

**SOUTH CHINA SEA NEWS No. 148**  
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*Compiled by CIL Ocean Law and Policy Team*

**ACTS OF CLAIMANT**

**Jan 29: ASEAN Foreign Ministers Discuss Myanmar, South China Sea at Cebu Retreat**

Southeast Asia's top diplomats met in the Philippines [on 28 January] for a two-day meeting at which they discussed pressing issues facing the region, including the civil war in Myanmar, the border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand, and a long-awaited Code of Conduct for managing disputes in the South China Sea. [...]

The other major issue of import at this week's AMM Retreat is the ongoing negotiation of a Code of Conduct (COC) for the South China Sea. This is intended to reduce the risk of conflict in the disputed seaway, where China's expansive "nine-dash line" maritime claim clashes with those of four ASEAN member states: Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Brunei. Indonesia does not officially consider itself a party to the dispute, but Beijing's claim also overlaps with a portion of Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone.

The COC has been a perennial agenda item for China and ASEAN since 2002, when the two sides signed the non-binding Declaration of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. The Philippines has pledged to expedite talks with the aim of concluding the Code [sometime in 2026](#).

This seems optimistic, to say the least, given the fundamental differences between ASEAN claimant states and China. To take just one example, the Philippines, which has borne the brunt of China's assertive behavior in the South China Sea over the past decade, insists that the agreement should be legally binding. This is opposed by Beijing, which also rejected the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling that found most of its claims unlawful under international maritime law. China has also [proposed banning](#) joint military drills with countries outside Southeast Asia and limiting oil and gas exploration to partnerships within the region.

In a [press conference](#) ahead of the meeting, a Philippine ASEAN spokesperson confirmed that the COC and disputes in the South China Sea would be on the agenda during the AMM Retreat. The spokesperson added that all parties remain committed to endeavoring to conclude the COC negotiations within the agreed 2026 timeline, "consistent with the guidelines and frameworks previously set by ASEAN."

<https://thediplomat.com/2026/01/asean-foreign-ministers-discuss-myanmar-south-china-sea-at-cebu-retreat/>

**Jan 29: Chinese warships sail near Okinawa after US-Philippine drills in South China Sea**

Japan tracked four Chinese warships transiting a strategic waterway near Okinawa this week, a move that followed U.S.-Philippine military drills near a contested South China Sea atoll that drew complaints from Beijing. The Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force monitored two Chinese guided-missile destroyers, a frigate and a replenishment ship as they passed through the Miyako Strait between 7 p.m. Tuesday and 2 a.m. Wednesday, according to a Wednesday news release from Japan's Joint Staff. The vessels traveled southeast through the strait — an approximately 155-mile-wide waterway between Miyako Island and Okinawa — moving from the East China Sea into the Philippine Sea, the release said. The strait is an international waterway that lies within Japan's exclusive economic zone. Japan's Ministry of Defense conducted surveillance and intelligence gathering using the minesweeper JS Shishijima, a

Kawasaki P-1 maritime patrol aircraft and a P-3C Orion surveillance plane, the Joint Staff said. “China continues to frequently cross the so-called First Island Chain into the Pacific Ocean, as in this latest incident, and is intensifying its military activities around Japan,” Japanese Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi wrote Wednesday on X. A Joint Staff spokesman was unable to say anything definitive about the ships’ purpose or intentions in the region. “Activities by Chinese military in the Indo-Pacific are becoming more active and expanding,” he told Stars and Stripes by phone Thursday. “The Self-Defense Forces will continue to maintain the utmost vigilance and monitoring.”

[https://www.stripes.com/theaters/asia\\_pacific/2026-01-29/china-philippines-miyako-scarborough-shoal-20560943.html](https://www.stripes.com/theaters/asia_pacific/2026-01-29/china-philippines-miyako-scarborough-shoal-20560943.html)

### **Jan 27: Philippines, US hold joint military drill at disputed South China Sea shoal**

The militaries of the Philippines and the United States sailed together this week at a disputed shoal in the South China Sea, Manila’s armed forces said on Jan 27, in joint exercises aimed at easing cooperation between the treaty allies.

