions where individuals and groups are assured of the protection of their fundamental rights and allowed to make choices and take advantage of opportunities in their everyday lives.” (UNDP, 2022, p. 36)

Adapted from UNDP (2022)

2.2.2 Everyday Politics

Everyday politics is a term used to describe political action in the context of the everyday or everyday life (Yates 2022). It has been utilized in different contexts including actions of individuals making decisions about their lifestyles in Western countries (de Moor, 2017), the dynamics of actors around crisis response (Hilhorst, 2013) and urban poor encroaching on the spaces of the powerful as well as the public (Bayat, 2010).

The definition utilized by Tria Kerkvliet (2009) which describes everyday politics as involving “...people embracing, complying with, adjusting to, or contesting norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources. and doing so in quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that are rarely organized or direct” (p. 232) stands out as particularly applicable to the context of this study. This are based on his research in the village of San Ricardo in the Philippines from the 1970s to 1990s when the country was under Martial Law where despite the repressive environment everyday life featured talk of

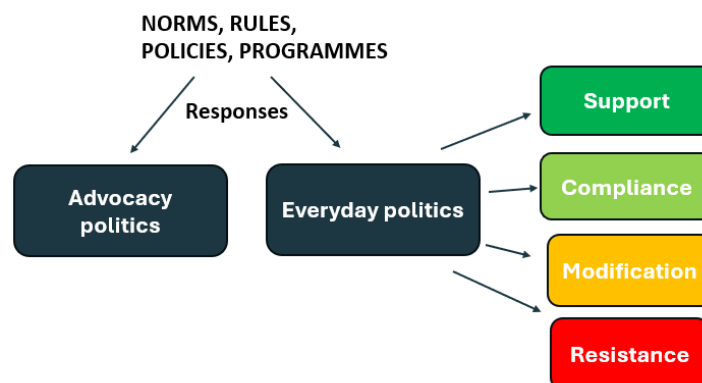
political issues influencing more overt political action as well as his experiences in Vietnam in the 1950s to 1980s when similarly non-overt political action made the government cease collective farming and allow family farming instead.

Kerkvliet (2009) further breaks down the forms everyday politics takes under the following: 1) Resistance, 2) Modifications and evasions, 3) Compliance and 4) Support. Resistance which is the most studied of these forms by researchers like Scott (1985) and Adas (1986) involves how people show their dislike, disagreement or opposition to claims made on them by those in power. It may precede advocacy politics which is more confrontational in nature. Everyday modifications and evasion on the other hand refers to actions in between resistance and outright compliance and support. They refer to actions that “convey indifference to the rules and processes” (p. 237) often associated with cutting corners. They differ from resistance in terms of their lack of intentionality. On the other end of the spectrum are actions demonstrating support and compliance. The former involves supporting the system deliberately while the latter can be defined as indifferently going through the motions in a way that supports political systems. An example of these very much prevalent in the Philippines is the patron-client network that is often formed between those in power and those who depend on them which reinforces existing systems and dynamics

He contrasts everyday politics with other types notably official politics and advocacy politics (although he recognizes that the lines between them may blur on occasion). The former refers to those where people have authoritative positions (it happens in governments, states, universities, churches etc) within the public and private sphere. The latter refers to “direct and concerted efforts to support, criticise, and oppose authorities, their policies and programs, or the entire way in which resources are produced and distributed within an organisation or a system of organisations” (Triet Kerkvliet 2009, p.232). In contrast, to these, everyday politics everyday politics is seldom organized, is more low profile and those practicing it may not even know they are doing so.

The concept of everyday life and everyday politics in particular is thus a useful frame when discussing how fisherfolk seek to empower themselves in light of the insecurities they experience through the conflict. Although they are not as repressed as the cases in Kerkvliet’s earlier studies their relatively low socioeconomic status within Philippine society means that their capacity for overt political action and participation on a scale that could significantly affect national policy, or geopolitical outcomes may be limited and an everyday lens adds nuance to the official and advocacy politics being practiced. While also discussing the advocacy politics the fisherfolk engage in, the research utilized Kerkvliet’s framework to view the practice of everyday politics and the part it plays as well.

Figure 2: Everyday Politics

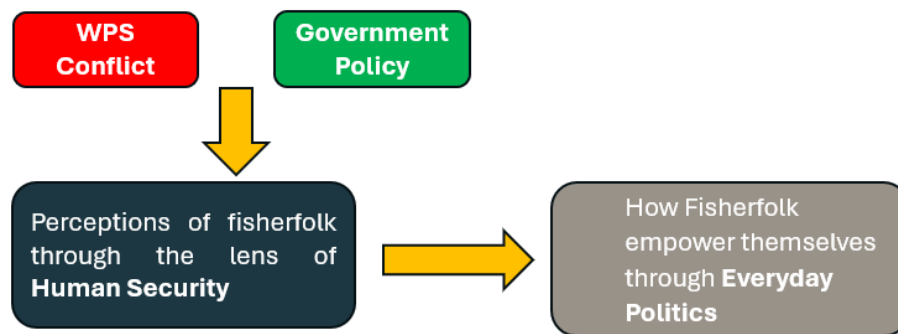


Adapted from Kerkvliet (2009)

2.3 Conceptual Framework

The two frameworks are thus combined in this study. Human security is used to frame how Filipino fisherfolk perceive their security being affected by the by the conflict and their government's actions within it while Everyday politics seeks to examine the less direct and more subtle ways in which they exercise their agency and seek to empower themselves in light of these insecurities.

Figure 3: Conceptual Framework



Chapter 3

Context and Case

3.1 Context: The West Philippine Sea Conflict: Triggering Events

The case of the fisherfolk operating in the Scarborough Shoal cannot be talked about without discussing the West Philippine Sea conflict between the Philippines and China. All of the following topics were drawn from the interviews with the fisherfolk as they viewed them as pivotal to the current issues plaguing them.

First is the Philippine national Government policy with regards to the conflict. Each of the administrations has employed different approaches reflecting changes in their stances in their relationship with China. The change in relationships between the two nations has coincided with how Filipino fisherfolk operating in the disputed waters have been treated by the Chinese navy and coast guard as well as how their own government has framed their grievances and supported or not supported them accordingly. The administration of Benigno Aquino III has been chosen as a starting point as the fisherfolk interviewed traced the current tensions to events during his term. Second is the 2012 Scarborough standoff during which tensions between the two countries reached a high. Most of the fisherfolk interviewed identified this occurrence as the primary starting point in the conflict and its effect on their lives and livelihoods. Connected with this was the Philippines' arbitration case against China in the PCA which established the dispute on the international scene. Some of the fisherfolk were those whose testimonies had been used and they were all familiar with the case and the Philippines' legal victory. Finally, in the context of fisherfolk interviewed, the *Atin Ito* resupply mission must also be discussed as many of them actually took part in it and in the opinions of some it is behind the latest tensions in the area and now total lack of access to the Shoal. It must also be noted that the author was connected to the fisherfolk through Akbayan which is the political party behind the initiative.

3.1.1 Recent Philippine National Government Policy Per Administration

Under President Benigno Aquino III who was elected in 2010 (the year before tensions resumed in the disputed area) and served until 2016, the country adapted a more confrontational approach towards China (De Castro, 2024). Aquino's administration began building up the Philippine navy, focusing on defense of national territory. Additionally, it began focusing on building closer ties with the other great power in the region the United States as well as with Japan. One key move in 2014 was allowing US troops to be rotated to the Philippines for extended periods in the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). The more aggressive political stance also saw the occurrence of the 2012 standoff at Scarborough Shoal. It was also during Aquino's term that the Philippines began referring to the area as the "West Philippine Sea" which was also picked up by the United States. Finally, the country also filed an arbitration case against China with the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in the Hague in 2013 contending that China's 9-dash line was invalid under the terms of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) of 1982 which is the current agreement establishing a legal framework for marine and maritime activities (Ibid).

Aquino's successor Rodrigo Roa Duterte adapted a different strategy. His administration once more began to pivot towards China using a strategy of appeasement. This was to allow the Philippines to establish closer economic ties with the country and potentially reap the benefits especially in light of its Belt Road Initiative (De Castro, 2024). This was despite the result of the arbitration from The Hague ruling in the Philippines' favor in 2016 (a resolution that was not recognized by China anyway). Under Duterte, the Philippines declined to pursue the ruling further and sought favorable economic and trade concessions with China as part of its infrastructure development "Build, Build Build" program. It was also during this period that he was able to negotiate for access to Scarborough Shoal for fisherfolk (Fabin, 2020). Towards the end of his term, determining that China had not delivered on agreed-upon direct investments and loans to the Philippines and had continued the buildup of its naval forces in Philippine as well as seeing that public opinion in the country had begun to turn against China, Duterte's administration began to take a more hardline approach towards Beijing (De Castro, 2024).

