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ACTS OF CLAIMANTS

31 March: Marcos boosts Philippines' maritime security as tensions with China rise

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr has ordered his government to strengthen its coordination on maritime security to confront “a range of serious challenges” to territorial integrity and peace, as a dispute with China escalates.

The order, signed on March 25 and made public on March 31, does not mention China but follows a series of bilateral maritime confrontations and mutual accusations over a disputed area of the South China Sea.

The order appears to expand the role of the military by naming the Armed Forces of the Philippines, not just the navy, among the agencies supporting the council.

“Despite efforts to promote stability and security in our maritime domain, the Philippines continues to confront a range of serious challenges that threaten territorial integrity, but also the peaceful existence of Filipinos,” Mr Marcos said in the order.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/philippines-marcos-boosts-maritime-security-as-china-tension-rises>

26 March: Ma urges Tsai to visit Itu Aba, against NSB advice

Former President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) yesterday said that he hoped President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) would reconsider her decision to not visit Itu Aba Island (Taiping Island, 太平島) before her term ends.

Taiping, the largest of the Spratly Islands (Nansha Islands, 南沙群島), lies 1,600km southwest of Kaohsiung, and is administered by the city's Cijin District (旗津). It hosts about 200 coast guard personnel trained by the Marine Corps, and is also claimed by China, the Philippines and Vietnam.

Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) lawmakers have called on Tsai to visit the island to reaffirm Taiwan's sovereignty, following the completion of a dredging project to allow larger vessels to dock.

The National Security Bureau has advised Tsai not to visit the island due to difficulties in maintaining the security of the head of state during the visit, amid rising geopolitical conflicts in the South China Sea.

<https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2024/03/26/2003815489>

24 March: China coastguard uses water cannons against Philippine ships in South China Sea

China's coastguard said it had taken measures against Philippine vessels in disputed waters of the South China Sea on Saturday, while the Philippines decried the moves, including the use of water cannons, as "irresponsible and provocative".

China's actions led to "significant damage" and injury to personnel on a civilian boat hired to resupply troops, the Philippine task force on the South China Sea said in a statement.

The incident occurred in the Second Thomas Shoal and Spratly Islands waters, according to the Chinese coastguard. The shoal is home to a small number of Filipino troops stationed on a warship that Manila grounded there in 1999 to reinforce its sovereignty claims.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-coast-guard-says-it-took-measures-against-philippine-vessels-south-china-2024-03-23/>

Follows-up: 25 March: Philippines summons Beijing envoy over South China Sea water cannon attack

The Philippines has summoned Beijing's envoy after accusing the Chinese Coast Guard of wounding three of its soldiers during a water cannon attack in the disputed South China Sea. The Philippines' Department of Foreign Affairs, in a statement on Monday, said Manila conveyed its "strong protest against the aggressive actions" undertaken by China's Coast Guard and Chinese maritime militias against the Philippine mission near the Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea.

The department said it has also instructed its mission in Beijing to lodge a formal complaint over the incident.

The move comes a day after Philippines' National Security Adviser Eduardo Ano said the confrontation wounded three Filipino soldiers caused severe damage to the Unaizah May 4 vessel.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/25/philippines-summons-beijing-envoy-over-south-china-sea-water-cannon-attack>

20 March: Taiwan warns of 'enormous' Chinese bases near its South China Sea holding

Taiwan's foreign minister said on Wednesday that China has built "enormous" military bases on three islands surrounding Taiwan's main holding in the South China Sea, but Taipei is not looking to further escalate tensions in the strategic waterway.

Both Taiwan and China claim most of the South China Sea as their own territory, but Taiwan only controls one islet in the contested Spratly Islands deep in the southern part of the sea called Itu Aba, which Taiwan refers to as Taiping.

Some lawmakers from both the ruling and main opposition parties have called on President Tsai Ing-wen to visit Itu Aba before she steps down in May to assert Taiwan's sovereignty and view a newly renovated harbour that can take larger ships.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taiwan-warns-enormous-chinese-bases-near-its-schina-sea-holding-2024-03-20/>

19 March: Blinken says US stands by 'ironclad' commitments to defend Philippines

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday (Mar 19) that the United States stands by its "ironclad" commitments to defend longtime ally the Philippines against armed attack in the South China Sea.

