

SOUTH CHINA SEA NEWS No. 140

May 2025

Compiled by CIL Ocean Law and Policy Team

ACTS OF CLAIMANT

1 June: Philippines defence chief calls out China's 'propaganda spiel'

A “deficit of trust” stands in the way of Beijing’s ability to resolve disputes such as overlapping claims in the South China Sea, said Philippine defence chief Gilberto Teodoro Jr on June 1.

Speaking at a plenary session during the 22nd Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Mr Teodoro also hit back at questions from Chinese delegates after one official compared the Philippines’ handling of the waterway dispute with China with the approaches taken by Malaysia and Vietnam, asking why Manila could not “do the same” and “effectively manage” these differences.

The same official also asked if Manila’s intention was to “act as a proxy for external powers”.

In replied, Mr Teodoro said: “I’m sure that if what China is doing to the Philippines is done to Malaysia or to any Asean country, you will see a different reaction. Certainly, as an Asean brother, the Philippines will stand up with that Asean brother in time of need and in support and defence of internal law and UNCLOS”

<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/philippines-defence-chief-calls-out-chinas-propaganda-spiel-says-beijing-faces-trust-deficit>

31 May: China's navy conducts combat patrols near disputed South China Sea shoal

China’s navy has conducted “combat readiness patrols” near the disputed Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea, while South Korean officials separately announced the discovery of more Chinese buoys in contested waters in the Yellow Sea.

The Southern Theatre Command of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) conducted the drills in the “territorial waters and airspace of China’s Huangyan Island and surrounding areas”, state-run news outlet Xinhua reported on Saturday, using China’s name for the Scarborough Shoal.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/31/chinas-navy-conducts-combat-patrols-near-disputed-south-china-sea-shoal>

28 May: China's most advanced bombers seen on disputed Paracel islands

Satellite imagery shows China landed two of its most advanced bombers in the disputed Paracel islands in the South China Sea this month - a gesture that some analysts described as Beijing's latest signalling of its growing military capabilities to rivals.

The deployment marks the first time the long-range H-6 bombers have landed on Woody Island in the Paracels since 2020, and the movement of the now upgraded aircraft comes amid tensions with the Philippines, operations near Taiwan and ahead of the region's biggest defence forum this weekend.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/chinas-most-advanced-bombers-seen-disputed-south-china-sea-island-2025-05-28/>

26 May: Marcos urges ASEAN to fast-track code of conduct in South China Sea

Philippine President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. on Monday asked his fellow Southeast Asian leaders to adopt a legally binding code of conduct (CoC) in the South China Sea, warning that rising sea tensions and uncertainty threaten hard-won regional gains. Speaking at the 46th Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit plenary in Kuala Lumpur, Mr. Marcos said the code, which has languished in negotiations for over two decades, should be finalized amid growing risks of miscalculation in contested waters. “We underscore the urgent need to accelerate the adoption of a legally binding code of conduct to safeguard maritime rights, promote stability and prevent miscalculations at sea,” he said.

<https://www.bworldonline.com/the-nation/2025/05/26/674880/marcos-urges-asean-to-fast-track-code-of-conduct-in-south-china-sea/>

23 May: Philippines condemns Chinese coast guard’s use of water cannon on a research vessel

Philippine officials condemned the Chinese coast guard for using what they say was a powerful water cannon to target one of two Philippine fishing boats conducting marine research in the disputed South China Sea.

The Bureau of Fisheries in Manila said the incident took place on Wednesday 21 May near one of three sandbars called Sandy Cay and caused damage to one of the fishing vessels and endangered its crew members.

The Chinese coast guard’s “aggressive interference” happened as the two Philippine vessels were conducting “routine marine scientific research” in the barren white sandbars that lie between the Philippine-occupied Thitu island and a Chinese-built island base called Subi Reef, according to the Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of Fisheries in Manila.

<https://apnews.com/article/south-china-sea-sandy-cay-philippines-a9f7522ee0d3c71fddce8a3e81543107>

22 May: Philippines accuses China of aggressive tactics in South China Sea

The Philippines’ fisheries bureau said the lives of a civilian crew were put at risk when the Chinese Coast Guard fired water cannon and sideswiped one of its vessels while it conducted marine research around a disputed South China Sea reef.

The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources condemned what it said was “aggressive interference” of the Chinese Coast Guard against the Datu Sanday and a second ship in the May 21 incident, saying its vessels had not previously been subjected to water cannon in the area.