The current Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos Jr. who was elected on 2022 has returned to a more confrontational stance towards China although he has still attempted to further develop economic ties with the country. An example of the latter approach is the country joining the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) history's largest trading bloc that includes China and 13 other nations of which the United States is not a part (Philippine Star, 2023). The Philippines, however, has once again pivoted towards the United States militarily to protect its national interests in the South China Sea. Among the things this has resulted in include hosting US troops in new EDCA sites and participating in military exercises with both the United States and Australia (De Castro, 2024). Renewed confrontations between Chinese and Philippine vessels have occurred during Marcos' administration up until the present day.

The Philippines is also part of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a union of states belonging to that region whose fisherfolk also operate in the disputed areas. De Castro (2020) discusses how administrations have used this body as a tool for their foreign policy with different approaches. Aquino attempted to strengthen the Philippine claims to disputed areas but was vetoed making him to turn other measures particularly strengthening its relationship with the United States and the filing of its case with the PCA. Duterte on the other hand used the ASEAN as a means of strengthening ties with China by avoiding rhetoric on its expansion and the PCA ruling.

3.1.2 The 2012 Scarborough Standoff

In 2012, one of the most serious confrontations yet between the two nations occurred. De Castro (2014) recounts the events as follows: In April 2012, the Philippine navy vessel *BRP Gregorio Del Pilar* was deployed to Scarborough Shoal in response to the sighting of the eight Chinese fishing vessels that had been sighted by Philippine reconnaissance aircraft. This was in response to President Aquino ordering the military to enforce the country's territorial rights. A boarding party from the Philippine ship allegedly found large amount of illegally collected catch which included corals, giant clams and live sharks. After confiscating these as well as fishing gear that included dynamite sticks and cyanide, the vessel then attempted to arrest the Chinese attempted to apprehend some of the fishing vessels on charges of illegal entry, illegal fishing and violating the International Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. The arrests however were prevented by the arrival of two Chinese marine surveillance vessels which went in between the *BRP Gregorio Del Pilar* and the fishing boats and informed the former that they were in Chinese territorial waters. To defuse tensions, the Philippines eventually withdrew its naval vessel and replaced it with a smaller coast guard ship. China responded by deploying the

Yuzheng-310 an advanced fishery patrol vessel to complement its two other ships in the area (Ibid).

Figure 4: The *BRP Gregorio Del Pilar*



Source: Philippine Navy (2016)

The incident resulted in exchanges between the embassies of both countries with the Philippines criticizing China's actions as aggressive and insisting that the case be brought before an international tribunal and China maintaining that the shoal was within Chinese territory and applying political and economic pressure (De Castro, 2014). During this period, the number of vessels in the shoal increased with four Chinese surveillance ships and ten fishing boats facing one Philippine coast guard ship and a vessel of the Fisheries Bureau. It was only two months later that all ships left the area at the onset of the typhoon season (Southgate, 2019). Afterwards however, a floating chain barrier was constructed by blocking the entrance of the shoal although according to fisherfolk interviewed, this was later destroyed in a storm.

The confrontation garnered strong public support in the Philippines with both majority of legislators and the public standing behind the Aquino Administration. Some of the manifestations were in rallies and demonstrations at the Chinese embassy in the Philippines. Even factions opposed to some of the government's policies including the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) and the Communist Party of the Philippines supported the Administration's stance on defending national territory (De Castro, 2014). Former Chinese ambassador to the Philippines Fu Ying (2023) discusses how in China the incident resulted in public outrage and the recent more aggressive behavior from the Philippines was seen as influenced by the increased presence and influence of the United States in the region.

3.1.3 The Arbitration Case

In 2012, the Philippines filed a case against China at the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague. The Court is one of the bodies authorized by UNCLOS to resolve cases brought before the court. The case was a maritime rather than territorial dispute and focused on how UNCLOS would be interpreted or applied (Carpio, 2017).

Figure 5: PCA Case Hearing in Session



Source: Permanent Court of Arbitration (2016)

An issue raised by the Philippine side during the arbitration which is of particular note to this study was on the rights of artisanal fishing within the Scarborough Shoal. Submission 10 by the Philippine side stated the following: “China has unlawfully prevented Philippine fishermen from pursuing their livelihoods by interfering with traditional fishing activities at Scarborough Shoal” (Republic of the Philippines v People’s Republic of China: Memorial of the Philippines Volume I’ 2014, p. 272). This was stated independently of the dispute regarding the nature of the shoal as a rock or island and the 12-nautical mile radius that the feature generates in terms of territorial sea. In fact as mentioned above, the Philippine case explicitly stated that the radius was recognized as not being part of either nation’s EEZ (Ibid).

The Philippine side mentioned that given the richness of waters surrounding it, the shoal is a traditional fishing ground for fisherfolk from the Philippines, China, Vietnam and Taiwan (Award, 2016). In the case of the Philippines this has been the case since the Spanish colonial era. The continued operations of Philippines fisherfolk in the area was confirmed by six fisherfolk interviewed for the case (Ibid). They noted that since April and May of 2012, the Chinese Coast Guard had prevented them from fishing in the area and noted the use of water cannons, sound blare as well as the carrying of guns by those who had approached their vessels. They also discussed how they this had affected their livelihoods and made its continuation uncertain citing a decrease in incomes with some fishers having retired. The Philippine submission talked about how despite making claims about the shoal being part of territorial sea declared by China in 1958 (China considers part of the Zhongsha Islands), nothing had been done in the past to disrupt the fishing activities of Filipinos in the area and they were only expelled in May 2012 and this change in policy was viewed as a “threat to justice” (Republic of the Philippines v People’s Republic of China: Memorial of the Philippines Volume I’ 2014, p. 173).

China did not respond directly to the Philippines’ Submission as it did not recognize the case. Thus, statements made by the Chinese Embassy in the Philippines and its own account the 2012 standoff were used to make clear its position (Award, 2019). It stated that the Shoal has been part of Chinese traditional fishing grounds since ancient times and cited “official documents, “local chronicles and official maps” as the basis. The 2012 incident was seen as the Philippine Navy violating Chinese territorial sovereignty and the human rights of the fishers apprehended (Ibid). It cited that it had attempted to resolve the dispute through diplomatic consultation but that Philippine actions escalated the tensions and damaged relations

between the two countries. Additionally, there was no explicit mention made of Filipino fisherfolk (Ibid).

The arbitration upheld the Philippine position on Submission 10 finding “that China has, through the operation of its official vessels at Scarborough Shoal from May 2012 onwards, unlawfully prevented Filipino fishermen from engaging in traditional fishing at Scarborough Shoal” (Award, 2016, p. 318).

3.1.4 Atin Ito Initiative

Figure 6: *Atin Ito* Coalition fishing vessels



Source: Akbayan Party (2024)

In 2023, a civilian-led initiative was launched that ventured into the disputed waters. The name of the initiative “*Atin Ito*” which translates to “This/It is ours” coincided with its stated objective of the mission which was to assert the right to freedom of navigation by Filipinos within the West Philippine Sea including around the disputed areas (David, 2024). The initiative was led by the Akbayan Citizen’s Action Party (Akbayan) a democratic socialist and 12 progressive political party which often caters to marginalized groups including fisherfolk and farmers. The mission was the first of its kind to be led by non-government and civil society entities as the resupply missions are usually carried out by the Philippine Navy, the Philippine Coast Guard and the BFAR. Additionally, foreign nationals from Pakistan Sri Lanka and Sweden were present as part of the mission (Ibid).

There have been 2 resupply missions done by the coalition so far. The first was in December 2023 was focused on the area around the Spratly Islands at Second Thomas Shoal where the grounded *BRP Sierra Madre* was located. The plan was to deliver supplies and Christmas gifts to the garrison stationed on board the ship. The Philippine National Security Council (NSC) initially rejected the plan saying there were potential security risks would unnecessarily stir up tensions with China. However, it eventually relented on the condition that the coalition’s vessels would not actually reach the grounded vessel but rather just stay in the surrounding area (Mangosing, F. (2023). The coalition’s vessels (roughly 40 in number) departed from San Fernando Port in the municipality of El Nido on the morning of December 10, 2023, escorted by a Philippine coast guard vessel. The convoy’s main vessel the *Kapitan Felix Ora* was surrounded by four Chinese warships including a guided missile destroyer and was ultimately forced to turn back. However, a single vessel managed to slip through and

resupply Philippine soldiers in an outpost in Lawak island in the Spratlys (Subingsubing, (2024).