Blinken's visit to Manila is his second since Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos took office in 2022 and is part of a brief Asia tour to reinforce US support for regional allies against China.

Blinken's renewed defence pledge follows recent incidents involving Philippine and Chinese vessels near disputed reefs off the Southeast Asian country's coast, including collisions.

"These waterways are critical to the Philippines, to its security, to its economy, but they're also critical to the interests of the region, the United States and the world," Blinken said at a joint press conference with his Philippine counterpart Enrique Manalo.

"That's why we stand with the Philippines and stand by our ironclad defence commitments, including under the mutual defence treaty."

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/world/blinken-says-us-stands-ironclad-commitments-defend-philippines-4205226>

Follows-up: 19 March: China blasts US declaration of 'ironclad' alliance with Philippines

China has lashed out after the US secretary of state pledged that his country stands ready to back the Philippines, Beijing's regional rival.

Beijing promptly responded to the US official's statement, insisting that the US has "no right" to interfere in the South China Sea, where Beijing and Manila have competing territorial claims.

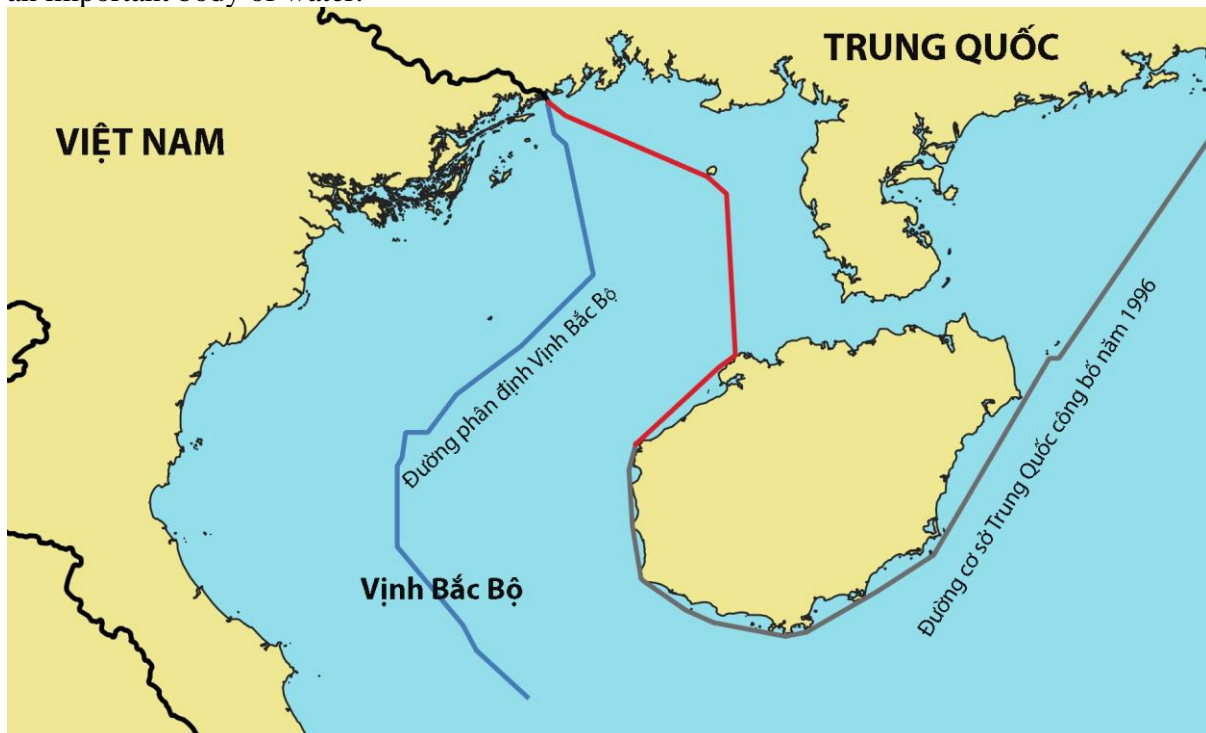
"The United States is not a party to the South China Sea issue and has no right to interfere in maritime issues that are between China and the Philippines," said foreign ministry spokesman Lin Jian.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/19/china-blasts-us-declaration-of-ironclad-alliance-with-philippines>

13 March: Are China and Vietnam on collision course over Beijing's 'creeping' demarcation in Gulf of Tonkin?

Vietnam's inaction to China's demarcation of its territory in the Gulf of Tonkin where the two countries have unresolved maritime boundaries could be a sign of Hanoi's desire to discuss the issue behind closed doors.