The Chinese Embassy in Manila did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the May 22 statement by the bureau.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/philippines-accuses-china-of-aggressive-tactics-in-south-china-sea>

20 May: Philippines ties Israeli arms deals to recognition in South China Sea dispute

The Philippines is conditioning future arms deals with Israel on a political declaration recognizing Manila’s sovereignty in the contested South China Sea, Israeli defense officials told Calcalist.

The demand has stalled new defense agreements for several months and comes despite Israel’s long-standing neutral stance in the regional dispute, a flashpoint between the Philippines and China. While previously signed contracts are still being fulfilled, Israeli defense companies and government officials say the standoff is putting future deals—potentially worth billions of dollars—at risk.

Israeli officials have resisted the request. “They’re insisting on recognition of their sovereignty in the South China Sea, similar to how Israel recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara two years ago,” a senior defense official told Calcalist. “Without such a declaration, Manila will not sign any new arms deals with us.”

<https://www.ynetnews.com/business/article/h1dwpbq11le>

15 May: Vietnam rejects China's fishing ban

Vietnam’s foreign ministry has engaged with the Chinese Embassy and sent a diplomatic note to oppose a fishing ban on the South China Sea issued by China.

Pham Thu Hang, spokeswoman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said Vietnam’s position on China’s fishing ban on the South China Sea, known in Vietnam as the East Sea, is consistent.

"Vietnam asks that China respects Vietnam’s sovereignty over the Paracel Islands, as well as its sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction over Vietnamese waters as provided by the UNCLOS," Hang said at a press meet on Thursday.

<https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnam-rejects-china-s-fishing-ban-4886541.html>

12 May: Philippines plans long-term post-Marcos strategy

The Philippines is drafting a long-term strategy to safeguard its claims in the South China Sea, aiming to preserve its assertive maritime stance beyond the administration of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, according to the country’s national security chief.

The move, observers said, could help Manila avoid the “pendulum” swing that had seen its foreign policy shift repeatedly between Washington and Beijing in recent years, and instead forge a more consistent approach rooted in national interest.

At a security forum on Tuesday, National Security Adviser Eduardo Año said the initiative was a direct response to “China’s baseless, excessive and expansive territorial claims, militarisation, and confrontations with its neighbours”

<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3309814/no-more-flip-flopping-philippines-plans-long-term-south-china-sea-strategy>

8 May: Philippines slams ‘high-risk’ Chinese naval actions near contested reef

The Philippines criticised on May 8 a “high-risk” manoeuvre by a Chinese vessel near the disputed Scarborough Shoal in a rare incident involving warships from the two navies.

The Scarborough Shoal – a triangular chain of reefs and rocks in the contested South China Sea – has been a flashpoint between the countries since China seized it from the Philippines in 2012.

The May 5 encounter took place “approximately 11.8 nautical miles south-east” of the Scarborough Shoal, the Philippines’ military said, during ongoing US-Philippine military exercises that Beijing has slammed as destabilising.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/philippines-slams-high-risk-chinese-naval-actions-near-contested-reef>

5 May 2025: Philippines claims intercepting Chinese ship conducting ‘illegal research’ in South China Sea

The Philippine Coast Guard said Monday it deployed a vessel and an aircraft to intercept a Chinese research ship last week conducting "unauthorized scientific activities" within the country’s exclusive economic zone.

The Chinese vessel Tan Suo 3 was spotted Thursday about 92 nautical miles (170 kilometers) off the northern coast of Ilocos, the coast guard said in a statement.

"The ship's irregular movements indicated marine research, which violates the Philippines' sovereign rights," according to the statement shared on X by a spokesman for the Philippine Coast Guard.

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/philippines-claims-intercepting-chinese-ship-conducting-illegal-research-in-south-china-sea/3557943>

OTHER STATES AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

22 May: US and China embassies in Singapore clash online over South China Sea

The US and China embassies in Singapore recently exchanged words over the South China Sea on its social media pages, after the US embassy here drew an analogy between the disputed territory and neighbourliness in HDB communities.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has responded to the posts on Wednesday (May 21) night, stating that the Republic "rejects attempts by foreign embassies to incite domestic reactions to international issues involving third countries".

"Complex issues are best resolved through appropriate channels for effective diplomacy," said the MFA spokesperson.

<https://www.asiaone.com/singapore/us-and-china-embassies-singapore-clash-online-over-south-china-sea-mfa-cautions-against>

21 May: China, US exchange barbs over South China Sea at UNSC

China and the United States have traded accusations over their respective actions in the South China Sea at a UN Security Council meeting on maritime security.

At the gathering in the UN headquarters in New York on Tuesday, acting US representative, Ambassador Dorothy Shea, spoke about the dispute between China and the Philippines over territorial rights to a part of the sea.