Military engagements between the treaty allies have soared under Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, who has pivoted closer to Washington

[in response to China’s growing presence](#)  
in the South China Sea.

The 11th such drill between the United States and the Philippines since November 2023 was held in the Scarborough Shoal in South China Sea waters in the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone, which China also claims as part of its territory.

“The successful conduct of these activities enhanced coordination, tactical proficiency and mutual understanding between allied forces,” the Philippine armed forces said in a statement. The event showcased the Philippines’ frigate Antonio Luna, a Philippine Coast Guard offshore patrol vessel, as well as two military planes and a helicopter.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/philippines-u-s-hold-joint-sail-in-disputed-south-china-sea-shoal>

### **Jan 26: Shandong’s use of newest PLA dry dock near South China Sea suggests carrier milestone**

China’s new dry dock near the [South China Sea](#) could help it avoid having an aircraft carrier “gap” in the disputed waterway and pave the way for military outreach to the Indian Ocean, analysts said.

According to a report by American geospatial intelligence company AllSource Analysis, satellite imagery on January 21 showed the first use of a new dry dock at Yulin Naval Base in the southern Chinese province of Hainan, for the likely maintenance of PLA Navy [aircraft carriers](#).

The report said China’s second aircraft carrier, [the Shandong](#), entered the dry dock for the first time on January 20 or January 21, indicating an expansion of dock’s capabilities and marking a “milestone” for both the facility and [People’s Liberation Army](#) carrier operations.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3341270/shandong-s-use-pla-s-newest-dry-dock-near-south-china-sea-suggests-carrier-milestone>

### **Jan 25: 15 crew members rescued from capsized Singapore-flagged ship handed to Philippine Coast Guard**

Fifteen crew members rescued from a Singapore-flagged ship that capsized in the South China Sea on Jan 23 have been handed over to the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), along with the bodies of two crew members who died.

Arrangements are being made for their return home, K Line – the shipping agency operating the stricken vessel Devon Bay – said in a statement on Jan 25.

Bulk carrier Devon Bay, built in 2013 and registered in Singapore, sank near the Scarborough Shoal off the Philippine coast while en route to Yangjiang, China. There were 21 crew members on board, all of whom were Filipinos, Reuters reported.

Search-and-rescue operations for the remaining four crew members are ongoing, under “close coordination of the relevant maritime authorities”, K Line said.

Due to “big waves” in the area, the rescued crew members were transferred from the China Coast Guard to the PCG using the rigid-hull inflatable boats of both vessels, PCG said in a Facebook post on Jan 25. They are expected to arrive at the Port Area in Manila early on Jan 26, the PCG added.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/15-crew-members-rescued-from-capsized-singapore-flagged-ship-handed-to-philippine-coast-guard>

### **Jan 23: MPA investigating the sinking of Singapore-flagged ship in South China Sea that left 2 dead**

The Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore (MPA) is investigating the sinking of bulk carrier Devon Bay in the South China Sea on Jan 23, which left two crew members dead. There were no Singaporeans on board the Singapore-flagged ship, and four crew members remain unaccounted for, MPA said in a statement to The Straits Times on Jan 23.

Bulk carrier Devon Bay, which was built in 2013 and registered in Singapore, had sunk while en route to Yangjiang, China.

According to the latest available information, 17 of the 21 crew members had reportedly been picked up, said MPA. China and the Philippines said on Jan 23 they launched rescue operations after receiving reports of a distressed cargo ship near Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea, carrying 21 Filipinos.

As Singapore is the vessel’s flag state, MPA said it is in contact with the ship owner and relevant search and rescue authorities, and is providing support as required.

The Chinese military said 17 crew members were rescued and two of them later died, after a report around 1.30am on Jan 23 that a foreign cargo vessel had capsized in waters near the shoal.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-says-it-rescued-philippine-crew-from-cargo-ship-near-scarborough-shoal?ref=inline-article>

### **Jan 17: Taiwan says Chinese drone made 'provocative' flight over South China Sea island**

A Chinese reconnaissance drone briefly flew over the Taiwan-controlled Pratas Islands at the top end of the South China Sea on Saturday, in what Taiwan's defence ministry called a "provocative and irresponsible" move.