The second phase of the resupply mission was focused on the Scarborough Shoal. Although the main mission was on May 15, an advance vessel was sent on the 14th with the hope that it could slip through the expected Chinese blockade of the shoal. This was successful and it managed to reach Filipino fisherfolk in the vicinity of the Shoal and distribute 1000 liters of fuel and 200 food packs (Punongbayan, 2024). The rest of the convoy was prevented from reaching the Shoal by Chinese Coast guard and navy vessels around 15 nautical miles from the Shoal but symbolic buoys and markers were dropped and members of the coalition on boats swam and fished in the nearby waters. The missions were hailed as a victory both by the coalition and Philippine media (Ibid).

Chinese media outlets responded to the mission calling it a provocation that was attempting to elicit a response and cast them in a bad light. Making no mention of the arbitration case, they continued to cite China's ownership of the islands, and the shoal based on the same territorial maps they cited. It was also portrayed as part of the US' containment strategy on China where the Philippines is being used by the former as a proxy to confront the latter (China Daily, 2024). In the context of the Shoal itself, a fishing ban started in May 15 was extended and on June 15 a no trespassing rule was established that as per the interviewees continues to the present with Chinese vessels driving off any Filipino fisherfolk getting closer than 20 nautical miles from the Shoal.

3.2 Case: Filipino Fisherfolk in the Scarborough Shoal

3.2.1 Fisherfolk Profile

The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) makes the distinction between municipal and commercial fisherfolk. Commercial fisherfolk are defined as those operating vessels with tonnage of 3 gross tonnes (GT) and above. Within this range however commercial vessels are also divided into small scale (up to 20 GT), medium scale (up to 150 GT) and large scale (over 150 GT). Their range is limited to 15km and beyond from the shoreline. Municipal fisherfolk on the other hand operate closer to shore mostly with smaller vessels (BFAR, 2023). Due to the distance of most of the disputed territories from the Philippines' larger islands it is commercial fishing vessels that are involved in the confrontations discussed.

The dispute has made fishing in the Shoal a riskier proposition for fisherfolk in the region. Fisherfolk have faced harassment from the Chinese military and fishing militias. These include instances where they have been fired upon, driven off and collisions (some say intentional) between vessels have also occurred. The violence isn't one-sided as there have also been reports of Filipino fishers firebombing and ramming Chinese vessels (Baviera, 2016). Yearly fishing bans imposed by both countries supposedly for the purposes of environmental conservation have also been politicized with the Philippines refusing to recognize China's ban and encouraging fisherfolk to continue operating in spite of it (Reuters, 2021).

3.2.2 Operating in Scarborough Shoal

Named after a British tea carrying ship that was wrecked in the area in 1748 (Bonnet 2012), Scarborough Shoal is located approximately 124 nautical miles (222km) (sources slightly differ on the distance) West of the largest Philippine Luzon. It is known to locals as *Bajo de Masinloc* and Panatag Shoal in the Philippines and Huangyan Island in China and

consists of two islets and a lagoon covering an area of approximately 150 square km. It is also the largest atoll in the South China Sea with access to the lagoon is through a channel approximately 370m wide (Keyuan, 1999). The highest feature South rock extends approximately 1.8m above the surface of the water at high tide (Ibid).

It is a rich fishing ground with various species of fish and other marine life present there included groupers, snappers, yellowspotted trevally and shellfish like lobsters. The shoal has served as a traditional fishing ground for Filipino, Chinese and Vietnamese fisherfolk. Aside from the plentiful marine life available, the area also serves as a source of shelter for fisherfolk from storms as it protects fisherfolk in the vicinity from strong waves which break on it that could potentially damage or destroy their vessels with many fisherfolk interviewed describing its core importance in this regard.

Figure 7: Scarborough Shoal



Source: CSIS/AMTI and Digital Globe, 2015

When making the voyage to Scarborough Shoal, larger vessels (called “mother boats” must be utilized as the trip may take around 12 hours (as per the interviewees for this study). On board these boats are smaller vessels called “series” that are attached to the outriggers of the larger boats. Once the mother boats have reached the shoal, the smaller boats disperse and fish separately. Profits among the crew are split based on the catch although practices vary per operator. Due to their higher price (Php 850,000 to Php 1 million according to Mother Boat Captain 2), these larger boats may be owned by wealthy businesspeople or individuals with the capital to acquire them. Some wealthier individuals may have multiple mother boats. An interview with the captain of a mother boat (Mother Boat Captain 3) describes operations at the shoal. Fishing takes place at 4 to 8 in the morning and from 3 in the afternoon to 8 in the evening. He also described a typical arrangement in a mother boat with 6 series where the payment is split into portions based on the catch. In his example there are 15 portions. Those operating a series get $\frac{1}{2}$ portions each while the other 12 portions are allocated to the crew of the mother boat.

Figure 8: Mother boat undergoing repairs

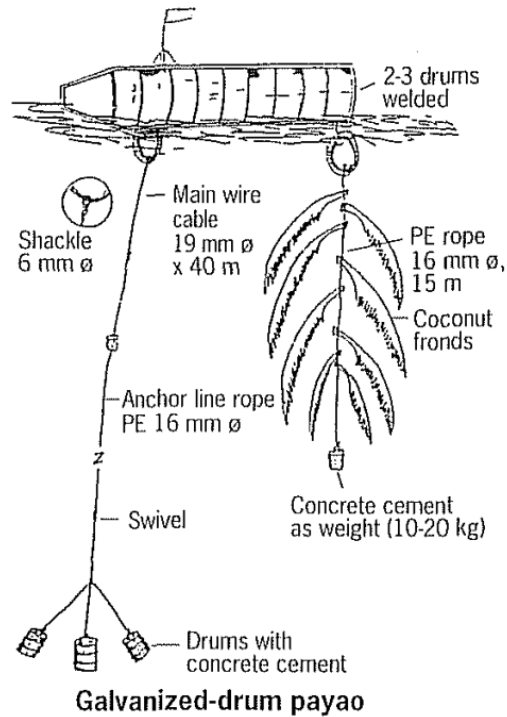


Source: Author's own photograph (2024)

There are several different methods utilized by Filipino fisherfolk operating in the West Philippine Sea. A prominent one is the *payao*. This is a traditional fish-aggregating device. It consists of a floating raft (traditionally constructed with bamboo) which is anchored to the seafloor. Beneath this are palm fronds which serve to attract fish which congregate around the device. The fish harvested are usually free-schooling tuna and pelagics like mackerel, sardines etc (Dickson and Natividad, 2001). This is often done using nets. Because of their weight and the difficulty this entails when deploying them (especially the weight of the drums as seen in the image below), *payaos* can only be deployed from larger vessels. According to fisherfolk interviewed, they are also expensive with prices for those used in the area around Masinloc being reportedly in the area of 100,000 Philippine pesos or over 2,000 US Dollars limiting the ability of individual fisherfolk or even smaller fisher groups to purchase them.

Once a *payao* is installed, the large number of fish it draws also attracts fisherfolk in smaller boats who operate around it. The BFAR has used them these in municipal waters reportedly to cope with the effects of the fishing bans imposed by China (Baviera, 2016). When they are deployed however, they can be vulnerable to theft and destruction and there have been reported instances of Chinese vessels allegedly removing *payao* deployed by the BFAR as well as Vietnamese fishers reportedly stealing catch from them (Carias, 2024).

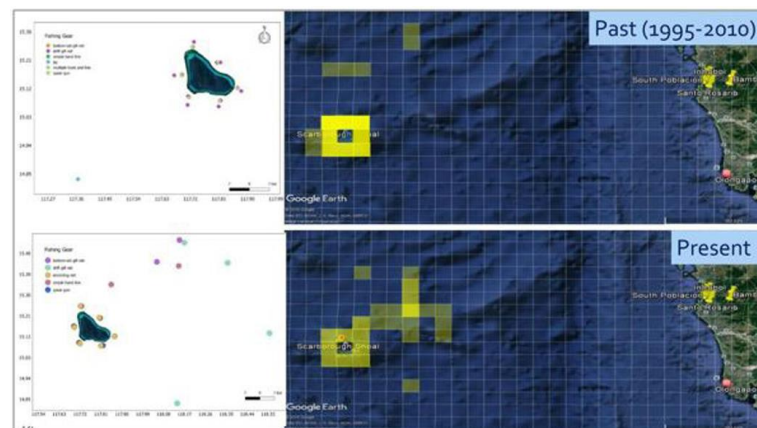
Figure 9: Drum payao



Source: Dickson and Natividad, 2001.

