

SOUTH CHINA SEA NEWS No. 122
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ACTS OF CLAIMANTS

3 December 2023: Philippines deploys vessels to monitor ‘illegal’ presence of Chinese boats in South China Sea

The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) has deployed two of its vessels in the South China Sea after monitoring an “alarming” increase in the number of Chinese maritime militia vessels at a reef within the country’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

The number of Chinese boats believed to be manned by militia personnel has increased to more than 135 from 111 in November, scattered within the Whitsun Reef, which Manila calls the Julian Felipe Reef, the PCG said in a statement.

“The PCG maintains its unwavering commitment to safeguarding maritime security, safety and the marine environment in the course of protecting the territorial integrity, sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction of the Philippines in the West Philippine Sea,” it said.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/philippines-deploys-vessels-to-monitor-illegal-presence-of-chinese-boats-in-south-china-sea>

27 November 2023: Chinese fighter jets ‘orbit’ Philippine patrol aircraft, says Manila

Two Chinese fighter jets were monitored “orbiting” a Philippine aircraft participating in patrols with Australia in the South China Sea but did not cause any untoward incident, Manila said on Nov 26.

China’s foreign ministry said on Nov 27 it was “unaware of the circumstances”.

“I want to emphasise that if China’s territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests are threatened or challenged, China will definitely have a firm response,” a spokesperson said.

The militaries of the Philippines and Australia carried out a second day of sea and air exercises in the South-east Asian country’s exclusive economic zone, days after Manila held patrols with the United States as Pacific nations warily eye an increasingly assertive China.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/chinese-fighter-jets-orbit-philippine-patrol-aircraft-manila-says>

21 November 2023: Philippines pitches new code for South China Sea in the name of peace and stability

The Philippines has proposed a new code of conduct for stability and peace in the disputed South China Sea.

Manila's pitch came after President Ferdinand Marcos expressed concern about the prolonged negotiations between Southeast Asian nations and China over the South China Sea Code of Conduct (COC), the Anadolu Agency citing Philippine News Agency reported.

"We are now in the midst of negotiating our own code of conduct, for example, with Vietnam because we are still waiting for the code of conduct between China and Asean (Association of South-East Asian Nations) and the progress has been rather slow unfortunately," "And so we've taken the initiative to approach those other countries around ASEAN with whom we have existing territorial conflicts," Marcos said at an event at the Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies in Honolulu, Hawaii on Monday.

It reported Marcos is also seeking support from nations like Vietnam and Malaysia to create a new sea code for maintaining peace in the South China Sea.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/aseanplus/aseanplus-news/2023/11/21/philippines-pitches-new-code-for-south-china-sea-in-the-name-of-peace-and-stability>

18 November 2023: Philippines' Marcos meets China's Xi to find ways to reduce South China Sea tensions

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr met with Chinese President Xi Jinping on Friday, seeking ways to reduce tensions in the South China Sea and restore Filipino fishermen's access to fishing grounds.

The Philippines and China need to continue to communicate, with the meeting a key part of the process to maintain peace, and keep open sea lanes and airways over the South China Sea, Marcos told reporters on the sidelines of the APEC Summit in San Francisco.

"We tried to come up with mechanisms to lower the tensions in the South China Sea," Marcos said, without elaborating.

Marcos said he voiced concern over incidents between Chinese and Philippine vessels, including one collision. He said he also raised the plight of Filipino fishermen.

"I asked that we go back to the situation where both Chinese and Filipino fishermen were fishing together in these waters," he said.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-marcos-meets-chinas-xi-find-ways-reduce-south-china-sea-tensions-2023-11-18/>

17 November 2023: China's Xi offers more investment in South China Sea claimant Brunei

CHINA offered to buy more goods from Brunei and to encourage investment in the Islamic sultanate as President Xi Jinping lauded relations with the tiny nation that have centred more on economics than territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

In his meeting with Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah in San Francisco on Thursday (Nov 17), Xi said China would welcome more exports from Brunei, tell more Chinese enterprises to set up shop in the South-east Asian country, and expand cooperation in areas such as food security, according to Chinese state media.