Analysts say China's move may not comply with international maritime conventions, adding that Beijing's "creeping" encroachment shows that it is aiming to assert greater control over an important body of water.



The red line is the declared baselines by China inside the Gulf

The blue line is the delimitation line by the two countries in their 2000 Agreement

The grey line is the declared baselines by China in 1996

Follows-up: 14 March: Vietnam urges respect of international law as China draws Gulf of Tonkin baseline

Vietnam's foreign ministry on Thursday said international law and the rights and interests of other countries must be respected, responding to a question about China's demarcation earlier this month of a baseline in the Gulf of Tonkin.

China's government delineated the baseline in the Gulf of Tonkin, known in Chinese as Beibu Gulf, using straight lines far from the coast, a move it said was in accordance with international law.

"Vietnam holds that coastal countries abide by the UNCLOS 1982 when determining the baseline for measuring their territorial waters," the ministry's spokesperson said in a regular press conference, referring to United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/vietnam-urges-respect-international-law-china-draws-gulf-tonkin-baseline-2024-03-14/>

12 March: Philippines says China's maritime-related proposals run contrary to its interests

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr said on Tuesday his country did not reject China's proposals on managing disputes in the South China Sea, but said that, since they stood on a questionable premise, it was "difficult to see a way forward".

"We have not rejected any proposals that China has made to us but the premise is something that we questioned...that premise that China has made is that their territory follows what is now described as a 10 dash line," Marcos said at a joint briefing with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

Marcos, who was on a working visit in Germany, said China's expansive claims in the South China Sea were "not recognised by any country, any international body, certainly not by the Philippines".

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-says-chinas-maritime-related-proposals-run-contrary-its-interests-2024-03-12/>

7 March: China coast guard flexes its might against the Philippines in disputed waters as journalists watch

As the high-seas faceoff unfolded Tuesday, two Chinese coast guard ships used water cannons against a smaller supply boat carrying a Filipino admiral and his sailors. The high-pressure spray shattered the boat's windshield and mildly injured the admiral and four sailors with glass shards and splinters of debris.

"That's very concerning and very worrisome," Vice Adm. Alberto Carlos later told reporters, after witnessing firsthand the Chinese actions against the supply boat Unaizah Mae 4, which he was aboard.

As the highest-ranking Filipino military commander overseeing the disputed waters, Carlos joined the trip to ensure that any confrontation would not spiral out of control, the navy said. Tuesday's hostilities off the Philippine-occupied Second Thomas Shoal lasted about five hours starting after dawn and were witnessed by two Associated Press journalists. The journalists were invited to join the trip aboard the Philippine coast guard ship BRP Sindangan, which was sideswiped by the Chinese coast guard ship in a tense and dangerous moment they caught on camera.

<https://apnews.com/article/south-china-sea-philippines-disputed-second-thomas-shoal-5fec2d298151891d79cc077ff02f3a74>

5 March: Philippines blames China Coast Guard for South China Sea collisions

The Philippines accused China of disrupting its mission to resupply troops stationed in the South China Sea on Tuesday, in the latest clash between the two countries in the disputed waters.

The Philippines said that China Coast Guard vessels caused two collisions with Philippine vessels and water cannoned a boat, leaving four crew injured during a resupply mission in the South China Sea.

Jay Tarriela, the Philippine Coast Guard's spokesperson, accused a China Coast Guard vessel of carrying out "dangerous maneuvers," and blocking the BRP Sindangan, a Philippine Coast Guard ship that was escorting Manila's resupply mission. The destination of the resupply

mission was Second Thomas Shoal, where the BRP Sierra Madre, a grounded warship, is stationed.