Besides the *payaos* other commonly used fishing methods are hook and line fishing, nets and spearguns. The latter is often utilized within the Shoal for catching large species including groupers and snappers. It must be noted that many of the fishers used more than one method. A study done by Arceo et al in 2020 involving among others 29 fisherfolk who were operating or had operated in the Shoal found that catch moved further away from the reefs in the period from 1995-2010. Majority of the fisherfolk interviewed noted that there was a decrease in both the catch and the composition of species that made it up. Environmental destruction of coral reefs (through illegal fishing practices) and an increasing number of fishers were blamed for this.

Figure 10: Change in Fishing Spots



Source: Arceo et al (2020)

*Darker yellow corresponds with increased intensity/frequency

Chapter 4

Methodology

4.1 Methodology

This study employed qualitative research methods in its approach. This was in the form of a case study on fisherfolk who had operated in the Shoal. Because the data needed was first-hand accounts of experiences of fisherfolk as well as those familiar with the topic, the chosen method was key informant interviews.

4.1.1 Key Informant Semi-Structured Interviews

Key informant interviews were conducted with 13 fisherfolk who had operated in Scarborough Shoal. When possible key informant interviews were used however, due to the time constraints of fisherfolk they sometimes had to be interviewed together turning them into spontaneous focus group discussions. Majority of the fisherfolk interviewed were in their mid to late 50s and all save one were male. These were made up of commercial fisherfolk whose vessels ranged in sizes although it must be noted that some also had their own small boats but acted as crew members on mother boats. Of these several 4 were the captains of mother boats that operated in the shoal and 2 were fishing association leaders.

The interviewees were sourced through the Akbayan Party who worked with these fisherfolk and some of these individuals had participated in the *Atin Ito* Mission. Due to ease of access compared with interviewing fisherfolk from Palawan or from the Spratlys, the interviews were conducted with fisherfolk from the province of Zambales in the island of Luzon. These communities are those involved in operations in the Scarborough Shoal and thus could provide first-hand accounts of their experiences in these waters. Additional interviewees were sourced through snowball sampling. In addition to the fisherfolk, 2 officials of the Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Management Councils (FARMC) were interviewed.

To gain more context into the situation, the author also attended a meeting between some of the fisherfolk leaders, the Akbayan Party and the local government in the province of Bulacan as well as an awarding ceremony in the governor's office recognizing the efforts of the *Atin Ito* mission. Finally, the author accompanied a visit to a local state university where during a school event one of the fisherfolk leaders was given a chance to speak to the students.

All the interviewees except for one were from the province of Zambales and came from 2 of its municipalities. The first of these is Masinloc, a first-class municipality which has a population of 54,529 as of 2020 (PSA, 2024). It is often associated with the Scarborough Shoal by the media and the like as fisherfolk discussed how members of different news networks and organizations from around the world flock there for interviews. However, a fishing association leader interviewed mentioned that approximately only 30% of the fisherfolk in Masinloc operated in the shoal (Fisher association head 1). Other interviewees came from Subic a former American military base that is also now a first-class municipality and has a large port. One interviewee came from Bataan which is a separate province but whose fisherfolk also operate in the Shoal.

The field notes were coded and subjected to thematic analysis to bring out the subjects' experiences through the framework of Human security as well as Everyday Politics.

4.1.2 Scope and Limitations

Because of the availability of interviewees and time constraints, not all interviewees were from the same town or even province. The presence of multiple fisherfolk in some interviews must also be considered given that in focus-groups the dynamics of the participants is also point of analysis.

Additionally, it must also be noted that these were a mixture of Fishing Association Leaders, Mother Boat Captains and other deep sea fisherfolk. Mother Boat Captains for example generally enjoy a more stable source of income and higher salaries than individual fishers or their crew with some even owning their boats. This may play a part in the extent to which they were affected by the conflict.

A potential source of bias in the answers given is that the interviews were sourced from the Akbayan party or were affiliated with them. Because they have worked with these fisherfolk in the past through fund raising initiatives and the like, the party is regarded as an opposition party in Philippine politics so it must be noted that these factors may come into play in the interviews (although as the data shows this was not always the case).

4.1.3 Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) of Erasmus University Rotterdam. Besides the fulfillment and submission of the university's standard ethics form, approval from the ethics committee will be obtained. This was to ensure that the data gathered especially from the fisherfolk to be interviewed is done in the correct manner and is properly handled and that all relevant key informants and stakeholders involved in the research are aware of the . The interviewees were also sourced through a political party who had worked with them in the past and the researcher was put in touch with fisher groups working with these individuals who have worked with numerous researchers and interviewers in the past and are thus more comfortable talking to them. The purpose of the study was explained to the interviewees by both the researcher and those that connected him to them and their names have been anonymized for the study.

4.1.4 Positionality Statement

I am a Filipino who has grown up in that country and lived there for most of his life. As such the South China Sea conflict is one that does have implications for both me and my family and friends living in that country. Although I does not interact with them regularly, the fisherfolk who are the focus of this study are still fellow Filipinos and I feel a degree of kinship with them and am sympathetic to the struggles they face. I also know however that my socio-economic status and relative comfort of my life thus far as well as my Filipino-mestizo heritage may put me at a bit of a distance from the experiences of many Filipinos and especially those from the socio-economic background of those I interviewed. Because of this, I know that I will never be able to completely understand their perspectives and experiences. Thus, overall, I am aware that I may hold biases on the issue both conscious and unconscious that potentially influenced the research.

I will strive to the best of my abilities to ensure that this will not be the case. One clear cut way to do this is in consultation with my university (the ISS) through both my professors and peers who will review my work and when necessary, will subject it to both feedback and criticism. They are individuals from diverse backgrounds who may be able to provide a more unbiased perspective.

Chapter 5

Findings and Analysis

The findings were analyzed based on the concepts of everyday security and everyday politics. Sections 5.1 is focused on the first research question namely how the conflict as well as government policy have affected the security of the fisherfolk. Section 5.2 deals with the second research question namely everyday strategies used by Filipino fisherfolk use to empower themselves to deal with the insecurities they face.

5.1 The South China Sea Conflict and the Philippine Government

The first-hand accounts of fisherfolk reveal that the Chinese aggression and transformation of Scarborough Shoal into a contested space poses a major threat to their Human Security. This along with the Philippine Government's response forces them into a situation where they must choose between having suffering indignities while maintaining a degree of economic security to completely losing access to the Shoal. The following sections align the framework of Human Security with the stories of the interviewed fisherfolk to demonstrate this.

5.1.1 The Transformation of Scarborough Shoal

This section addresses how fisherfolk perceive the conflict affecting their Human Security. The most visible manifestation of the dispute for the fisherfolk was the limiting of then total loss of access to Scarborough Shoal which affected their livelihoods and forced them to change how they operated. The loss of the Shoal represented a major effect on economic security, food security and a source of indignity for the fisherfolk who operated there. This translated into direct threats to their livelihood, profitability human dignity and created larger community level externalities

Livelihoods and Shelter

The Shoal was a reliable source of income for fisherfolk during the months that they were able to operate in it. The physical security afforded by the Shoal in terms of shelter to fisherfolk while operating also allowed them to stay in the area for lengthy period of time. The inconsistent nature of the fishing profession in general meant that this its loss hit them hard.

The fisherfolk operated in and around the lagoon and its large size meant it could contain hundreds of vessels (from various country). The sheer number of fish that could be caught in the Shoal meant that fisherfolk would stay in the area for weeks on end with one fisherman interviewed saying that he would stay for up to 4 months (Fisherman 6). During this time, some of the mother boats would be sent back to the mainland filled with the catch that would be sold and then return to be loaded again.

A major reason fisherfolk were able to stay at the Shoal for so long was because of the shelter afforded it to them. It protected them from storms as the waves from these would smash upon the reef. Access to the lagoon (which was often denied by the Chinese military

vessels) was not even needed to be safe. One fisherman described it as such *...if it's (the storm) coming from one side you stay on the opposite side (of the reef). Then you get only wind but no waves. Because the waves break when they strike the reef*" (Mother boat Captain 4).

Even those who were not operating at the Shoal could stay at sea longer and venture out further than they would have otherwise because they were confident that when they were caught in storms, they would be able to make their way to it. With the loss of this reliable source of shelter, fisherfolk were now more apprehensive about venturing out especially in bad weather with one fisherman saying *"... because things are more hi tech now you know when the weather will worsen so you can prepare, the problem is you can't go if you know you won't finish a voyage."* (Mother boat Captain 8). Since they were unable to return to the site without being confronted by Chinese military vessels, they often opted to fish closer to shore. However, some individuals still opted to fish further away from the Shoal exposing themselves to further risk.