"Both sides should work together to promote positive progress in joint maritime development and jointly safeguard peace and stability in the South China Sea," Xi told Brunei's sultan on the sidelines of the APEC summit in San Francisco.

<https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/international/asean/chinas-xi-offers-more-investment-south-china-sea-claimant-brunei>

17 November 2023: Vietnam ramps up South China Sea island expansion, says US report

Vietnam has been ramping up its dredging and landfill work in the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, creating another 134ha of land since December 2022, a United States think-tank said in a report.

The expansion, much larger than the 49ha it had created between 2012 and 2022, makes Vietnam second only to China in terms of island build-up in the Spratly Islands, Washington's Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) said in the report this week, citing satellite imagery.

Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The recent expansion by Vietnam was the most noticeable at Barque Canada Reef, called Bai Thuyen Chai in Vietnam, where the report, produced by CSIS's Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, said 85ha of land was created in the past year.

The report said Vietnam had started using cutter suction dredgers to "accelerate its dredging efforts", and in October, it began dredging at two additional features, including South Reef and Central Reef.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/vietnam-ramps-up-south-china-sea-island-expansion-researchers-say>

12 November 2023: China will host 6-nation ‘Aman Youyi’ army drills to ‘deepen trust’ with Southeast Asia as disputes roil South China Sea

China will hold anti-terrorism exercises with five Southeast Asian neighbours in Chinese waters later this month, the country’s defence ministry said.

The joint drills come as China seeks to “deepen military mutual trust” at a time of heightened tensions over territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

The militaries of Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam will take part in the “Aman Youyi 2023” drills, with China hosting the multinational exercise for the first time since they started in 2014.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3241241/china-will-host-6-nation-aman-youyi-army-drills-deepen-trust-southeast-asia-disputes-roil-south>

<https://www.voanews.com/a/china-hosts-military-exercises-with-5-asean-members/7360416.html>

10 November 2023: China Coast Guard says its ‘special arrangements’ allow Philippines to supply Second Thomas Shoal base

China’s coastguard has made “temporary special arrangements” for Philippine ships to supply their base in the disputed Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea, according to China.

Gan Yu, a spokesman for the China Coast Guard, said on Friday three Philippine coastguard ships and two cargo vessels made an “unapproved entry” into the disputed waters.

He said the coastguard followed and took control measures against the Philippine vessels and made “temporary special arrangements for the Philippines to transport food and other necessary daily supplies”.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3241062/south-china-sea-china-coast-guard-says-its-special-arrangements-allow-philippines-supply-second>

***Follows-up:* 16 November 2023: Philippines rejects China's call for prior notice on resupply missions in disputed waters and calls on China to remove illegal structures, cease reclamations in South China Sea**

The Philippines does not have to give China prior notice about resupply missions in its own territory in the South China Sea, saying the operations, including the “upkeep” of a grounded navy ship, are legitimate, its foreign ministry said on Thursday.

The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) also called on China to remove all “illegal structures” it built within the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone (EEZ), cease reclamation in those areas and be accountable for the environmental damage the activities caused.

China has repeatedly accused the Philippines of illegally entering its waters without its permission during its missions to transport food and water to Filipino soldiers living aboard a navy ship that Manila grounded at the disputed Second Thomas Shoal. The atoll is called Ayungin by the Philippines and Renai Reef by China.

“We are being asked to give prior notification each time we conduct a resupply mission to Ayungin Shoal. We will not do so,” DFA spokesperson Teresita Daza said in a statement.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-calls-china-remove-illegal-structures-cease-reclamations-south-china-2023-11-16/>

06 November 2023: Taiwan to keep deploying frigates to disputed South China Sea island

Taiwan will continue to send large Coast Guard vessels to its disputed South China Sea claim hoping to “stabilize the regional situation,” the country’s national security director said on Monday (Nov. 6).

Tsai Ming-yen was responding to questions from legislators about possible Chinese incursions into the area around the South China Sea's Taiping Island, which is claimed by Taiwan, China, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Tsai said that the Coast Guard routinely patrols the area, and gradually larger ships will also be deployed to the waters around the island, per CNA.

