

SOUTH CHINA SEA NEWS No.117
June 2023

ACTS OF CLAIMANTS

27 June 2023: Calls grow in Philippines for UN intervention against Beijing over Hague ruling refusal

The Philippines' long-running feud with China over its refusal to recognise a 2016 international arbitral ruling that invalidated most of Beijing's claims to the disputed South China Sea could soon be raised at the United Nations' General Assembly, after more Philippine senators gave the proposal their backing.

Introduced last week by lawmaker and outspoken China critic Risa Hontiveros, the Senate resolution calls on the Department of Foreign Affairs to pursue a UN intervention prodding Beijing to accept The Hague tribunal's verdict, which recognised the Philippines' sovereign rights in the resource-rich waterway.

'China claims to be an ally ... but it's harassing our fisherfolk,' said one lawmaker who backs the plan to raise the issue at the UN General Assembly

https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3225538/south-china-sea-calls-grow-philippines-un-intervention-against-beijing-over-hague-ruling-refusal?module=perpetual_scroll_0&pgtype=article&campaign=3225538

21 June 2023: Philippines' Marcos Jnr hails 'progress' on South China Sea fishing ban talks with Beijing

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jnr says his government and Beijing have made "progress" on navigating a unilateral fishing ban imposed by the Asian giant in the contested South China Sea that has threatened the livelihoods of local fisherfolk.

The annual restrictions have been in place in the resource-rich waterway, which encompasses the Philippines' exclusive economic zone, for more than two decades – despite a 2016 UN-backed tribunal ruling that found the Southeast Asian nation has a sovereign right to fish there. China has refused to recognise the decision.

Marcos Jnr also sought to soft-pedal on the issue of a Chinese coastguard vessel reportedly shadowing a Philippine boat last week while it was on its way to deliver supplies to fishermen on Thitu Island, one of the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea currently under Manila's jurisdiction.

<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3224849/philippines-marcos-jnr-hails-progress-south-china-sea-fishing-ban-talks-beijing>

19 June 2023: Beijing builds research port in disputed waters

China is building its first port dedicated to deep-sea research in the South China Sea as the country seeks to cement its claims over disputed waters in the area.

The project broke ground last week in the resort city of Sanya on the island province of Hainan. The China State Shipbuilding Corporation, a state-owned ship-maker, said it would serve the interests of national defence as well as supporting deep-sea experiments.

The port will be the core of the research base, docking experimental vessels and ensuring "highly efficient operations", the state-owned company said.

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/south-china-sea-beijing-builds-research-port-in-disputed-waters-gmql8dqgt>

17 June 2023: Tensions High as Chinese Vessels Shadow Vietnam's Oil, Gas Operations

China is sending more ships to Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), and the frequency and length of those trips, which have picked up since early May, is raising tensions in the South China Sea.

After a nearly monthlong incursion of a survey ship and its large entourage, more Chinese vessels are sailing through sensitive locations within Vietnamese waters. Vietnam's EEZ extends out 200 nautical miles from the country's coast.

The presence of Chinese research, coast guard and civilian ships in these waters, in addition to harassing Vietnamese oil and gas operations, showcases Beijing's push of contested claims in the resource-rich waters, experts say.

<https://www.voanews.com/a/tensions-high-as-chinese-vessels-shadow-vietnam-s-oil-and-gas-operations-/7141273.html>

14 June 2023: Philippines starts bringing tourists to disputed Spratly Islands in South China Sea

The Philippines is, for the first time, allowing tourism in areas it controls in the hotly contested Spratly Islands of the disputed South China Sea.

The islands which the Philippines has laid claim on are in the northeastern part of the Spratly archipelago, an area locally known as the Kalayaan Island Group of the West Philippine Sea.

The seven-day tour aboard a dive yacht is dubbed the Great Kalayaan or Freedom Expedition, and costs more than US\$2,000 per person.

