

SOUTH CHINA SEA NEWS No. 134
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ACTS OF CLAIMANTS

28 November: Chinese ships gather near island disputed with Philippines, satellite images show

Satellite images obtained by Reuters on Thursday show a build-up of Chinese civilian vessels near contested Thitu Island, Manila's key outpost in the South China Sea, but a senior Philippine navy officer said they are "not a cause for concern".

One of the images taken by Maxar Technologies on Monday and reviewed by Reuters shows about 60 vessels, some within 2 nautical miles of Thitu, a strategically important island from which Manila monitors Chinese vessels and aircraft in the busy waterway.

Vice Admiral Alfonso Torres, chief of the Philippines' Western Command, said it was common for "maritime militia" ships to gather in the area. Manila, the Pentagon and foreign diplomats say such vessels work with the Chinese coast guard and navy to strengthen Beijing's presence in disputed waters.

Rear Admiral Roy Trinidad, Philippines Navy spokesman for the South China Sea, also said maritime militia ships were regularly in the area, adding that Manila was aware of the vessels, which he called an "illegal presence", but there was no need for alarm.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinese-ships-gather-near-island-disputed-with-philippines-satellite-images-show-2024-11-28/>

21 November: Vietnam, Malaysia seek to smooth tensions in South China Sea

Vietnam and Malaysia agreed on Nov 21 to elevate ties and explore closer cooperation to maintain peace in the South China Sea, after a complaint from Malaysia raised tensions over the contested waters.

In a joint briefing with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in Putrajaya, Communist Party of Vietnam chief To Lam said the two leaders pledged to "continue working closely together to maintain peace, security, stability, safety and freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea and to promote peaceful settlement of disputes".

Datuk Seri Anwar said both sides "agreed to explore the possibility of having joint efforts in the fishing industry so that we can really work on the basis of trust and friendship".

The nations have overlapping claims in the highly contested South China Sea.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/vietnam-malaysia-seek-to-smooth-tensions-in-south-china-sea>

18 November: How Beijing flipped the South China Sea game with a single island

An isolated reef in the Spratly Islands holds the key to improved Chinese response times in the region, a new study says

A massive base in the southern part of the South China Sea has made China the country with the fastest response time to emergencies in the region, according to a study by Chinese scientists.

"China's accessibility [to a scene] for search and rescue operations has significantly improved after the incorporation of the Yongshu Reef port," a team of scientists led by Su Fenzhen, a researcher with the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research, wrote in a peer-reviewed academic paper published this month. Yongshu is the Chinese name for Fiery Cross Reef, which is part of the Spratly Islands claimed by multiple countries and known as the Nansha Islands in China.

The average minimum accessible time has dropped significantly to 15.54 hours, with an area coverage rate now exceeding 99 per cent," Su and his colleagues said.

Previously, the average time it took to reach the Spratlys from Chinese ports was over 33 hours, according to the researchers' calculations. This made China an underdog among other countries in the region.

Malaysia had the shortest average accessible time of just 16.26 hours. Brunei, the Philippines and Vietnam also enjoyed much faster response times than China, "with average accessible times in the waters all less than 19 hours", the team wrote.

<https://www.msn.com/en-xl/news/other/how-beijing-flipped-the-south-china-sea-game-with-a-single-island/ar-AA1uchqi>

08 November: Philippines' Marcos signs laws to assert South China Sea rights

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. signed two laws on Friday aimed at strengthening his country's claims and sovereignty in the South China Sea as tensions persist in the area.

The Maritime Zones Act seeks to declare Manila's maritime entitlements, defining the extent of its 12-nautical mile territorial sea and the exclusive economic zone that spans 200 nautical miles, among others, while the Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act marks sea lanes and air routes in a bid to demarcate the country's territory.

"With these pieces of legislation, we align our domestic laws with international law, specifically the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea or UNCLOS, improve our capacity for governance, and reinforce our maritime policies for economic development and for national security," Marcos said in a signing ceremony.

Beijing reacted to the developments by summoning the Philippines ambassador to condemn the signing of these laws. "This is a serious violation of China's territorial sovereignty and maritime interests in the South China Sea. China has the right to take necessary measures," Mao Ning, foreign ministry spokesperson, told reporters on Friday.

06 November: Philippines buys 40 fast patrol craft worth US\$450 million for its coastguard

The Philippines has approved the purchase of 40 fast patrol craft worth 25.8 billion pesos (US\$450 million), seeking to bolster maritime security as tensions with Beijing in the South China Sea linger.

The National Economic and Development Authority Board, chaired by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, gave the greenlight for the purchase, which will be funded by assistance from the French government, the economic planning agency said in a statement on Tuesday.

"The project aligns with the government's objective of enhancing maritime security by upgrading the capabilities of institutions such as the Philippine Coast Guard," National Economic and Development Authority Secretary Arsenio Balisacan said.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3285393/philippines-buys-40-fast-patrol-craft-worth-us450-million-its-coastguard>

06 November: Philippines says joint maritime exercises rein in China

Joint naval exercises held frequently by the Philippines, United States and other Western powers are helping rein in "aggressive" Chinese actions in the South China Sea, a Filipino military official said on Wednesday (Nov 6).