Boats from the two countries had another confrontation in the disputed waters hours after the first collision. During that incident, two Chinese Coast Guard vessels shot water cannons at a Philippine supply boat, injuring four people on board, according to a Philippine government task force.

<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/South-China-Sea/Philippines-blames-China-Coast-Guard-for-South-China-Sea-collisions>

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/china-philippines-south-china-sea-collision-coast-guard-second-thomas-shoal-renai-reef-4172026>

4 March: ‘stop harassing us’, Philippines foreign minister urges Beijing

Philippine foreign minister Enrique Manalo said on Monday that his country wants to solve maritime disputes with China peacefully – but delivered a simple message to Beijing: “stop harassing us”.

Speaking on the sidelines of an Asean-Australia summit in Melbourne, Manalo defended his government’s policy of publicising Chinese manoeuvres in contested maritime territory – including the recent passage of warships near Scarborough Shoal.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3254031/south-china-sea-stop-harassing-us-philippines-foreign-minister-urges-beijing>

OTHER STATES AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

26 March: India backs Philippines in South China Sea, riles China

India on Tuesday backed the Philippines in upholding its "sovereignty" as New Delhi emphasized the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, or the UNCLOS.

“The progress and prosperity of this region is best served by staunch adherence to rules-based order (and) UNCLOS is particularly important as the constitution of seas,” Indian Foreign Minister S Jaishankar told a news conference streamed live from Manila.

New Delhi’s backing of Manila came as the Philippines and China are engaged in an intense tussle over the disputed maritime boundaries in the resource-rich South China Sea.

Jaishankar is on an official trip to the Philippines where he held talks with his Filipino counterpart Enrique Manalo, who called the 2016 arbitral award by the Hague-based tribunal on the disputed South China Sea “final and binding.”

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/india-backs-philippines-amid-sea-tensions-with-china/3175454>

22 March: Australia, Britain call out China for Hong Kong, South China Sea and Russia support

Australia and Britain criticised China on Friday for its actions in Hong Kong, the South China Sea and its support of Russia, after a meeting in which London and Canberra deepened their security ties.

The two countries called out "recent unsafe and destabilising behaviour by China's vessels against Philippine vessels and crew near the Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea", in a statement that contained unusually direct language on Beijing's activities in the region.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/australia-britain-warn-potentially-devastating-consequences-israeli-operation-2024-03-22/>

18 March: New Zealand raises South China Sea, Taiwan tensions with China during Foreign Minister’s visit

New Zealand shared with China its concerns about rising tensions in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait during a meeting on March 18 between the foreign ministers of both countries. The meeting between Mr Wang Yi and Mr Winston Peters was the first in-person meeting since New Zealand elected a conservative government in October 2023. They previously spoke by phone.

The ministers discussed trade, business and security in the Pacific as well as “areas of difference”, including human rights and the situation in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Tibet, according to a statement issued by Mr Peters after the meeting.

“We also highlighted New Zealand and China’s shared interest in a secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region and raised concerns over increased tensions in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait,” the statement added.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/china-foreign-minister-willing-to-strengthen-communications-with-new-zealand>

13 March: PH, US, Japan to hold trilateral meetings in Manila and Washington, senior officials say

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Japan Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa will visit Manila next week for talks focusing on bolstering defense and economic ties ahead of a summit of their leaders in US next month, Philippine government sources told the GMA News Online Wednesday.

Blinken will first arrive in Manila on March 18 for bilateral talks with Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Enrique Manalo and other senior Philippine officials before their March 20 trilateral ministerial meeting with Kamikawa, the sources said

At the top of their agenda is a planned trilateral summit of US President Joe Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. at the White House in Washington DC on April 11, according to the sources.

<https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/900327/japan-us-ph-arranging-to-hold-summit-meeting-in-april-asahi-reports/story/>

12 March: Germany’s Scholz calls for diplomacy, de-escalation in South China Sea

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on Tuesday called on China and regional countries to resolve tensions in the disputed South China Sea peacefully.

Speaking at a joint news conference with Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., Scholz said they have discussed the latest developments in the region, and increased tensions in the South China Sea.