<https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/5034496>

OTHER STATES AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

25 November 2023: Australia and Philippines begin joint patrols in South China Sea as regional tensions rise

Australia and the Philippines have begun joint sea and air patrols in the South China Sea as Pacific nations warily eye an increasingly assertive China.

The three-day exercises follow discussions earlier this year on joint patrols to underscore what the countries say is their commitment to closer cooperation and a rules-based order in the region.

It also comes days after Manila took similar steps with the US, concluding patrols that started in waters near Taiwan.

Australia’s defence minister, Richard Marles, said the inaugural patrols represent the practical implementation of the strategic partnership signed between the two nations in September.

The Philippine defence department spokesperson Arsenio Andolong said the patrols would be carried out in the West Philippine Sea, Manila’s term for waters in the South China Sea that fall within its exclusive economic zone.

The Philippine military said two of its navy vessels and five surveillance aircraft would participate.

Australia said it would send the frigate HMAS Toowoomba and P8-A maritime surveillance aircraft.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/25/australia-and-philippines-begin-joint-patrols-in-south-china-sea-as-regional-tensions-rise>

25 November 2023: China, US exchange accusations over US vessel in South China Sea

China and the United States exchanged accusations at the weekend over the disputed South China Sea, after China's military said it had driven away a US warship that the US Navy said was on a routine freedom of navigation operation.

According to a post on the official WeChat social media account of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Southern Theatre Command on Saturday (Nov 25), the Chinese military deployed its naval and air forces to "track, monitor and warn away" the US destroyer.

The US Navy said on Sunday that the Hopper had "asserted navigational rights in the South China Sea near the Paracel Islands, consistent with international law".

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/south-china-sea-beijing-us-exchange-accusations-3945661>

22 November 2023: Philippines launches joint sea and air patrols with US military

Joint maritime and air patrols in the South China Sea between the Philippines and the United States military were launched on Tuesday (Nov 21), Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr said, describing it as a "significant initiative".

The Philippine leader's announcement comes amid a rapid strengthening of ties this year between the two defence treaty allies, including a decision to almost double the number of Philippine bases accessible to the US military.

"This significant initiative is a testament to our commitment to bolster the interoperability of our military forces in conducting maritime and air patrols," Marcos said on social media platform X.

The patrol would take place off of the island of Mavulis, according to Eugene Cabusao of the Northern Luzon command. The island is the northernmost point of the Philippines, located about 100km off Taiwan.

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/philippines-launches-joint-sea-and-air-patrols-us-military-3936436>

21 November 2023: U.S. advises Philippines on warship repair on China-claimed atoll

The U.S. has begun advising the Philippines on the repair of a World War II-era warship grounded on an atoll in the South China Sea, people familiar with the matter told Nikkei, demonstrating Washington's commitment to protecting Manila's maritime rights in the face of growing tensions with China.

A senior Philippine official told Nikkei that Manila and Washington have begun informal discussions about the vessel's structure as a part of efforts to draft a concrete repair plan.

The Philippine official said the U.S. could provide help, such as transportation of materials, and security, while repair work takes place. The two sides have not yet discussed such details, the official added.

<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/South-China-Sea/U.S.-advises-Philippines-on-warship-repair-on-China-claimed-atoll>

16 November 2023: US defence chiefs slam Beijing's 'dangerous' actions, seek intel-sharing deal with the Philippine

The US and the Philippines' defence chiefs slammed Beijing's recent moves in the South China Sea and pushed to bolster their long-standing alliance, even as Washington seeks to warm ties with China.

US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin and his Philippine counterpart Gilberto Teodoro Jr met on the sidelines of Asean Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus in Jakarta, according to a joint readout released on Wednesday.

The secretaries "denounced the recent harassment" by Chinese vessels towards Philippine coastguard and resupply vessels "conducting lawful resupply operations" around Second Thomas Shoal, which is part of Beijing's sweeping claims over the South China Sea.