Shea said: "The United States stands with the Philippines. Once again, we condemn China's dangerous and unlawful actions in the South China Sea."

China's deputy ambassador to the UN, Geng Shuang, accused the US of sending military vessels to the area under the pretext of the freedom of navigation, but with the real intent "to flex its muscles and stir up the confrontation."

https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20250521_10/

21 May: Philippines, US hold joint maritime drills in South China Sea

Coast Guard vessels of the Philippines and the United States have taken part for the first time in joint maritime exercises with naval and air force units in the contested South China Sea, Manila's armed forces said on Wednesday (May 21).

The exercises, held on Tuesday in waters off Palawan and Occidental Mindoro, involved the Philippine Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard, alongside the US Coast Guard Cutter Stratton and a US Navy P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft.

The "maritime cooperative activity", which was the second for the year and sixth overall since the allies launched the joint activities in 2023, included communication drills and search-and-rescue scenarios, the military said in a statement.

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/philippines-us-joint-maritime-drills-south-china-sea-5143441>

16 May: Satellite Photo Shows US Aircraft Carrier at South China Sea

Latest satellite imagery shows that the United States aircraft carrier USS Nimitz continues to operate in the South China Sea, where China's sovereignty claims cover most of the waters.

Regarding the Nimitz's deployment in the South China Sea, the U.S. Seventh Fleet—which maintains U.S. naval presence in the Western Pacific Ocean—previously told Newsweek that the nuclear-powered ship "provides presence and combat-ready forces to the theater."

Open-source intelligence researcher @MT_Anderson said on X (formerly Twitter) that the Nimitz and its two escorting destroyers were spotted underway in the southern part of the South China Sea, about 310 miles west of Brunei on Tuesday, based on a satellite image.

<https://www.newsweek.com/satellite-news-uss-nimitz-south-china-sea-2073117>

16 May: Germany and Philippines sign new defense deal amid South China sea tensions

Germany and the Philippines have signed a new defense cooperation agreement as Manila continues to strengthen international partnerships in response to rising tensions in the South China Sea. The deal was signed in Berlin on Wednesday by Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro and his German counterpart Boris Pistorius.

According to the Philippine defense ministry, the agreement will expand collaboration in areas such as cybersecurity, defense logistics, armament development, and peacekeeping operations under the United Nations. This move reflects both countries' shared interest in upholding security and freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region.

<https://dailytimes.com.pk/1301632/germany-and-philippines-sign-new-defense-deal-amid-south-china-sea-tensions/>

11 May: New Zealand's 'hawkish' China turn drives its expanding Asian security footprint

A newly minted military agreement between the Philippines and New Zealand reflects deepening defence cooperation among "like-minded democracies" and positions Wellington as a more active player in Southeast Asian security, but analysts caution that the move also marks a hawkish shift likely to strain ties with China.

The Status of Visiting Forces Agreement, signed in Manila on April 30, paves the way for joint military exercises between the two nations. Philippine Defence Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr and his New Zealand counterpart Judith Collins finalised the pact in a ceremony overseen by Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3309787/new-zealands-hawkish-china-turn-drives-its-expanding-asian-security-footprint>

7 May 2025: Top US general says America will keep promise to ensure Indo-Pacific allies' security

A top US general has assured Indo-Pacific nations that Washington will keep to its promise to ensure its allies' security, weeks after China's coast guard unfurled the nation's flag atop a sandbank also claimed by the Philippines in the South China Sea.

Responding to a question from The Straits Times during a virtual press briefing on May 7, the US Army's Pacific commander, General Ronald Clark, said the US stood "shoulder to shoulder" with the Philippines in its territorial dispute with Beijing.

However, he stressed that he could not speak for the government in Manila, nor dictate what actions it might take.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/top-us-general-says-america-will-keep-promise-to-ensure-indo-pacific-allies-security>

4 May 2025: British warship sails South China Sea despite China warning

The Royal Navy patrol vessel HMS Spey has concluded a 16-day multinational exercise in the South China Sea, working alongside Commonwealth partners to rehearse joint responses to regional threats, including the simulated defence of Malaysian territory.

Spey, joined by warships from Australia, Singapore, and Malaysia, operated under the command of Captain Mohd Effendy bin Shuib of the Royal Malaysian Navy. “These shared experiences will build stronger armed forces but also deeper friendships and trust between our nations,” said Captain Effendy, highlighting the importance of cohesion in facing “the complex maritime challenges of our time”.

<https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/british-warship-sails-south-china-sea-despite-china-warning/>