Democratically governed Taiwan, which China claims as its own territory, reports Chinese military activity around it on an almost daily basis, including drones though they very rarely enter Taiwanese airspace.

Taiwan's defence ministry said the Chinese reconnaissance drone was detected around dawn on Saturday approaching the Pratas Islands and flew in its airspace for eight minutes at an altitude outside the range of anti-aircraft weapons.

"After our side broadcast warnings on international channels, it departed at 0548," it said in a statement.

"Such highly provocative and irresponsible actions by the People's Liberation Army seriously undermine regional peace and stability, violated international legal norms, and will inevitably be condemned," it added.

Taiwan's armed forces will continue to maintain strict vigilance and monitoring, and will respond in accordance with the routine combat readiness rules, the ministry said.

A spokesperson for China's Southern Theatre Command said that drones had conducted "normal flight training" in the airspace, in a statement on its official WeChat account.

China also views the Pratas as its own territory.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/taiwan-says-chinese-drone-made-provocative-flight-over-south-china-sea-island-2026-01-17/>

### **January 15: Beijing looks for social workers to place on disputed South China Sea islands**

China is recruiting social workers for disputed islands in the South China Sea.

According to a notice published on Monday, the government of Sansha, the authority set up to administer the disputed territories, said it was looking for 11 "community workers" to post on eight reefs and islands in the Paracel and the Spratly islands.

The territories include Woody Island, the administrative centre of the disputed territories, and Mischief Reef, which is home to a large military base.

The notice was unclear about the nature of the roles, but it suggested they would play a role in day-to-day governance. Beijing recruited 16 people to similar positions in 2023.

It added that candidates should be aged between 18 and 35 years old, have a college degree and be "dedicated to island and community service".

It said they should also be able to cope with long-term postings in "remote maritime locations", which required exceptional physical and psychological adaptability.

The notice also said that applicants needed to "demonstrate strong organisational and interpersonal skills, relevant professional knowledge, a heart for public service, and a genuine commitment to grass-roots community work and long-term residence on the islands".

It added that preference would be given to Communist Party members, veterans or their family members, or those with experience in maritime law enforcement, island-based community management or marine environmental protection.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3339921/beijing-looks-social-workers-place-disputed-south-china-sea-islands>

### **Jan 14: Indonesia asked to buy US-made drones for surveillance in waters near South China Sea**

The United States is demanding that Indonesia purchase US-made maritime surveillance drones for use in waters near the South China Sea as a condition for lowering tariffs, according to a government document seen by The Straits Times.

The US has offered to reduce the tariff on Indonesia to 19 per cent, down from a threatened 32 per cent.

Both countries are currently in the final stages of completing the Agreement on Reciprocal Trade in a bid to narrow the US trade deficit with Indonesia.

According to the document dated Oct 10, 2025, Washington has also asked Indonesia to readjust its stance on the South China Sea, a demand that has raised the eyebrows of many observers as it falls outside the scope of trade issues.

“The US seeks a commitment from Indonesia to readjust its South China Sea policy to safeguard its sovereign rights and national jurisdiction, ensure alignment with international law, and enhance maritime domain awareness and regional cooperation,” the document says. “Furthermore, the US requires Indonesia to publicly announce the procurement of US-made unmanned aerial systems to bolster its maritime security,” it adds.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-asked-to-buy-us-made-drones-for-surveillance-in-waters-near-south-china-sea>

### **Jan 12: South China Sea: claims of coercion, deception as Beijing and Manila wage new war of words**

[China and the Philippines](#) have again exchanged barbs over confrontations in the disputed [South China Sea](#), with each accusing the other of provocation and escalating tensions. The Chinese embassy in the Philippines on Tuesday said a statement the day before by the National Maritime Council – a government body created by Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr in 2024 to address the nation’s maritime challenges – was “unfounded and misleading”.

It accused Manila of “provoking trouble and attempting to change the status quo” in the disputed waters.