The US and the Philippines' defence ministers also "committed to explore further opportunities to strengthen bilateral operations and planning," including military drills next year and an agreement on information-sharing. They also sought "to expand multilateral activities with like-minded partners," the statement said.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3241714/south-china-sea-us-philippine-defence-chiefs-slam-beijings-dangerous-actions-seek-intel-sharing-deal>

08 November 2023: G7 Foreign Ministers' Statement on South China Sea (in part)

We underscore that China has a responsibility to uphold the purposes and principles of the UN Charter in their entirety. We remain seriously concerned about the situation in the East and South China Seas, strongly opposing any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by

force or coercion. We reemphasize the universal and unified character of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and reaffirm UNCLOS's important role in setting out the legal framework that governs all activities in the oceans and the seas. We reiterate that the award rendered by the Arbitral Tribunal on July 12, 2016, is a significant milestone, which is legally binding upon the parties to those proceedings, and a useful basis for peacefully resolving disputes between the parties.

We reaffirm the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as indispensable to security and prosperity in the international community and call for the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues. There is no change in the basic position of the G7 members on Taiwan, including stated one China policies.

Follow-up: 10 November 2023: China pushes back G-7 'interference' in Taiwan, South China Sea

China called on the G-7 nations on Friday to cease “interfering in the internal affairs” of other countries, including Taiwan.

"China firmly opposes the G-7's actions in undermining China's sovereignty and interfering in China's internal affairs," said Wang Wenbin, spokesman of China's Foreign Ministry.

Wang said: "We urge the G-7 to abide by the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter, as well as the basic norms of international relations, manage their own affairs, and stop interfering in the internal affairs of other countries under any pretext or in any name."

Wang called the South China Sea 2016 ruling "illegal, invalid, and has no binding force."

"The key to maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Straits lies in adhering to the one-China principle," said Wang, according to the Beijing-based daily Global Times.

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/china-pushes-back-g-7-interference-in-taiwan-south-china-sea/3050186>

03 November 2023: US airs concerns to China about 'dangerous and unlawful' South China Sea actions

The United States and China held "candid" talks on maritime issues on Friday, including on the contested South China Sea, and the U.S. side underscored its concerns about "dangerous and unlawful" Chinese actions there, the U.S. State Department said.

The talks took place in Beijing between the department's China Coordinator Mark Lambert and China's Director-General for Boundary and Ocean Affairs Hong Liang, the State Department said in a statement.

The meeting follows recent high-level diplomacy ahead of an expected meeting between U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the mid November APEC summit in San Francisco.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-airs-concerns-china-about-dangerous-unlawful-south-china-sea-actions-2023-11-03/>

02 November 2023: Chinese jet fired flares close to submarine-hunting helicopter in South China Sea, Canadian Navy says

A Chinese warplane fired flares in front of a Canadian military helicopter over international waters of the South China Sea last Sunday, an operation that Canadian military officers said was reckless and could have resulted in the downing of the aircraft.

“The risk to a helicopter in that instance is the flares moving into the rotor blades or the engines so this was categorized as both unsafe and non-standard, unprofessional,” said Maj. Rob Millen, air officer aboard the Royal Canadian Navy frigate HMCS Ottawa, the warship from which the Sikorsky Cyclone helicopter was flying.

The incident was the second of two encounters the Ottawa's helicopter had with Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy J-11 fighter jets over international waters on October 29, which saw the fighters get as close as 100 feet from the helicopter, Millen told CNN in an interview aboard the warship.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2023/11/03/asia/canada-china-helicopter-interception-south-china-sea-hnk-intl/index.html>

Follow-up: 05 November 2023: China hits back after Canada accuses PLA jets of 'unsafe' South China Sea moves

Beijing has hit back at Ottawa over a mid-air encounter between a Canadian aircraft and PLA fighter jets over the South China Sea late last month, describing the Canadian action as provocative.

Chinese defence ministry spokesman Zhang Xiaogang said on Saturday that a Canadian helicopter conducted flights of "unknown intent" to approach the airspace around the Paracel Islands, known in China as the Xisha.

Zhang said the People's Liberation Army's naval and air forces had identified the Canadian helicopter and repeatedly issued warnings, but it "refused to respond" and "took provocative actions such as flying at ultra-low altitude".

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3240397/china-hits-back-after-canada-accuses-pla-jets-unsafe-south-china-sea-moves>