

SOUTH CHINA SEA NEWS No.114
March 2023

ACTS OF CLAIMANTS

30 March 2023: Tensions Flare at Malaysian, Vietnamese Oil and Gas Fields

China Coast Guard patrols near oil and gas projects in the South China Sea have triggered responses from Vietnamese law enforcement and the Malaysian navy in two separate incidents over the last month.

Contested Patrols at Nam Con Son and Vanguard Bank

Chinese and Vietnamese law enforcement vessels had an extremely close encounter on March 25 near Vanguard Bank, as reported by Radio Free Asia along with Reuters and others. A look into historical automatic identification system (AIS) data from commercial provider MarineTraffic shows that while this encounter was unusually dangerous, interactions between Chinese and Vietnamese vessels in the area have been a regular occurrence in recent months.

The China Coast Guard at Kasawari

Malaysia's Kasawari gas project has been no stranger to attention from the CCG, but tensions appear to be building. Satellite imagery and AIS data show that CCG 5901 has been operating near construction at Kasawari for the last month, drawing a response from the Royal Malaysian Navy. The world's largest coastguard vessel, the 12,000-ton 5901 last made headlines in January when it appeared near Indonesia's Tuna oil and gas project after Jakarta announced a \$3 billion plan to develop the block.

<https://amti.csis.org/perilous-prospects-tensions-flare-at-malaysian-vietnamese-oil-and-gas-fields/>

28 March 2023: US steps up South China Sea visits to serve its political and diplomatic agenda, Chinese think tank says

The US intensified military operations in the South China Sea last year to promote its political and diplomatic agenda, a Beijing think tank says.

The South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative (SCSPI), a Beijing-based defence think tank, predicts forces targeting the Taiwan Strait will increasingly affect stability in the area.

The assessments were published in the initiative's annual report monitoring US military presence in the South China Sea and other waters near China.

The report said US military operations were further politicised last year with greater media coverage of the movements and discussion of Chinese manoeuvres.

"The Pentagon and the US military have also repeatedly speculated on so-called dangerous interceptions or unprofessional behaviour by the [People's Liberation Army] at sea to put pressure on the Chinese side from a diplomatic, public opinion and strategic perspective," it said.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3215070/us-steps-south-china-sea-visits-serve-its-political-and-diplomatic-agenda-says-chinese-think-tank>

See the report here:

http://www.scspi.org/sites/default/files/reports/an_incomplete_report_on_us_military_activities_in_the_south_china_sea_in_2022.pdf

27 March 2023: Vietnam sends ship to track Chinese vessel patrolling Russian gas field in EEZ -data

A Vietnamese ship monitored a Chinese Coast Guard vessel on Saturday in a Russian-operated gas field in Vietnam's South China Sea exclusive economic zone (EEZ), data show - the latest Chinese patrol in a pattern stretching more than a year.

Chinese coast guard ships have sailed directly into energy exploration blocks operated or owned by Russian firms in Vietnam's EEZ about 40 times since January 2022, according to vessel-tracking data from Vietnamese research organisation South China Sea Chronicle Initiative (SCSCI), an independent non-profit.

The Chinese ship on Saturday sailed through both blocks, data show, as well as two others. The Vietnamese ship Kiem Ngu 278, operated by a fisheries law enforcement agency, followed the vessel, data show, at times closing to distances of just a few hundred metres. From those blocks, roughly 630 nautical miles from China's Hainan island, the Chinese ships typically return on a direct route to Vanguard Bank, where they are stationed, data reviewed by Reuters show. The Chinese ship on Saturday instead sailed to Malaysia's EEZ.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/vietnam-sends-ship-track-chinese-vessel-patrolling-russian-gas-field-eez-data-2023-03-27/>

21 March 2023: US, PH condemn China's gray-zone activities in South China Sea

THE United States and the Philippines condemned on Thursday (Manila time) China's gray-zone activities, which they said interfered with the livelihood of Philippine communities and the rights of other claimant states that seek to operate lawfully in the South China Sea consistent with the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal ruling.

In a telephone conversation, US Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin 3rd and Department of National Defense (DND) Officer in Charge Carlito Galvez Jr. also noted with particular concern China's massing of more than 40 vessels, including a People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy ship, around Pag-asa (Thitu) Island in the West Philippine Sea earlier this month within the country's 12-nautical mile territorial sea.

The swarming of vessels falls on the heels of an incident in February, in which the Chinese Coast Guard directed a military-grade laser against a Philippine vessel operating lawfully around Ayungin (Second Thomas) Shoal, temporarily blinding some of the crew.