“China has been compelled to take necessary measures in response, to safeguard its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, and to ensure the full and effective implementation of the DOC,” an embassy spokesperson said in an English statement.

On Monday, the Philippine National Maritime Council, which is responsible for formulating and coordinating policies and strategies on maritime security and domain awareness, released a statement rejecting Beijing’s claims that the Philippines was staging provocations in the South China Sea by deploying vessels and allowing Filipino fishermen to operate in the disputed waters.

It said China’s “persistent illegal, coercive, aggressive and deceptive (ICAD) activities” had led to the tensions in the waters.

“China’s claim that the Philippines ‘stages provocations’ by deploying government vessels or allowing Filipino fisherfolk to operate in these waters is preposterous and completely false,” the council said.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3339766/south-china-sea-claims-coercion-deception-beijing-and-manila-wage-new-war-words>

### **Jan 11: U.S. Navy Supercarrier Is Now Operating In Waters Claimed By China**

The United States Navy's USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN-72), the fifth Nimitz-class nuclear-powered supercarrier, carried out live-fire exercises and a replenishment-at-sea in the South China Sea last week as part of its ongoing routine operations.

The warship began her current deployment in late November, departing San Diego with almost no fanfare. Moreover, the Pentagon did not announce where CVN-72 would operate. However, even as this deployment began, it was expected that USS Abraham Lincoln would relieve USS Nimitz (CVN-68), the oldest nuclear-powered aircraft carrier in the fleet.

CVN-68 returned home to Naval Base Kitsap in Bremerton, Wash., just before the Christmas holiday, wrapping up what was confirmed to be the 50-year-old carrier's final deployment. Later this spring, USS Nimitz will head to Norfolk, Va., for decommissioning, followed by the start of recycling the supercarrier. That effort will last several years.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/petersuciu/2026/01/11/us-navy-supercarrier-is-now-operating-in-waters-claimed-by-china/>

### **Jan 9: Philippine navy confident it can navigate South China Sea dispute: ‘up to the challenge’**

Manila is banking on modern ships and global alliances to challenge China’s increasing presence in the contentious waters

The [Philippines](#) has expressed confidence in countering [China](#)’s widening influence in contested waters as its navy presses ahead with expanding its fleet, joint activities with foreign partners and the use of unmanned systems.

Analysts say these measures would boost the interoperability of the Philippine military across the sea and air, as the [South China Sea](#) dispute continues to dominate its security planning.

“We are up to the challenge [posed by] ... the People’s Liberation Army Navy, Chinese coastguard and maritime militia, which is towards the integration of their respective forces” in 2026, navy spokesman [Roy Vincent Trinidad](#) said during a briefing on Tuesday.

According to Pitz Defense Analysis, the navy is expected to double its fleet size from nine vessels in 2023 to at least 18 by 2028. These additional vessels will include two guided missile corvettes and at least six offshore patrol vessels.

<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3339264/philippine-navy-confident-it-can-navigate-south-china-sea-dispute-challenge>

### **Jan 6: Viet Nam opposes China's opening of shopping mall in Paracel Islands**

“All foreign activities in the [Paracel] Islands conducted without Viet Nam’s permission are entirely illegal and of no validity, and Viet Nam resolutely opposes them,” said Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Pham Thu Hang. Pham made the statement on January 9 in response to a reporter's request for comment on [China's inauguration of a shopping mall](#) on [Woody] Island, part of Viet Nam's Hoang Sa (Paracel) archipelago.

The Spokesperson said that Viet Nam possesses sufficient historical evidence and legal grounds to affirm its sovereignty over the [Paracel] Islands in accordance with international law.

<https://en.baochinhphu.vn/viet-nam-opposes-chinas-opening-of-shopping-mall-in-paracel-islands-11126010917134628.htm>

### **Jan 6: China Is Building Out Another Artificial Island**

Satellites have revealed a flurry of new land reclamation activity at a disputed reef in the South China Sea’s Paracel Islands, suggesting China is expanding an outpost there.