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/south-china-sea-spratly-islands-philippines-tourism-3561061>

13 June 2023: China sends new patrol ship Haixun 03 on South China Sea mission

China has sent its maritime patrol ship the Haixun 03 to the disputed Paracel Islands in the South China Sea to bolster its claims to the area.

The vessel arrived on Sunday at Woody Island, known as Yongxing Island in Chinese, and will patrol the surrounding waters until early July, Chinese state media reported on Monday.

The assignment comes as South China Sea claimant countries are scrambling to reinforce their claims before a code of conduct for activities in the waters is finalised.

China has established military bases and civilian settlements in the Paracels, known as the Xisha in China, but the US Navy also sails frequently through the waters on what it calls freedom of navigation operations.

The Haixun is operated by the Hainan Maritime Safety Administration (MSA) and its crew is tasked with inspecting the navigation route, telecommunication and lighthouse equipment, beacons, buoys and other navigational facilities.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3223847/china-sends-new-patrol-ship-haixun-03-south-china-sea-mission>

8 June 2023: ASEAN to hold first joint military drills in South China Sea

Southeast Asian nations have agreed to hold their first joint military drills in the South China Sea, Indonesian officials said on Thursday (Jun 8), as tensions grow over China's increasing assertiveness in the region.

"We will hold joint military drills in the North Natuna Sea," Indonesian military chief Yudo Margono said after a meeting of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) defence chiefs in Bali, state news agency Antara reported.

They will take place in September and involve all 10 members of the bloc as well as observer member Timor-Leste, he said.

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/south-china-sea-asean-hold-first-joint-military-drills-3548521>

<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/South-China-Sea/ASEAN-seeks-to-demonstrate-unity-in-South-China-Sea-drills>

In relation: 13 June 2023: Cambodia Pumps Brakes on Plan for ASEAN Joint Military Exercises in South China Sea

Cambodia has thrown a diplomatic wrench in ASEAN plans for joint military drills in the contested South China Sea, in the latest test of Prime Minister Hun Sen's balancing act between the regional bloc and Beijing.

General Vong Pisen, commander-in-chief of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, released a statement soon after saying that Cambodia had yet to agree to the drills. Vong Pisen said Indonesia's military chief had raised the idea as the rotating chair of the bloc, but Cambodia and "several other countries" — which were not named — did not respond. He added that a joint statement from the 20th ASEAN Commander-in-Chief Meeting, held in Bali last week, "did not mention ASEAN joint military exercises in the South China Sea."

<https://www.voanews.com/a/cambodia-pumps-brakes-on-plan-for-asean-joint-military-exercises-in-south-china-sea/7134571.html>

In relation: 20 June 2023: ASEAN moves joint drills away from disputed South China Sea area

The ASEAN has moved its first-ever joint drills, Indonesia's military said on Tuesday, edging them away from waters disputed by China.

The bloc's joint exercises were initially slated to take place in the North Natuna Sea, which Indonesia claims as its exclusive economic zone but where Beijing's ships occasionally patrol.

Asean's drills will now take place in the South Natuna Sea between Sept 18 and 25, Indonesia's military said in a statement, avoiding the contested waters.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/asean-moves-joint-drills-from-disputed-south-china-sea-area>

6 June 2023: Chinese ships leave Vietnam waters after Hanoi protest

Chinese research ship and its escort, which operated for nearly a month in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea and prompted a rare protest from Hanoi, left those waters late on Monday.

Chinese vessel Xiang Yang Hong 10 began sailing in Vietnam's EEZ on May 7, at times flanked by a dozen ships, regularly crossing gas and oil fields operated by Russian companies, according to vessel-tracking data.

The Chinese vessel and its entourage of more than half a dozen ships began their journey back to China's Hainan island, leaving Vietnam's EEZ around midnight, the data showed.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinese-ships-leave-vietnam-waters-after-us-china-talks-2023-06-06/>

OTHER STATES AND SOUTH CHINA SEA

30 June 2023: For the First Time, India Calls for Abiding by the 2016 Arbitral Award on South China Sea

Seven years after the order by an international tribunal, India has upgraded its position and for the first time, it has explicitly called for abiding by the 2016 arbitration award that had struck down China's territorial claims in South China Sea.