Profitability

Because it was atoll, the Shoal was home to various forms of reef fish that would sell higher in the market. Operating in the Shoal thus represented a chance for profitability while being in relative safety. It's loss therefore meant that they had to catch a higher volume of cheaper fish to compensate.

Although it was not the sole fishing source in the area, the Shoal was seen as the richest and the investment of time and expenses making a voyage there was seen to yield good significant returns. Besides the quality of the fish caught there, it was mentioned how fishing at the site was relatively cost efficient in terms of fuel as other similar areas would result in double to triple the amount of fuel consumed to reach resulting in low profits after the sale of the catch. Additionally, during lulls in operations, there were many fish and other marine species that could be caught to sustain the fisherfolk. One fisherman mentioned how during such breaks, he and his captain would take a small boat and walk along the rocks on the shoal picking up shells that were cooked together with coconut milk. As another of the fisherfolk stated: *"...it was really good if you were able to earn from Scarborough. You had your salary, which was separate from when you would go hook fishing. You were able to get good funds there. You would go diving/spear fishing (during the day), and then at night you would go hook fishing"* (Mother boat Captain 1).

The loss of income that came with no longer being able to access the high value reef fish from Scarborough necessitated its own set of adjustments. Several owners of mother boats had reportedly decided to sell their vessels as it was no longer profitable for them to operate which also affected the crew members. According to those interviewed, they also tried to compensate for the loss of expensive fish through volume. This led many to fisherfolk flocking to the *payaos* closer to the mainland instead as these also attracted large numbers of fish which led to its own set of issues because of overcrowding resulting in less catch. Two of the fisherfolk interviewed discussed this with one saying *"If before we were 300 now we're 1 billion *laughs* that's why we're fighting for space whatever we can get"* (Fisherman 4) with the second adding *"We used to be 10 in one payao now 50 boats are there"* (Fisherman 5).

Sense of Dignity and Community

A major feature of operating at the Shoal for the fisherfolk was that it was a shared space and community. Their being driven out of and now fearing a space that they had previously seen as theirs to fish in was a major indignity for them and a source of anger and frustration.

In the past, the fisherfolk of various nations including the Philippines, China, Vietnam and Indonesia all operated in there and fished together. Although there occasionally reported

tensions in the past, all parties had access to the area. Two of the fishermen (Mother Boat Captain 1 and Fisherman 8) interviewed talked at length about their friendly encounters with the fisherfolk of other nations. There were many such stories told. “*Sometimes they (Chinese fisherfolk) would give us vegetables (and) meat*” and “*Even if we did not understand each other, we would just use hand signals (to communicate) and laugh. When they take a shot (of alcohol) we take a shot. When they dance, we dance*” (Fisherman 7). Another (Fisherman 6) even mentioned how he saw a Chinese family (including children) operating a fishing vessel and he approached them asking for water which was promptly given.

However, with the escalation of tensions, this all changed. With the Chinese coast guard and eventually fishing militia constantly patrolling the waters around the shoal, they were subject to denial of access to the lagoon (and eventually the entire surrounding area). The fisherfolk discussed the harassment they faced wherein they were driven away or if they approached too closely ran the risk of being rammed, doused with water cannons or arrested. These risks came with a fear of venturing into or even close to the Shoal. As one interviewee said “*...you’d be afraid they’re coast guard they have guns they rammed a ship, and someone lost his fingers. We were scared they used to spray us (with water cannons) how wouldn’t you be afraid with that?*” (Fisherman 4).

The fear of returning to the Shoal transformed the area from a place of mundane activity and harmonious coexistence where territorial sovereignty and ownership were not discussed into a dangerous geopolitical hotspot that they could no longer access freely. Interviewees also described how in the current situation those who were brave enough to sneak into the restricted area were made to feel like robbers when they did so which was unnerving given that they had previously operated there regularly.

Effects on Other Parts of the Community

The effects of the Shoal’s loss extended to the communities the fisherfolk came from. This was in terms of other fisherfolk who did not operate in the Shoal or further out at sea and within their own families.

Even though not all fisherfolk operated there its loss resulted in a domino effect of sorts. The overcrowding of the *payaos* and the crowded municipal waters also led some municipal fisherfolk to illegally venture into other waters where they could be arrested and fined. Food security was also threatened as this scarcity had also led to the increase in the price of reef fish for them and their families. Within families themselves, adjustments must be made. Some of the wives of the fisherfolk have gone abroad as Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) to serve as domestic helpers in the Middle East often in Saudi Arabia or Dubai. Although this pays better, it results in them leaving their partners and children for extended periods of time.

This also had implications for the continuing of the profession. Because of the difficulties of the fishing profession and its unpredictability (according to one of the interviewees there is a saying that translates to “*The rumble of the sea is the rumble of a fisherfolk’s stomach*” (Mother Boat Captain 4) fisherfolk interviewed wished for their children to enter another more stable profession. Many fisherfolk have not finished a high school or even elementary and they are hoping those of their children that are able to study perform well at school and obtain scholarships. Although this was already a situation even before the conflict, the latter only exacerbated the issue.

The loss of the Shoal thus significantly affected the fisherfolk’s human security. This was most visible in the economic sphere but also bled into their community security through their families and had potential implications for the continuing of the fishing profession. They expressed a sadness at its loss and a wistfulness for the times they had been able to

operate there peacefully. Although they blamed the Chinese Government for driving them out of the Shoal, they also believed the Philippine government played a large role in the direction conflict had taken which will be discussed next.

5.1.2 The Role of the Philippine Government in the Conflict

This section also addresses the on the fisherfolks' perspectives on the Philippine Government's policy towards the conflict and its effect on their security. It shows how the government's policy responses to the conflict have pushed the fisherfolk into a situation where they feel they must make tradeoffs between political security with their dignity and rights as Filipinos being asserted (at least on paper) and economic security and food security where they are allowed (with limitations) to fish in the disputed waters. Furthermore, disconnect with the fisherfolk needs and proper representation has manifested in other areas including regulations, training and solutions provided.

Confrontation or Appeasement?

As discussed in the previous chapters, the reported change in the behavior of Chinese naval and coast guard vessels in the Shoal and surrounding areas tended to coincide with the relationship between the governments of both nations during the time. A more confrontational stance by the Philippine government thus often meant more restricted access for Filipino fisherfolk as well as increased harassment by the Chinese coast guard and fishing militia.

Because of how much the conflict directly affected them and their practice the fisherfolk had very strong opinions these actions. There were two prevailing views concerning the stances taken on the dispute primarily as it manifested in different administrations. The first was that confrontation with China was inevitable given its expansion in the region and that standing up to them was the only option even though they could potentially crack down more on fisherfolk. The second view however held that it would be impossible for the Philippines to do so given the military and economic disparities between the two which made direct confrontation an unrealistic option prioritizing instead whatever access was given by China to the Philippine fisherfolk if the two countries had a friendlier relationship.

A contrast in the views of the fisherfolk on more confrontation and more appeasement-based policies towards the conflict can be seen in their perspective towards the Aquino and Duterte administrations' actions. which followed each other but employed different approaches.

When discussing beginning of the current tensions most of the fisherfolk interviewed, traced them back to the 2012 standoff at the shoal during Aquino's term. During the period (as discussed in Chapter 3), access to the shoal was restricted and a floating barrier was erected limiting blocking the lagoon. A number of fisherfolk interviewed wished the incident had never occurred. One of the fisherfolk said: *"If the (BRP) Gregorio Pilar hadn't gone (to the Shoal) there might not be a mess now"* adding *"That was the start of it (the conflict). Maybe they should have just left them alone (the Chinese fisherfolk apprehended)"* (Fisherman 7). Another of the interviewees (Fisherman 6) was of a different opinion altogether. He supported the decision to confront the Chinese navy and in fact was more frustrated that the Philippines had backed down sending its vessels home earlier. The arbitration case with the PCA initiated during the Aquino administration similarly elicited different responses.). Although some of the fisherfolk interviewed had given their testimonies in the case and it was referenced as legal proof that they could fish in the Shoal there was a general frustration with the inability of the Philippine government to enforce its legal victory. This frustration was reflected by some comparing the case to a piece of paper saying it was simply ignored by China.

