

SOUTH CHINA SEA NEWS No. 135
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ACTS OF CLAIMANTS

2 January: Why 2024 was the ‘most violent, dangerous’ point in Philippine-China ties, and what’s next

The year 2024 marked the “most violent” and “most dangerous moment” for both Beijing and Manila in their long-running South China Sea dispute, according to several experts interviewed by This Week in Asia.

All of them agreed that China was the hands-down winner in gaining control over more geographical features in the contested waterway, but most added that Beijing had suffered “reputational damage” in the process.

<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3293073/why-2024-was-most-violent-dangerous-point-philippine-china-ties-and-whats-next>

23 December: Philippine military says will acquire US Typhon missile system

The Philippine military said Monday it plans to acquire the US Typhon missile system to protect its maritime interests, some of which overlap with regional power China.

“It is planned to be acquired because we see its feasibility and its functionality in our concept of archipelagic defence implementation,” Philippine Army chief Lieutenant-General Roy Galido told a news conference.

“I’m happy to report to our fellow countrymen that your army is developing this capability for the interest of protecting our sovereignty,” he said, adding the total number to be acquired would depend on “economics”.

<https://hongkongfp.com/2024/12/23/south-china-sea-philippines-says-will-acquire-us-typhon-missiles/>

20 December: Malaysia will strengthen territorial defence while keeping diplomatic channels open in South China Sea

Malaysia will strengthen its navy and air force to safeguard territorial waters, including the South China Sea, while keeping diplomatic channels open with stakeholder countries, said Malaysia’s National Security Council (NSC) director-general Raja Nushirwan Zainal Abidin. He was speaking to 300 delegates, including diplomats, military personnel and academics, at the Maritime Institute of Malaysia South China Sea Conference 2024 in Kuala Lumpur on Dec 18.

Datuk Raja Nushirwan said NSC will develop a new national security policy to reaffirm Malaysia’s status as a maritime nation.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysia-will-strengthen-territorial-defence-while-keeping-diplomatic-channels-open>

20 December: Chinese coastguard expels Philippine aircraft from Scarborough Shoal airspace

China expelled a Philippine plane that “illegally intruded” into the airspace over a contested South China Sea shoal on Thursday, according to the China Coast Guard.

A C-208 light utility plane sent by the Philippines “illegally invaded the airspace of China’s Huangyan Island”, coastguard spokesman Liu Dejun said on Friday, using the Chinese name for Scarborough Shoal.

“The Chinese coastguard closely monitored, warned and drove the aircraft away according to the law,” Liu said.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3291757/chinese-coastguard-expels-philippine-aircraft-scarborough-shoal-airspace>

12 December: Philippines considers new UN case against Beijing over South China Sea activity

The Philippines is working to build a new arbitration case against China over alleged breaches of international law in the South China Sea and is lobbying other countries to join as it struggles to counter Beijing's increasingly assertive actions in the disputed waters. The administration wants to file a "foolproof, solid case" against China, Andres Centino, Marcos's chief adviser on maritime policy, told the Financial Times, adding that his government wanted other countries to take part in the claim.

"We are seeking also more support of the international community, maybe for [other UNCLOS signatories] to fight the case," said Centino.

<https://www.ft.com/content/d16f314b-a602-44ce-a304-83f850a50d81>

10 December: Philippines to continue resupply missions in S.China Sea, won't escalate the situation

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr said on Tuesday that the country will not send its navy to support Filipino fishers in a contested shoal in the South China Sea despite a recent incident with Chinese vessels.

"We will never be part of an escalation in the West Philippine Sea," Marcos told reporters, adding that the country will continue supporting fishermen.

The Philippines will not deploy its own navy warships in the area to prevent provocation and escalation, Marcos said. The Philippines refers to the portion of the South China Sea that it claims as the West Philippine Sea.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-continue-resupply-missions-schina-sea-wont-escalate-situation-2024-12-10/>

10 December: Vietnam reef projects and runway may set scene for conflict with Beijing

China has long held an advantage in the South China Sea through its land reclamation on strategic reefs, creating potential bases for military assets. However, Vietnam, a claimant to the Spratly Islands, is advancing its own reclamation and airstrip construction. Recent satellite images show emerging military structures and new embankments on several Vietnamese reefs, including Barque Canada Reef, Central Reef, Tennent Reef, Namyit Island, South Reef, and Ladd Reef.