<https://www.manilatimes.net/2023/03/21/news/us-ph-condemn-chinas-gray-zone-activities-in-south-china-sea/1883742>

14 March 2023: China exerts control over internet cable projects in South China Sea

China has begun to impede projects to lay and maintain subsea internet cables through the South China Sea, as Beijing seeks to exert more control over the infrastructure transmitting the world's data.

Long approval delays and stricter Chinese requirements, including permits for work conducted outside its internationally recognised territorial waters, have pushed companies to design routes that avoid the South China Sea, according to multiple sources inside the industry.

A cable under construction called SJC2, which will connect Japan to Singapore as well as Taiwan and Hong Kong, has been delayed by more than a year because of Chinese objections and lengthy permit issues, according to two industry executives.

China is also among a handful of countries in Asia that have started requesting permits for cable-laying in claimed territorial waters beyond 12 miles, in apparent contravention of international maritime law

<https://www.ft.com/content/89bc954d-64ed-4d80-bb8f-9f1852ec4eb1>

12 March 2023: China to develop dredger ‘more powerful than artificial island-builder of South China Sea’

China is developing a record-breaking dredger 50 per cent more powerful than its existing “super island builder”, the project’s chief engineer said.

The new self-propelled suction dredger being developed will feature a 10,000kW reamer, the first in the world, according to Qin Bin, chief engineer of the Tianjin Waterway Bureau, a subsidiary of the state-owned China Communications Construction Company (CCCC).

A dredger is a vessel that can blast through the rock on the bed of a river or the sea with its reamer, suck up rocks and sand and pump them through a pipe over a distance. They are used to clear navigation waterways or to build artificial islands.

China has invested heavily in its dredging industry and has built about 200 vessels since 2006 to become one of the world’s biggest dredger manufacturers.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3213206/china-develops-dredger-more-powerful-artificial-island-builder-south-china-sea>

10 March 2023: Code of conduct on South China Sea must be actionable, Indonesia says after China-Asean talks

The code of conduct (COC) for the South China Sea, being drawn up by Asean and China, will have to be one that is effective and substantive, said Mr Sidharto R. Suryodipuro, director-general for Asean cooperation at Indonesia’s Foreign Ministry.

Speaking at a briefing on Friday after officials from Asean and China held meetings on the COC, Mr Sidharto noted that talks have been progressing, and there is a commitment from all sides to intensify negotiations.

While he did not reveal specific details of the three-day discussions, Mr Sidharto stressed that the priority for the COC is to be “actionable”.

“We do not want the agreement to just simply be a document only, (where parties are) agreeing for the sake of agreeing. Thus, the COC has to be effective, substantive and actionable,” he said.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/code-of-conduct-on-south-china-sea-must-be-actionable-indonesia-says-after-china-asean-talks>

10 March 2023: South China Sea: Chinese ship orders Philippine plane flying over Spratlys to ‘leave immediately’

As a Philippine coastguard plane carrying journalists flew over the Spratly Islands in the hotly disputed South China Sea, a Chinese voice issued a stern command over the radio: “Leave immediately.”

The order came from a radio operator on a Chinese coastguard vessel 3,500 feet (1,066 metres) below – one of dozens of ships seen prowling the waters.

AFP was one of several media outlets given the rare opportunity on Thursday to fly over some of the dozens of tiny islands and reefs where the Philippines, China and several other nations have competing claims.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3213046/south-china-sea-chinese-ship-orders-philippine-plane-flying-over-spratlys-leave-immediately>

09 March 2023: South China Sea: risk of China flashpoints ‘high’ as rival energy projects expand, report says

A growing number of energy exploration projects in the disputed waters of the South China Sea will increase the chances of confrontations, particularly with Chinese patrols, according to a new report by a US think tank.

Many rival claimants in the resource-rich region have stepped up oil and gas development. China, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia have all either announced or started new offshore projects.

In a worrying sign, many of the new projects lie in the disputed waters, some at the sites of previous confrontations, according to a report by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), which is operated by the Centre for Strategic & International Studies.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3212987/south-china-sea-risk-china-flashpoints-high-rival-energy-projects-expand-report-says>

04 March 2023: Philippines says Chinese navy ship spotted near disputed island

The Philippines said on Saturday (Mar 4) it had spotted a Chinese navy ship and dozens of militia vessels around a contested Philippine-occupied island in the South China Sea, as territorial tensions mount in the area.

The Philippine Coast Guard said 42 vessels believed to be crewed by Chinese maritime militia personnel were seen in the vicinity of Thitu Island, while a Chinese navy vessel and coast guard ship were observed "slowly loitering" in the surrounding waters.