The perspective favoring the appeasement strategy which was represented by the administration of Rodrigo Duterte with its friendlier stance towards China was one that emphasized practicality. During his presidency, fisherfolk were once again able to approach the Shoal (although it was noted that access to the lagoon was still barred). One of the fisherfolk interviewed discussed (Mother boat Captain 4) how this was a favorable turn of events for them despite the non-pursuit of the PCA case as access had at least been restored. However, for another fisherman (Fishing Leader 1), security remained an issue as they were still harassed by both the Chinese Coast guard and fishing militia that were now present (he had had his catch taken and exchanged for expired cup noodles). He expressed his frustration with the administration as he said it was making it appear that relations had improved, and bartering was happening between the fisherfolk of both nations where in fact what he saw going on was bullying.

The Marcos administration's current stance on the issue received similarly mixed opinions. One fisherman for example praised the more aggressive moves the Marcos administration had made with regards to defending territorial sovereignty saying, "...*Marcos he won't give up a square inch (of territory). That's the way to do it. You fight for your rights you won at the Hague (the Arbitration Case)*" (Fisherman 6). Those more critical of direct confrontation were more skeptical about the feasibility of doing so. As another fisherman stated: "*We should fight and assert that it (the Shoal) is ours. But before it was resolved through diplomacy that's why we could enter. But now that they've taken a confrontational approach, we're no match for them*" (Mother boat Captain 4). He also acknowledged the difficulty of the situation where solutions like levelling sanctions against China (both from the perspective of the Philippines and concerned foreign powers) for example might be hard because of its influence on the economy of various countries and their dependency on it.

This duality of these views also extended to significant political action outside the purview of the administrations that had been viewed as confrontational (at least by the Chinese government) and had greatly influenced the current dynamics at the shoal leading the Chinese navy to completely close access to it. This was the *Atin Ito* mission discussed in the previous chapters which had. It must be noted however that the Akbayan Party which initiated the mission is represented by a Senator formerly from Aquino's coalition. Many of the fisherfolk interviewed namely the captains had been participants in the mission and transported members of the coalition on their boats and thus it was a key point of discussion for them.

There were different reactions to mission and its effects The fishing association leaders for instance were of the mind that it had helped bring attention to the conflict (there was a large media presence as well as foreign nationals who accompanied the coalition) and the amount of donations and other initiatives to aid the fisherfolk had increased significantly because of it. Additionally, they said that China would eventually have restricted access to the Shoal anyway at some point regardless of the coalition's actions. However, there were those who said that the mission had only made the situation worse. One of the fisherfolk (Mother boat captain 4) said that prior to the mission, there was at least access to the shoal as opposed to the current situation where even approaching it would trigger the Chinese coast guard to intercept any vessel within 20 nautical miles of the lagoon. He said he saw no practical benefit to it as of yet saying "...*it's correct that what's ours should be ours but what can we do against China? That's the big question. It just got even worse when we went (Atin Ito Mission) that's why I talked to these people (other fisherfolk) and apologized because our going made them lose even more rights (to the Shoal)*" (Mother Boat Captain 4).

There was also specific criticism towards politicians who used the fisherfolk for their own ends. Indeed, it was stated that politicians would be present in their area during election season. The term often used to describe such individuals in the Philippines is *epal*. Politicians

described as such are criticized for including their names and likenesses on government projects ranging from infrastructure to relief operations. One of the fisherfolk (Mother Boat Captain 4) interviewed voiced his anger against such politicians citing that they should have been the objects of ire rather than China.

The fisherfolk thus face a difficult choice. They can advocate for a strategy where they are able to operate in the Shoal albeit on a limited basis and alleviate their economic and food security to a degree but face harassment (threats to their personal and political security) or they can lose access altogether. For some, the first option was preferable but for others even losing access to the Shoal was worth asserting their rights.

Everyday Disconnects

Besides the loss of access to the Shoal, Philippine fisherfolk deal with a plethora of challenges around regulations and support which contributes to their security or insecurity. In these areas are other evidences of government disconnect particularly in the government provided solutions and regulations and how the fisherfolk actually operated. This had negative implications in terms of their human security as it could threaten their livelihoods and on occasion their physical safety.

Several examples were cited. One was the list of requirements when registering a *payao*. It was mentioned how this was too complicated and time-consuming for many but operating an unregistered *payao* meant that any complaints regarding damage to it or individuals poaching from it went unheeded. Installing a *payao* also supposedly required a survey to be done of the installation site but according to the fisherman interviewed lack of personnel meant this was often not done. These perceived bureaucratic issues thus affected both the ability to obtain a *payao* and for those who installed it anyway an inability to protect their catch.

Another example was the installation of a device required by the BFAR called a vessel monitoring system (VMS) for the purpose of tracking fishing boats that was required to be turned on expended a lot of electricity and reportedly even alerted Chinese vessels to their presence. In this sense, the fisherfolk actually believed that this device was a direct threat to their physical security and were fearful of using it near the Shoal (FARMC 1). Yet another example was of fiberglass boats provided by the BFAR that were of such poor quality that many of the beneficiaries who received them ended up selling them and replacing them with wooden ones.

One of the fisherfolk was particularly passionate about the perceived lack of consultation and was frustrated and amused by the disconnect. He expressed this when discussing government-provided training in the storage of fresh catch where the ratio of ice to fish that the trainings taught was actually wrong and did not properly preserve its freshness which was something the fisherfolk already knew saying: *“...we laugh because they teach us how to take care of the fish but we’re even better at it than them and their way is so expensive because the way to use ice is 1:1. If 100kg of fish then its 100kg of ice. The eyes of the fish go white because of the cold”* (Mother boat captain 4).

This extended to the regulation around municipal fisherfolk who although did not operate in Scarborough Shoal nevertheless had regular interactions with those interviewed. One of the fishing association leaders related how her group was advocating against making fishing in neighboring municipal waters illegal and subject to fines making things even more difficult for those in these already crowded areas. Sometimes this disconnect in regulations could have deadly consequences: *“Before commercial fisherfolk go on a voyage they have to ask the coast guard. You won’t get a clearance if the weather isn’t good, and your papers are not in order. But with municipal they just go regardless, and they are the ones we always see sunk at sea. Many times, I even have videos near my own payao. Last year 2 people died and only a kid survived. Good thing he endured for 5*

days just holding on to his overturned boat. 16 years old. That's why when I called the coast guard and we talked and the family of the kid was there we almost cried. I said it's so pitiful to see what he went through if you only saw the video and you saw him all alone" (Mother boat captain 4).

5.2 Responding to a Crisis

This section addresses the second research question which is on the everyday strategies fisherfolk use to empower themselves in the wake of the insecurities they faced as a result of the conflict. Despite the threats to their Human Security fueled by broader geopolitical and policy dynamics, a theme emerged from the interviews that demonstrates that in the face of larger structural dilemmas fisherfolk still manage to empower themselves and exercise agency. Aside from their participation in advocacy political movements, there was the presence of everyday politics practiced consciously or unconsciously that aided them.

5.2.1 Advocacy Politics

The salience of the conflict in Philippine society especially because of heavy media coverage and the presence of civil society groups and NGOs meant that advocacy politics or direct, confrontational and organized political action (Kerkvliet, 2009) was widespread in the area. This was further heightened because politicians on all levels of national politics knowing that it was a popular issue also became involved and often visited the fisherfolk. The latter were active in the sphere often through their organization namely associations and federations which protested for their rights to fish in the waters among other issues.

The most recent and prominent example of this was the *Atin Ito* Resupply missions where hundreds of them set sail for the disputed waters to assert their rights to freedom of navigation. Many of the fisherfolk interviewed including the captains of the vessels had been participants carrying members of the coalition which included individuals from the Akbayan political party, NGOs, other civil society groups and journalists. One of the aspects of the mission involved showing the coalition members the practices used by fisherfolk in real time. Non-fisherfolk were allowed to participate and the accompanying media filmed the event expanding the reach of the message. The fisherfolk leaders interviewed also showed that it sent the message to China that even Philippine civilians (not just the military) were angry about the issue. There were also other forms of protest one mentioned was outside the Chinese Embassy in Manila for instance.

5.2.2 Everyday Politics

The communities of the fisherfolk were thus rife with advocacy politics and they were no stranger to participating in these. However, even within these movements the fisherfolk indirectly and sometimes covertly undermined those in power and used everyday politics to contest narratives, build connections and assert their rights.

Taking Control of Narratives

One method used by fisherfolk of asserting their agency was in attempting to take control of the narrative surrounding them and the conflict. Much of this is shown in the sections above where they were determined to tell their own story of how the conflict was occurring and affecting them. This process involved all the forms of everyday politics discussed (Support, Compliance, Modification and Evasion and Resistance) as within a spectrum, they

supported those propagating narratives they agreed with while resisting those they did not agree with.