Beijing has for years sought to expand its presence in the disputed waterway, brushing aside an international ruling that its claim to most of the sea has no legal basis.

In recent months, China has deployed navy, coast guard and so-called maritime militia forces – allegedly Chinese fishing vessels – in a bid to bar the Philippines from a trio of strategically important reefs and islands in the South China Sea.

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/philippines-china-maritime-exercises-south-china-sea-4730141>

4 November: Philippine military drills to seize an island in the South China Sea

The Philippine military opened two weeks of combat drills on Monday (Nov 4) that would include seizing an island in the disputed South China Sea and likely be frowned upon by China.

More than 3,000 Filipino army, navy and air force personnel will take part in the manoeuvres, which Philippine military officials said were not directed against any country.

China has rapidly expanded its military and has become increasingly assertive in pursuing territorial claims in the South China Sea, which Beijing claims virtually in its entirety. The tensions have led to more frequent confrontations, primarily with the Philippines and Vietnam, though the longtime territorial disputes also involve Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and Taiwan.

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/philippine-military-drills-seize-island-south-china-sea-4722691>

4 November: Malaysia complains to Vietnam over South China Sea reef expansion, sources say

Malaysia has sent a complaint letter to Vietnam over its alleged expansion of a South China Sea reef that both countries claim as their own, two officials told Reuters, in a rare bilateral escalation not involving China.

Malaysia's letter was sent to Vietnam's foreign ministry in early October but has so far received no reply, the two officials said, declining to be identified more precisely because the matter was sensitive.

The complaint was over Vietnam's alleged artificial expansion of the Barque Canada Reef, an islet in the Spratlys where Vietnam has built numerous infrastructure, according to satellite images analysed by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington-based think tank, which were released last month.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3285150/malaysia-complains-vietnam-over-south-china-sea-reef-expansion-sources-say>

OTHER STATES AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

28 November: Trump's choice of China hawks signals rough seas ahead for Sino-US ties

Among the four was congressman Marco Rubio, who had been instrumental in pushing through a Bill that bans US companies from sourcing goods made by forced labour in China's western Xinjiang region.

The problem is: Mr Rubio, one of the most unpopular politicians in China, is now going to be in charge of handling Washington's relationship with Beijing.

Seen as among the most vociferous China critics on Capitol Hill, the 53-year-old, who unsuccessfully sought the Republican nomination for a presidential run in 2016, has been picked by President-elect Donald Trump as secretary of state, his administration's top diplomat.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/trumps-choice-of-china-hawks-signal-rough-seas-ahead-for-sino-us-ties>

21 November: U.S. backs Philippine forces in South China Sea with task force

The U.S. military is supporting Philippine operations in the South China Sea via a special task force, a U.S. embassy official said on Thursday, an initiative Manila said involves intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance.

Task Force-Ayungin, named after the Philippine designation for the contested Second Thomas Shoal, was first mentioned this week by U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin during a visit to the Philippines.

"Task Force-Ayungin enhances U.S.-Philippine alliance coordination and interoperability by enabling U.S. forces to support Armed Forces of the Philippines activities in the South China Sea," said U.S. embassy spokesperson Kanishka Gangopadhyay.

"This initiative aligns with multiple lines of cooperation between U.S. and Philippine forces," he said, without elaborating on what kind of support the task force provides.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-backs-philippine-forces-south-china-sea-with-task-force-2024-11-21/>

19 November: Pentagon chief visits island near South China Sea in sign to Beijing

U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin visited a Filipino military base only miles from the South China Sea, a sign of resolve against Chinese harassment in the waterway that flared this summer.

Antonio Bautista Air Base was Austin's final stop in the Philippines, a country he's visited more than any previous secretary of defense. He spoke with officials from Manila's Western Command, which defends Filipino claims to the South China Sea — mapped in bright green on the wall inside the base's headquarters.

The trip itself is a message to China, which claims ownership over much of the area despite a 2016 ruling from the United Nations saying otherwise.

<https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2024/11/19/pentagon-chief-visits-island-near-south-china-sea-in-sign-to-beijing/>

11 November: Indonesia says it has no overlapping South China Sea claims with China, despite joint agreement

Indonesia said on Nov 11 it does not recognise China's claims over the South China Sea despite signing a joint maritime development deal with Beijing, as some analysts warned the agreement risked compromising the country's sovereign rights.

Joint agreements with China in the strategic waterway have for years been sensitive, with some claimant states wary of entering into deals they fear could be interpreted as legitimising Beijing's vast claims.

"Indonesia reiterates its position that those (Chinese) claims have no international legal basis," it said. "The partnership does not impact sovereignty, sovereign rights or Indonesia's jurisdiction in the North Natuna Sea."

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-says-it-has-no-overlapping-south-china-sea-claims-with-china-despite-joint-agreement>