A new runway may be built on Vietnam-occupied Pearson Reef, according to an October report by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI). Vietnam's expansion efforts, initiated in late 2021, have been rapid and large-scale. An AMTI report from June noted that Vietnam expanded its territory by about 280 hectares (692 acres) across 10 Spratly features from November to May, marking a significant escalation in its territorial claims.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3290043/south-china-sea-vietnam-reef-projects-and-runway-may-set-scene-conflict-beijing>

10 December: Taiwan says Chinese sea deployment bigger than 2022 military drills

Taiwan reported on December 10 that China's deployment of ships around the island surpassed its 2022 military drills, the largest-ever Chinese war games. Defence ministry spokesman Sun Li-fang stated that the number of Chinese warships, coast guard, and other vessels along the first island chain exceeded the response to Nancy Pelosi's 2022 Taipei visit. A senior Taiwanese official confirmed nearly 90 Chinese naval and coast guard ships were in

the East China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and South China Sea. Taiwan also detected 47 Chinese aircraft and 12 warships near the island in the past 24 hours.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/aseanplus/aseanplus-news/2024/12/10/taiwan-says-chinese-sea-deployment-bigger-than-2022-military-drills>

4 December: Philippines, China trade accusations over confrontation in South China Sea

On December 4, the Philippines and China provided conflicting accounts of a maritime confrontation at the Scarborough Shoal, a contested area in the South China Sea. China's Coast Guard accused four Philippine ships of attempting to enter its claimed territorial waters around the shoal, which China refers to as Huangyan Island. In response, the Philippines filed a diplomatic protest, stating that China had dangerously interacted with its vessels. The incident follows a November diplomatic spat over China's claims of territorial waters around Scarborough Shoal.

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/east-asia/philippines-china-trade-accusations-over-confrontation-south-china-sea-4785626>

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/philippines-files-diplomatic-protest-against-china-over-south-china-sea-incident-4788766>

3 December: China accuses Philippine ships of 'illegally gathering' at disputed reef

On December 3, China condemned Philippine ships for allegedly gathering "illegally" near the Houteng Reef in the Spratly Islands, also known as the Iroquois Reef. China's Coast Guard took "control measures" against the ships, accusing them of fishing illegally in the disputed area. The Philippine Coast Guard responded by reporting harassment from a Chinese military helicopter over Philippine vessels operating at the reef.

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/12/03/asia-pacific/politics/china-philippines-ships-reef/>

2 December: Indonesia yet to agree joint development areas with Beijing in South China Sea

Indonesia's Foreign Minister confirmed on December 2 that no joint development agreements have been reached with China regarding the overlapping waters in the South China Sea. Indonesia had previously caused concern by issuing a joint statement with China in November, but clarified that it would not compromise its sovereignty in any future projects, and no specific areas for joint development had been finalized.

<https://thesun.my/world-news/indonesia-yet-to-agree-joint-development-areas-with-beijing-in-south-china-sea-minister-says-NG13370379>

OTHER STATES AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

10 December: Khaled, Australian DPM reiterate concern about developments in South China Sea

Defence Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin expressed concerns about South China Sea developments threatening regional peace and security, stressing the importance of freedom of navigation and overflight under international law. He made this statement alongside Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles during the 4th Malaysia-Australia High-Level Committee on Defence Cooperation in Melbourne on December 10. Both

ministers called for self-restraint to avoid actions that could lead to accidents, misunderstandings, or miscalculations.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2024/12/10/khaled-australian-dpm-reiterate-concern-about-developments-in-south-china-sea>

9 December: US Sends A-10 'Warthogs' to Allied Air Base in Contested South China Sea

The United States has deployed a number of attack aircraft to the Philippines amid persistent tensions in the contested South China Sea.

At least four A-10 Thunderbolt II aircraft, commonly known as Warthogs, have arrived at Clark Air Base in the Philippines, photos published on Friday by the U.S. Air Force showed. They will conduct integrated training with the Philippine air force through December 15.