The change in India's posture was mentioned in a joint statement issued by India and the Philippines after the fifth Joint Commission on bilateral cooperation on Thursday.

Saying that both countries have a shared interest in an open and inclusive Indo-Pacific, the joint statement said, “They (the ministers) underlined the need for a peaceful settlement of disputes and for an adherence to international law, especially the UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Award on the South China Sea in this regard.”

<https://thewire.in/diplomacy/for-the-first-time-india-calls-for-abiding-by-the-2016-arbitral-award-on-south-china-sea>

29 June 2023: US asks Asean claimants to resolve own South China Sea issues before taking on China

The United States called on Asean claimants to the South China Sea to resolve their differences with one another, so they can strengthen their “collective voice” in negotiations with China, said Washington’s top diplomat for East Asia on Wednesday.

Mr Daniel Kritenbrink said the US was particularly encouraged by recent agreements between Indonesia and Vietnam, as well as between Indonesia and Malaysia, to settle their sea boundaries and end long-running disputes over their overlapping claims to parts of the South China Sea.

“We believe that US policy has bolstered regional confidence in US resolve, and it has empowered South China Sea claimants to speak up publicly to protect their own rights and interests,” he said, at a forum organised by the Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

“Moving forward, we want to support South-east Asian claimants with both our words and our actions,” added Mr Kritenbrink.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/us-asks-asean-claimants-to-resolve-own-south-china-sea-issues-before-taking-on-china>

27 June 2023: Japan, Australia Drill Together in South China Sea for Trident Exercise

Australian and Japanese forces conducted exercise Trident 2023 over the weekend in the South China Sea.

The Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force participated in the exercise as part of its Indo-Pacific Deployment 2023. The exercise followed a port visit in Vietnam.

JMSDF helicopter destroyer JS Izumo (DDH-183) and destroyer JS Samidare (DD-106), which form the main body of the first surface unit of IPD23, carried out the exercise with Royal Australian Navy frigate HMAS Anzac (FFH150) and a Royal Australian Air Force P-8A Poseidon Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) in the South China Sea, according to a Tuesday JMSDF release. The exercise focused on tactical operations, including anti-surface and anti-air warfare.

<https://news.usni.org/2023/06/27/japan-australia-drill-together-in-south-china-sea-for-trident-exercise>

18 June 2023: New Zealand frigate confronted by Chinese navy in South China Seas, investigation reveals

A New Zealand frigate was confronted in a sensitive part of the South China Sea by Chinese navy warships demanding details of its passage, a Stuff Circuit investigation has revealed.

HMNZS Te Mana was transiting through the Spratly Islands when two People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) frigates, a helicopter and four other vessels came within 463 metres of the 3500-tonne warship, in an act described by a security expert as possibly “sending a message” about changes to defence policy.

Defence Minister Andrew Little, who attended a major security summit alongside the US and China in Singapore in early June, said the Te Mana incident was not in the same category as the ‘unprofessional intervention’ of the Chung-Hoon.

“[The contact with Te Mana] hasn’t been described as unprofessional. [China] clearly take the view that they have a right to do what they do in that area and to question others about what they’re doing in the area.”

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/300907470/nz-frigate-confronted-by-chinese-navy-in-south-china-seas-investigation-reveals>

6 June 2023: US, Japanese, Philippine coast guard ships stage law enforcement drills near South China Sea

U.S., Japanese and Philippine coast guard ships staged law enforcement drills in waters near the disputed South China Sea on Tuesday as Washington presses efforts to reinforce alliances in Asia amid an increasingly tense rivalry with China.