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/philippines-chinese-navy-ship-south-china-sea-thitu-island-3324901>

01 March: Malaysian premier proposes 'multilateral' approach to disputed South China Sea

Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim on Wednesday suggested a "multilateral" approach at the level of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a way forward in dealing with the disputed South China Sea.

"Due to the complexity and sensitivity of the issue, we should try and engage and take the position at a multilateral level between ASEAN so that we have a comprehensive approach and achieve an amicable resolution to this outstanding problem," Anwar said at a joint news conference with Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in Manila, which was broadcast live.

Anwar is on a two-day state visit to the Philippines, the first foreign leader hosted by Marcos since taking office in June last year.

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/malaysian-premier-proposes-multilateral-approach-to-disputed-south-china-sea/2834659>

OTHER STATES AND SOUTH CHINA SEA

29 March 2023: Japan pushes Philippines, US to form anti-China security framework

Japan, the Philippines and the United States plan to set up a trilateral framework involving their national security advisers, officials familiar with the matter said recently, amid China's growing military assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region.

Their first discussions under the new scheme may take place as early as April, said Eduardo Ano, security adviser to Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Ano said he is "willing to attend" the meeting although details, including which country will host the talks, remain fluid.

An aide to Ano separately disclosed on Friday that the proposal to initiate a three-way security dialogue was put forward by Japan which, with the US, believes that forging closer ties with the Philippines is essential for boosting deterrence against Beijing and preparing for a potential crisis over Taiwan.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/east-asia/article/3215226/japan-pushes-philippines-us-form-anti-china-security-framework>

25 March 2023: New Zealand raises concerns with China on South China Sea

New Zealand Foreign Affairs Minister Nanaia Mahuta said on Saturday (Mar 25) she had expressed concerns over the South China Sea and tensions in the Taiwan Strait during talks with her Chinese counterpart at the end of a visit to Beijing.

Mahuta also said in a statement she "noted New Zealand's deep concerns regarding the human rights situation in Xinjiang and the erosion of rights and freedoms in Hong Kong", during her meeting with Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister Qin Gang.

"Nanaia Mahuta expressed concerns over developments in the South China Sea and increasing tensions in the Taiwan Strait," the foreign minister's statement said.

Mahuta arrived in China on Wednesday for the four-day trip, the first by a New Zealand minister since 2019, and also met China's top diplomat Wang Yi as well as business and women leaders.

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/world/new-zealand-concerns-south-china-sea-taiwan-foreign-ministers-3373446>

24 March 2023: US Navy challenges Beijing's South China Sea claims, gets angry reaction

A day after China said it drove a US Navy destroyer away from Beijing-claimed waters in the South China Sea, the US 7th Fleet said the same warship sailed through those waters to challenge the Chinese claims.

The "guided-missile destroyer USS Milius asserted navigational rights and freedoms in the South China Sea near the Paracel Islands, consistent with international law," a statement from 7th Fleet spokesperson Lt. jg. Luka Bakic said.

The warship conducted what the US Navy calls a "freedom of navigation operation," or FONOP, Bakic said, "challenging the restrictions on innocent passage imposed by the People's Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan, and Vietnam."

The US statement also said the Milius challenged China's claim to "straight baselines enclosing the Paracels," meaning Beijing's claims to waters between the islands, even when those waters are outside the internationally recognized 12-nautical-mile limit from a coastline for territorial waters.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/24/asia/us-navy-operation-paracels-china-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>

22 March 2023: US gets new Philippine bases with South China Sea, Taiwan in mind

Four new military bases to be used by United States forces deployed to the Philippines will be in scattered locations around the country, including in a province facing the flashpoint South China Sea, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr has said.

The Marcos administration announced last month that it would allow rotating batches of US forces to indefinitely stay in four new Philippine military camps in addition to five local bases earlier designated under a 2014 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA).

Locations for the new bases will include areas in the northern Philippines, a move that is likely to infuriate China as it would provide US forces with a well-situated staging ground close to southern China and Taiwan.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/22/us-gets-new-philippine-bases-with-south-china-sea-taiwan-in-mind>

18 March 2023: Australia Blames ‘Chinese Military’ For Harassing Civilian Airliner; Warns Pilots of VHF Attacks, GPS Jamming

Qantas has warned its pilots about very high frequency (VHF) interference from stations purporting to represent the PLA in the South China Sea and western Pacific, as well as GPS jamming allegedly originating from warships off the coast of northwest Australia.