An example of this resistance was in expressing how they viewed the fisherfolk of other nations and their role in the conflict. All the fisherfolk who discussed the matter maintained that they held no ill will towards these individuals with one of them saying *“It’s also the fault of our government with that whole issue. We (the fisherfolk) were all at peace with each other there before”*. (Fisherman 7). Humanizing their counterparts through stories of eating dancing and even getting drunk together, they communicated their perspective on the conflict as one between governments one and expressed that coexistence between them was possible. This was further emphasized by another of the fisherfolk who stated his recognition about the PCA case *“From what I know about the 2016 ruling Scarborough is for everyone. Not just Philippines or China it’s for everyone.”* (Mother Boat Captain 4).

Another area where this was done was in the expressing their opinions of the national government’s policy in the conflict discussed in section 5.2 through voicing approval or disapproval with the different strategies of the various administrations in handling the issue. They also challenging how it was portrayed in the media by the government (for example Fishing association Head 1’s disputing Duterte’s administration being one of peaceful relations at the shoal with bartering between fisherfolk occurring). Even the *Atin Ito* mission was not immune from this with one of the participants questioning its merits (as discussed in the sections above) and furthermore adding that his support for Duterte’s policies went unheeded as he stated: *“When they interview me about the sea, and they know I say it was better under Duterte they end the interview immediately”* (Mother Boat captain 4). These all fall in the realm of everyday support for the status quo and resistance (badmouthing and criticizing authority figures) as described by Kerkvliet (2009).

Showing resistance to the capture of his experiences by other actors, one of the fisherfolk (Mother Boat Captain 3) interviewed has utilized social media and become a digital creator (utilizing social media as an everyday space) to show his side of the story. His Facebook page shares videos which details his daily life as a fisherman giving viewers an on the ground perspective of events. The content includes showing the catch made for the day, strong typhoons affecting the area as well as the presence of vessels of the Chinese coast guard in the background. He stated how he refused to have his videos taken or statements recorded by the media as they could potentially distort his story.

This extended to defending the authority of their knowledge when it comes to fishing practices. During meetings or trainings conducted by the municipality or government agencies one of the fisherfolk interviewed (Mother Boat Captain 4) talked about how he would always question the regulations given or new tools or technology introduced especially when they did not make sense (some of the issues with these are mentioned in 5.1.2.2).

In summary, the lived experiences of fisherfolk played an important role in the ways they viewed the conflict and the roles of various actors in it that did not always line up with popular narratives and through everyday conversations and interactions, they were able to express this.

Building and Utilizing Networks

Even outside formal organizations or formal politics, connections play a vital role in Philippine society. For the fisherfolk interviewed it was no different. Although when viewed through Kerkvliet’s (2009) lens of everyday politics these are examples of Everyday Support which perpetuate current political and class dynamics continuing the survival of patronage politics in the Philippines, it was one of the important ways that fisherfolk dealt with the insecurities they faced.

In a country where political patronage is common, knowing how to utilize it was noted that being in the same party or a supporter of local government was seen as being beneficial when it came to being selected for programs that would help them. Fisher associations and other organizations are also entangled in local politics as they may be more inclined towards particular political figures and reap the resulting benefits or losses. An example was mentioned where 2 mother boats had been given by the municipality to a particular *barangay* consisting of the mayor's supporters. In this same vein, it also played an important role when fisherfolk felt that government aid was unfairly withheld. One of the fisherfolk leaders (Fisher Association Head 1) for example discussed how his association had previously been denied financial aid through an official channel supposedly because of poor relationships with their municipal leaders. In response he approached a visiting senator in a public forum who pledged to give the amount from his personal funds. Through this contact, he was able to secure aid financial for his organization through less official means.

This extended to other political efforts in the area. The national and media focus on the conflict especially in the wake of the PCA case filed and *Atin Ito* Missions has placed many of the fisherfolk especially association leaders in direct contact with civil society leaders and politicians in various spheres of government who now know them personally on an informal basis. Although they claim that they are under no illusions about some of the intentions of some of these individuals (as discussed in the previous sections) namely their interest in gaining constituents, they also utilize the connections they have made for their own interests. This engagement with and access to political figures also gave the Fishing Association leaders ambitions in this area and one of them expressed potential interest in running for political office in the future. Formal connections were also useful in the context of fishing around the Shoal. Fisher association head 1 for instance said real time information was provided by the Philippine Coast Guard to their fisherfolk contacts to share with each other regarding current Chinese patrols in the area.

Peer relationships even outside of formal organizations also played an important role in increasing security as they banded together and cooperated in times of need. As a fisherman said in response to the loss of the shoal "... *now we just borrowed money to get boats here we all put in money (in a pool) so we could get our own boats.*" (Fisherman 4). The setting up of *payaos* was also seen as a way to benefit multiple fisherfolk and it was generally accepted that even non-operators of the device would fish around it, for example, concerning others using his *payaos* one of the captains interviewed said: "...*we don't get mad if they go around it or even if they cling to it. Our only ask is if the weather's bad watch their boats so they don't collide with the payao and break it. If the weather's bad and they don't watch it that can happen. I mean it's their livelihood. We don't even ask for a percentage from them If they catch three tons or two tons we don't mind.*" (Mother Boat Captain 4). One of the interviewees (Fisher association head 1) discussed arrangements made with operators of larger commercial fishing vessels for the deployment and harvesting of the *payaos*, where profits were split 70:30 with the majority going to the operators of the larger ships.

Overall, the creation and maintenance of networks by the fisherfolk was an important source of empowerment for them. Whether through connections with politicians or peers, these gave them access to financial and physical resources allowing them to continue in their profession.

Pushing Boundaries

When it came to the no-trespassing zone around the Shoal enforced by the Chinese military, fisherfolk most of the interviewed generally complied albeit begrudgingly. Expressing that there was no way of directly confronting them especially if the Philippine military itself could not, they instead sought to fish in other areas or within the limits set around the Shoal. However, this was not always the case.

Demonstrating acts of everyday resistance, fisherfolk occasionally trespassed around the imposed boundaries. One of them talked about how during a storm his boat needed to seek shelter in the Shoal and so they snuck in under cover of darkness and stayed there until they were driven out in the morning. Another fisherman (Fisherman 6) discussed how once he had allowed an American photographer from the media that had interviewed to hide in his hold. He then took him to Shoal and let him take pictures. He knew that the detection of that individual would place him in danger from the Chinese vessels but did it nonetheless.

Three of the fisherfolk interviewed did this in a more overt way. When they were discovered by Chinese vessels, they would be approached by the coast guard in rubber dinghies and be made to leave but they responded in other ways. *“They would force us outside, but of course Filipinos are also hard-headed. When the rubber boats would go back to the bigger boats in their service, the ones in the coastguard, we would go back in and fish again. That’s where they would get frustrated”*. (Fisherman 7).

Occasionally, these types of activities when carried out and captured on video by the media turn into advocacy politics demonstrate the bravery of the fisherfolk involved such as one of a small fishing vessel being chased around in circles by the coast guard (Agence France-Presse, 2023). In a similar way, the *Atin Ito* Coalition practiced this by sending an advance vessel the day before the main mission to sneak past Chinese warships and resupply Filipino fishing vessels near the shoal.

Chapter 6

Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Discussion and Implications

The previous chapter has shown how their perceptions of the dynamics of the conflict and its effect on their security as well as their responses in terms of advocacy and everyday politics help Filipino fisherfolk navigate the interplay between Philippine government policy and the South China Sea conflict. This section aims to unpack this further. Synthesizing sections in the previous chapter, it shows how they connect to larger debates in the literature and what the implications for these may be.

6.1.1 Defining the Conflict

Through focusing on a bottom-up approach to Human security through the interviews of the fisherfolk, certain nuances that may be overlooked in a more top-down analysis were brought out. Through their lived experiences of the conflict and the ways they perceive it affecting various elements of their human security, one factor that stands out beyond the economic dimensions is the loss of dignity they feel. That shared dignity and sense of community of those operating within the Shoal was shattered by the conflict and also informs how they define it.