The Warthog has served with the U.S. Air Force since March 1976. Armed with a 30 mm gun and up to 16,000 pounds of bombs and missiles, the aircraft was originally designed for close air support of ground forces.

<https://www.newsweek.com/us-news-sends-warthogs-allied-air-base-contested-south-china-sea-philippines-1997547>

6 December: US destroyer sailing near Spratly Islands in South China Sea is FONOP

On December 6, the USS Preble conducted a freedom-of-navigation operation near the Spratly Islands, passing within 12 nautical miles of Swallow Reef, a disputed area. The U.S. Navy stated that the operation, which was pre-planned, reaffirmed navigational rights and freedoms under international law. These operations are part of U.S. efforts to challenge China's claims and ensure the free movement of ships in the region.

https://www.stripes.com/theaters/asia_pacific/2024-12-06/navy-fonop-spratly-south-china-sea-16076935.html

6 December: US, Japan, Philippine conduct maritime exercises in South China Sea

The U.S., Japan, and Philippines conducted joint maritime exercises in the South China Sea on December 6. The drills aimed to enhance interoperability and strengthen defense tactics among the three nations within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone, emphasizing their collective commitment to regional security amid ongoing tensions with China.

<https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/2915081/united-states-japan-philippine-conduct-maritime-exercises-in-south-china-sea>

5 December: The US objected China's Note Verbale in the CLCS submissions of Viet Nam, Malaysia and the Philippines

On 5 December, the US sent a communication in response to China's notes verbale in connection with the submissions to the CLCS by Viet Nam, Malaysia and the Philippines. The US did not comment on the submissions of the three countries but reiterated its objection of the expansive maritime claims of China in the South China Sea, which they believe are without a factual or legal basis.

https://www.un.org/depts/los/clcs_new/commission_submissions.htm

5 December: Japan grants Philippines ¥1.6b for naval upgrade as China 'harassed' vessels in South China Sea

Japan has provided ¥1.6 billion (approximately \$46 million) to the Philippines for upgrading its naval capabilities, including rigid-hulled inflatable boats, radar systems, and automatic identification systems. This financial assistance aims to bolster the Philippines' maritime security, especially in light of ongoing confrontations with China in the South China Sea.

<https://www.malaymail.com/news/world/2024/12/05/japan-grants-philippines-16b-for-naval-upgrade-as-china-harassed-vessels-in-south-china-sea/159001>

4 December: US Reacts as China Clashes With Ally at Sea

The United States has condemned China's recent interception of a Philippine government vessel near a disputed atoll in the South China Sea early Wednesday morning.

"The PRC's (People's Republic of China) unlawful use of water cannons and dangerous maneuvers disrupted a Philippine maritime operation on December 4, putting lives at risk," U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines MaryKay Carlson said in a statement, posted on X, formerly Twitter. "We stand with our like-minded friends, allies, and partners in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific."

<https://www.newsweek.com/china-news-clash-philippines-south-china-sea-1995371>

3 December: Russian submarine spotted in South China Sea

The Philippine military observed a Russian submarine transiting the South China Sea on December 3. The submarine, identified as being on its way back to Russia after a joint exercise with the Malaysian Navy, was not considered alarming by the Philippine authorities but raised some surprise due to its advanced missile capabilities.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-12-02/russian-submarine-in-south-china-sea-near-philippines/104675612>

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russia-submarine-south-china-sea-philippines-navy-ship-warplanes/>

1 December: Japan to provide defense equipment to Philippines, 3 other nations

Japan plans to provide defense equipment to the Philippines, Indonesia, Mongolia and Djibouti under its official security assistance to the armed forces of like-minded countries that share its values, a government source said Saturday.

The four countries have been designated as the recipients of the OSA grant aid for fiscal 2024 through March next year, with Japan earmarking 5 billion yen (\$33 million) in its initial budget for the current fiscal year, the source said.

Tokyo launched the OSA in April 2023 to help recipient countries ramp up their defense capabilities amid security concerns like China's growing military assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region.

<https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2024/12/841b1ed83b58-japan-to-provide-defense-equipment-to-philippines-3-other-nations.html>