“This is about adhering to international law, ensuring the freedom of navigation. We are working to ensure that the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is being adhered to by all its parties,” Scholz said.

“We want to do whatever we can to help settle tensions in a peaceful manner. Therefore, ASEAN’s negotiations on a code of conduct for the South China Sea is therefore of the utmost importance, de-escalation must always be our priority,” he added.

“We have the UNCLOS, we have an arbitral tribunal which is in Hamburg. Important judgments have been passed over the course of the year. I believe it to be very important that each and every one adheres to the legislation in place,” Scholz said.

13 March: China urges S.Korea to refrain from hyping up SCS issue

The Chinese foreign ministry urged South Korea on Tuesday to make the right choice, refrain from following others to hype up the South China Sea issue, following South Korean foreign ministry's remarks regarding a recent incident during which Philippine vessels had trespassed

into the waters off China's Ren'ai Jiao (also known as Ren'ai Reef), and a spokesperson from the ministry said extraterritorial countries should not become troublemakers on the issue. In response to the "deep concerns" of South Korea over the incident between China and the Philippines, Wang Wenbin, spokesperson of the Chinese foreign ministry, told a press conference on Tuesday that China has noted the relevant remarks made by the spokesperson of the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on which we express serious concern.

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202403/1308673.shtml>

11 March: US part of Philippines' 'calculated' plan to tap oil, gas in waters disputed by China

The Philippines is counting on the US and its allies to play a crucial role in its plans to explore energy resources in the disputed South China Sea, according to Manila's envoy to Washington.

The country is seeking to parlay its deepening security ties with Washington into broader economic benefits, said Philippine Ambassador to the US Jose Manuel Romualdez.

"When the time comes that we are going to start exploring it, we'll have the options to be able to see how we can secure the expedition," Romualdez said in an interview in Manila. "We're working closely with our allies, not only the US but also Japan and Australia," he said.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3254887/south-china-sea-us-part-philippines-calculated-plan-tap-oil-gas-waters-disputed-china>

6 March: Australia and ASEAN call for restraint in South China Sea, ceasefire in Gaza

Australia and Southeast Asian nations ended a three day summit on Wednesday calling for restraint in the contested South China Sea and a lasting ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.

Australia hosted a summit with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Melbourne to mark the 50th anniversary of its ties to the bloc, even as differences remained across the 10 members on China's plans to extend diplomatic and military presence in the region.

A joint statement by Australia and ASEAN called for "rules-based" order in the Indo Pacific, as Beijing looks to increase its presence in the South China Sea.

"We recognise the benefits of having the South China Sea as a sea of peace, stability, and prosperity," the statement said.

"We encourage all countries to avoid any unilateral actions that endanger peace, security and stability in the region."

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/asean-summit-focus-maritime-security-trade-amid-south-china-sea-tensions-2024-03-06/>

5 March: South China Sea issues not easy to resolve, code of conduct negotiations will take time: PM Lee

Negotiations between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for a code of conduct on the South China Sea will take time as there are different national perspectives on the issue, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said on Tuesday (Mar 5).

"The issues are not easy to resolve and really, negotiating a code of conduct inevitably raises issues of what the ultimate outcomes are going to be," Mr Lee said at a joint press conference with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese.

"Because the ultimate answers are difficult, so too, negotiating the code will take quite some time."

Mr Lee is in Melbourne for the 9th Singapore-Australia Annual Leaders' Meeting and the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit.

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/pm-lee-south-china-sea-cptpp-australia-visit-4171671>

4 March: Australia gives \$42m to ASEAN countries for ‘free, open’ South China Sea

Australia’s Foreign Minister Penny Wong has announced 64 million Australian dollars (\$41.8m) in funding for maritime security on the first day of a special summit with members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Melbourne.

“The countries of our region rely on oceans, seas and rivers for livelihoods and commerce, including free and open sea lanes in the South China Sea,” Wong said in her address to a forum on maritime cooperation on Monday morning.

Wong did not specify which countries the funding would go to but “welcomed efforts” by Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines to “delimit their maritime boundaries”.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/4/australia-gives-41mn-to-asean-countries-for-free-open-south-china-sea>