In a notice published on March 16, the airline updated its flight standing orders manual to incorporate procedures for what to do if crews run into such circumstances.

The notice alerted pilots to hostile activities that flights had sometimes experienced in the western Pacific and South China Sea.

According to the release, interference on VHF was experienced by Qantas Group aircraft in the western Pacific and South China Sea from stations allegedly representing the Chinese military.

The term “very high frequency,” or VHF, refers to radio waves that range in frequency from 30 to 300 MHz and are utilized for various radio communications.

<https://eurasianimes.com/australia-blames-chinese-military-for-harassing-civilian/>

15 March 2023: Philippines and U.S. to hold largest-ever joint military drills

The Philippines and the United States will hold their largest ever joint military exercises next month, Philippine and U.S. officials said Tuesday, as the longtime allies seek to counter China's growing regional influence.

A total of 17,680 soldiers will take part in the annual drills, which for the first time will include live-fire exercises in the disputed South China Sea and a simulated defense of a tiny Philippine island nearly 300 kilometers south of Taiwan.

The countries will also stage an amphibious landing on the western island of Palawan, the closest Philippine landmass to the Spratly Islands — a flashpoint for Beijing and Manila.

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/03/15/world/philippines-china-military-drills/>

08 March 2023: Germany hails PH’s ‘tweaked’ South China Sea policy

The German Embassy in Manila finds the Philippines’ shift in its South China Sea policy as an important development in showing the world its willingness to strengthen a rules-based regional order.

“[T]his is really so crucial that the message that the world gets is that the Philippines wants to work in the framework of the rules-based international order to strengthen and to work for its sovereignty and rights and we can support this,” German Ambassador in Manila Anke Reiffenstuel said on the sidelines of a Stratbase ADRI forum in Makati, Wednesday.

The Marcos administration, through the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), last month vowed that it would make maritime incidents in the West Philippine Sea public following the continued harassment it experienced from the Chinese Coast Guard.

<https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1196964>

06 March 2023: RAAF crews offered counselling after tense encounters with Beijing's military over South China Sea

The RAAF says it's noticing a trend of more dangerous behavior by aircraft from the People's Liberation Army.

Last May, the RAAF was dangerously intercepted by a Chinese military aircraft, which released aluminium chaff, that was ingested into the engine of the Australian P-8 surveillance plane.

Air Vice Marshal Darren Goldie says it's important RAAF crews are offered counselling after stressful sorties.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-03-06/raaf-crews-offered-counselling-after-tense-encounters-with-china/102056560>

03 March 2023: Quad ministers vow to address challenges in South, East China seas

The foreign ministers of India, Japan, the United States and Australia pledged Friday to address maritime challenges in the South and East China seas, in a display of solidarity against Beijing's military assertiveness in the region.

The four Indo-Pacific democracies, collectively known as the Quad, also voiced their concern about "the militarization of disputed features" and "the dangerous use of coast guard vessels and maritime militia" in the area, according to a joint statement issued after their gathering in New Delhi.

The meeting came amid the Communist-led government increasing its military presence in disputed areas in the South China Sea and repeatedly intruding into Japanese waters around the Senkaku Islands, controlled by Tokyo but claimed by Beijing, in the East China Sea.

<https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2023/03/95864973bd75-quad-foreign-ministers-meet-in-india-amid-china-rise-war-in-ukraine.html>

02 March 2023: New Marine Corps Prototype Ship Signals Interesting Times For South China Sea

U.S. Marine Corps innovators have stumbled upon an ideal solution for the contested reefs and sea-features of the South China Sea. Tasked to build a modest prototype for a future Marine Corps landing ship, America has ended up with a tough, mobile, shallow-water mini-base, perfect for the Philippine Navy.

First built in the early 1950's, jackup rigs were developed to be mobile drilling platforms, moving to where they were needed and drilling exploratory wells. Today, jackup rigs are being reinvented as wind-farm support tools, setting their extendable legs into the seabed, serving as a stable platform for generator installation, heavy maintenance or whatever might be needed.

News of the new craft also came days before the Philippine Marine Corps Chief, Maj. Gen. Charlton Sean Gaerlan was set to arrive in Washington to spend the week with General David Berger, America's Marine Corps commandant, who quipped that "he had much to learn about mobility around islands and beaches". With the modified HOS Resolution, the foresighted General and his Service—as well as the Chinese—are likely to learn an enormous amount.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/craighooper/2023/03/02/new-marine-corps-prototype-ship-signals-interesting-times-for-south-china-sea/?sh=457183c678ae>