Witnessed by journalists onboard a Philippine coast guard patrol boat, the BRP Cabra, the drills focused on a scenario involving the interdiction and boarding of a vessel suspected of carrying weapons of mass destruction off the Bataan Peninsula, Philippine coast guard spokesperson Commodore Armand Balilo said.

The Philippine coast guard, meanwhile, has intensified patrols in the South China Sea and taken extra efforts to document and publicize assertive Chinese behavior in the waterway following a Feb. 6 incident in which a Chinese coast guard ship aimed a military-grade laser that briefly blinded some crew members on a Philippine patrol boat off a disputed reef.

<https://apnews.com/article/us-japan-philippines-south-china-sea-drill-24e42edef1fcfe7100327c55f0537732>

5 June 2023: Chinese warship passed in 'unsafe manner' near destroyer in Taiwan Strait, US says

A Chinese warship came within 150 yards (137 meters) of a U.S. destroyer in the Taiwan Strait in "an unsafe manner," U.S. military officials said, as China blamed the United States for "deliberately provoking risk" in the region.

U.S. and Canadian navies on Saturday were conducting a joint exercise in the strait, which separates the island of Taiwan and China, when the Chinese ship cut in front of the U.S. guided-missile destroyer Chung-Hoon forcing it to slow down to avoid a collision, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command said in a statement.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinese-warship-passed-unsafe-manner-near-us-destroyer-taiwan-strait-us-2023-06-04/>

4 June 2023: Germany to send two warships to Indo-Pacific in 2024 amid South China Sea tensions

Germany will send two warships to the Indo-Pacific in 2024, Defence Minister Boris Pistorius said on Sunday, amid rising tensions between China and Taiwan and over the disputed South China Sea.

Speaking at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Asia's most important security conference, Pistorius said countries needed to stand up for the rules-based international order and the protection of major maritime passages.

"To this end, the German Federal Government sent a frigate to the Indo-Pacific in 2021, and will again, in 2024, deploy maritime assets – this time a frigate and a supply ship - to the region," he said, according to a script of his speech distributed by the defence ministry in Berlin.

He added the deployments were not directed against any nation, a remark apparently addressed at China.

"To the contrary: They are dedicated to the protection of the rules-based international order that we all signed up to and which we all should benefit from – be it in the Mediterranean, in the Bay of Bengal or in the South China Sea."

<https://www.reuters.com/world/germany-send-two-warships-indo-pacific-2024-amid-south-china-sea-tensions-2023-06-04/>

3 June 2023: US and China in the same room but worlds apart on Taiwan, South China Sea

Top Chinese and US defence officials may have shaken hands but they were soon back bristling over Taiwan and the South China Sea at a major security conference in Singapore on Saturday.

Beijing and Washington seemed as far apart as ever as US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin renewed his country's commitment to defend the Taiwan Strait against "bullying and coercion" while a senior Chinese official accused Austin of making "false accusations". The terse exchanges at the Shangri-La Dialogue all but eliminated any hopes of a meeting between Austin and his Chinese counterpart, Li Shangfu, who had bilateral talks with his counterparts from Malaysia, Germany, Britain, Australia, Japan and South Korea on the sidelines of the forum.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3222854/shangri-la-dialogue-us-and-china-same-room-worlds-apart-taiwan-south-china-sea>

3 June 2023: Philippines to step up ties with U.S.-Japan-Australia coalition

The U.S., Japan, Australia and the Philippines held their first-ever quadrilateral defense chief talks in Singapore on Saturday amid growing challenges posed by China in the South China Sea and in the waters around Taiwan.

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Japanese Defense Minister Yasukazu Hamada met with their Australian and Philippine counterparts, Richard Marles and Carlito Galvez, on the sideline of the Asia security forum known as Shangri-La Dialogue.

According to a readout provided by the Japanese Minister of Defense, the four leaders "reaffirmed that they share a vision for Free and Open Indo-Pacific and collectively make efforts to ensure the vision continues to thrive."