Their described relationships with the fisherfolk of other nations, speaks to this. The findings and analysis in this are like the work of Zhang (2016) and Liu et al (2024). It shows that as per their accounts, Filipino fisherfolk did in fact have friendly relations with their counterparts. The exchanges of food and alcohol as well as social activities on each other's boats demonstrated this. It also spoke to their recognition of their intersectionality as they saw themselves as both fisherfolk and Filipino citizens and thus also identified with their counterparts in other nations in terms of their shared need for the security of their profession. As recognized by Rozco (2015) however, they like their Vietnamese counterparts do identify themselves as Filipino and associate the waters with sovereign rights of access. This was however not at the expense of denying these other fisherfolk access to the Shoal but rather seeing it as a shared space where all can operate freely. Through this lens the dispute primarily becomes one between governments.

As discussed in the finding and analysis, the triggers identified by the fisherfolk for the various stages in the escalation of the conflict were primarily initiated by the national government through ways that provoked China into further clamping down in the Shoal which had negative effects on their security. The implications of this will be discussed next.

6.1.2 State Security vs Human Security

The perceptions towards the Philippine government by the fisherfolk also speaks to the larger debates concerning human security and state security as discussed by Gilder (2022) and Acharya (2001). It shows the disconnect between the state-based security strategies and the security of the fisherfolk but also to the difficult position faced by the Philippine government itself which is caught in between two global superpowers in the United States and China.

When viewed through a state-centric lens, the maintenance and control of Philippine sovereignty over its waters makes the filing of the Arbitration case and other such actions challenging any territorial threats of primary importance. However, the flip side of this as has been shown is that without enforceability, these challenges ring hollow. The effect of the conflict thus far has demonstrated the inconsistencies with state-based security strategies and what fisherfolk perceived as their security. As shown in the findings and analysis the focus on the state and the protection of sovereignty and national pride may clash with the human security of individuals who are driven out of their traditional fishing sites while on the flip side for those who see the fight for territorial sovereignty as their own, appeasement based strategies towards China are also unacceptable (and result in harassment anyway according to first-hand accounts). Their seeing themselves as having to choose between the two in a sense renders them trapped by these geopolitical realities facing them. This has led to a belief in the fishers of the primacy of military power and a scepticism regarding international law as they see the PCA case routinely ignored by China.

However, there are dilemmas faced by the Philippine government in this area too. As it is caught in between two great powers in the region and with its ASEAN neighbours at least for now unwilling to collectively oppose China's territorial claims, (whether that would be effective is another question altogether), it must therefore play a balancing act or completely pivot whether that be towards China or the Western powers in the region (particularly the United States). As discussed by De Castro (2024) the Marcos administration thus far has been favouring the latter approach allowing the US to use military bases in the country as part of the EDCA and conducting military exercises together. It is still uncertain as of yet what effect this will have on the fisherfolk in the coming months and years.

These dilemmas faced also speaks to wider debates in International Relations (which have dominated the discussion on the South China Sea Conflict) about the effectiveness of international institutions like UNCLOS as discussed by such schools as neo-institutionalism and neo-realism (Houlden, Romaniuk and Hong, 2021) but also just as importantly to the effectiveness of the Human Security model in such contexts and what it's role really is with some seeing it as complementary rather than opposed to state security but others disagreeing (Rubenstein, 2017).

In this vein, given that Human Security is aimed at reducing vulnerabilities of the populations that it targets, it may necessitate structural or systemic changes. This then begs the question of how vulnerable populations exercise their power to enact change and what which will be discussed next.

6.1.3 Responding within Limits

The responses by the Filipino fisherfolk in the form of advocacy politics and everyday politics demonstrates that within the constraints of their situation, there are still means for empowerment. A larger question then becomes how these interact and whether this can effectively lead to larger social or structural changes and what the nature of these might be.

Yates (2022) discusses that one of the importance of Everyday Politics in terms of how it leads to social or structural change by itself or help explain the emergence of advocacy politics. Authors like Tria Kervliet (2009) and demonstrate this in in examples in Vietnam and in the Philippines. This begs the question of what Everyday Politics can do in a political environment where it intersects with advocacy and traditional politics and on paper at least Filipino fishermen do have representation. Although as shown in the literature the lines between the two types of politics may blur, the findings and analysis demonstrate that examining issues through an everyday politics lens is crucial in capturing certain nuances in the way

individuals practice politics. An example of this would be the fisherman who participated in the *Atin Ito* Mission despite having differing political leanings from the Coalition and his later regret in his decision.

They also show how everyday politics and political opinion have grown into advocacy politics and led to positive changes for the fisherfolk with the most visible being the *Atin Ito* Mission which involved multiple civil society actors beyond the fisherfolk showing various groups coming together to demonstrate their rights of freedom of navigation. This in turn as discussed has led to larger donations from NGOs and other private actors. Additionally, it has led to the issue receiving more attention from the government, as officials find it in their interest politically to support them.

In a situation where the government itself is limited by more powerful actors that it cannot best in a direct confrontation, what can social movements do to alleviate the struggles faced? This could potentially be in the area of increasing support for the fisherfolk affected by both state and non-state actors or actually lead to structural changes that address their issues aside from the conflict (it must be noted that regardless of the restrictions on their fishing grounds, they are already some of the poorest groups in Philippine society). Since Human Security is also focused on addressing such root causes of vulnerabilities (O'Brien and Barnett, 2013), these changes would not be insignificant. Given the recency of the missions the jury is still out on this and only time will tell.

6.2 Conclusion

This research sought to answer the way Filipino fisherfolk operating in the disputed waters of the South China navigate the interplay of the conflict and the Philippine government's policy in their everyday lives. It is focused on fisherfolk who operate in Scarborough Shoal a rich fishing ground that is one of the main disputed areas. It has used qualitative research methods namely key informant interviews and focus group discussions to present its findings on the perspectives of fisherfolk on how the conflict and the Philippine Government affect their security as well as the everyday strategies they use to empower themselves in the face of insecurities they encounter.

The findings indicate that the Filipino fisherfolk perceive their human security as being adversely affected by the conflict as they have lost access to a valuable traditional fishing ground that they have a deep connection to and attribute much of the blame to Philippine Government policy. Aside from their loss of access it also led to their been pushed into a situation where they have to make trade-offs in terms of their economic security and their dignity.

Despite these structural and geopolitical limitations, the Filipino fisherfolk maintain their agency and have utilized both advocacy and everyday politics to empower themselves. The former has primarily taken the form of protests and public assertions of freedom of navigation in Philippine sovereign waters while the latter has involved taking control of the narrative surrounding the conflict, utilizing their personal networks to gain access to resources and aid and finally pushing boundaries in terms of the limits set around the disputed waters by the Chinese Navy.

There are several implications for this. Firstly, a bottom-up approach adds nuance to the research by also how the conflict is framed. Secondly, because of the it brings up debates on Human Security vs State Security and the viabilities difficulties of each perspective. Thirdly and finally, it looks at the interplay between advocacy politics and Everyday Politics and how and whether the two interact to bring about lasting social or structural change.

The issue is still an ongoing one and opens many potential new areas of research.

Appendices

Appendix 1: List of Interviewees

Location	Profile	Date
Masinloc	Fisher association head 1	13-Aug-24
	Fisherman 1	26-Aug-24
	Fisherman 2	26-Aug-24
	Fisherman 3	26-Aug-24
	Fisherman 4	26-Aug-24
	Fisherman 5	26-Aug-24
	Fisherman 6	26-Aug-24
	Mother Boat Captain 1	26-Aug-24
	Mother Boat Captain 2	26-Aug-24
	Fisherman 7	26-Aug-24
Subic	Mother Boat Captain 3	27-Aug-24
	Mother Boat Captain 4	27-Aug-24
Bataan	Fisher association head 2	29-Aug-24

Additional Interviews with FARMC Personnel

Subic	FARMC 1	28-Aug-24
Subic	FARMC 2	28-Aug-24

Appendix 2: Questionnaire Guide

Section 1: Background information

1. Please describe your background (age, profession etc)
2. Discuss experiences operating as a fisher

Section 2: Security

1a. Perspectives on Security

3. How secure do you feel in terms of carrying out your livelihood as a fisherman/fishworker?
4. How do these manifest in different areas in your life?
5. Describe any challenges faced in these areas
6. Describe what in your view contributes to these challenges and how
 - a. Follow ups asking regarding role of the government, fishing experiences, operating in the disputed Scarborough Shoal, How the conflict affected them.
 - b. Regulations by government agencies?

2b, Support

7. Where do you find the support for addressing these challenges?
8. How have these groups/individuals/organizations provided this support?
9. How do you feel about the support being provided?

Section 3: Everyday Politics

3a. Everyday practices

10. How have you responded to the challenges posed?
- a. What particular actions/practices have you taken/adapted.

Section 4: Reflections

11. Is there anything else you'd like to discuss related to the issue?

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