[China](#) claims sovereignty over more than 80 percent of the [South China Sea](#), a strategic waterway that serves as a conduit for up to one-third of global maritime trade.

This includes the Paracels, where Beijing’s claims overlap with those of [Taiwan](#) and Vietnam. Since 2013, China has carried out land reclamation on an unprecedented scale, building out 20 outposts in the Paracels and seven in the Spratlys to the south—some of them militarized—contributing to regional tensions and causing significant damage to [marine ecosystems](#).

Satellite imagery from the European Space Agency’s Sentinel-2 satellites shows new sand dredging began sometime after October 15 at Antelope Reef, [known as Linyang Jiao in Chinese and Da Hai Sam \(" Sea Cucumber Rock"\) in Vietnamese](#).

Antelope Reef is a submerged coral formation in the Western Paracels, located about 250 miles east of the Vietnamese city of Hue and roughly 175 miles southeast of China’s Sanya naval base in Hainan province.

The dredging is concentrated along four sites on the eastern and southern sides of Antelope's lagoon. Additional land appears to be reclaimed on either side of the current outpost and its adjoining port facility.

<https://www.newsweek.com/china-building-out-another-artificial-island-11312424>

### **Jan 6: Philippines eyes more joint drills in South China Sea and beyond**

THE PHILIPPINE military plans to hold more joint naval drills with its allies in the South China Sea and beyond as it expects heightened Chinese coerciveness in the disputed waters, a navy spokesman said on Tuesday.

Philippine forces plan to expand naval exercises beyond traditional allies to strengthen deterrence as Manila faces growing Chinese assertiveness and may also stage similar drills beyond the South China Sea, said Rear Admiral Roy Vincent T. Trinidad, navy spokesman on the South China Sea.

"There will be an increase in our multilateral participants... [and] there will be an increase in our multilateral engagements and exercises," he told a media briefing.

<https://www.bworldonline.com/the-nation/2026/01/06/722682/philippines-eyes-more-joint-drills-in-south-china-sea-and-beyond/>

### **Dec 29: PLA conducts 'Justice Mission 2025' drills around Taiwan islands**

Multiple forces of the Eastern Theater Command of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) started drills code-named "Justice Mission 2025" around Taiwan Island Monday, said Shi Yi, spokesperson for the theater command.

The PLA Eastern Theater Command is dispatching its Army, Navy, Air Force and Rocket Force troops to conduct drills in the Taiwan Strait and areas to the north, southwest, southeast and east of Taiwan Island, Shi said.

The drills will focus on subjects of sea-air combat readiness patrol, joint seizure of comprehensive superiority, blockade on key ports and areas, as well as all-dimensional deterrence outside the island chain, he added.

<http://eng.mod.gov.cn/2025xb/N/T/16429628.html>

## **OTHER STATES AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA**

### **Jan 15: Japan, Philippines sign new defence pacts amid surging China tensions**

The Philippines and Japan signed two defence pacts Thursday, including a deal allowing their forces to exchange supplies and services, the latest in a series of agreements aimed at countering China's regional assertiveness.

Tokyo and Manila have significantly deepened military ties in recent years, joining a security partnership with Washington, and Japan supplying patrol boats and radio gear to the Philippines.

The Philippines and China have engaged in [frequent clashes](#) in the contested South China Sea, which Beijing claims in nearly its entirety despite an international court [ruling](#) that its assertion has no legal basis.

Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi signed the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement with Philippine Foreign Secretary Theresa Lazaro in Manila. The deal allows the tax-free provision of ammunition, fuel, food and other necessities when their forces stage joint training.

Motegi and Lazaro also announced a \$6m Official Security Assistance package from Tokyo to fund the building of facilities to house rigid-hulled inflatable boats donated by Japan to boost Manila's naval capabilities.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/15/japan-philippines-sign-new-defence-pacts-amid-surge-china-tensions>

### **Jan 15: Philippines taps Korean weapons to bolster deterrence as South China Sea clashes surge**

Tensions have escalated in the disputed South China Sea, with law enforcement vessels from the Philippines and China engaging in an average of 12.1 confrontational interactions per month between August 2024 and May 2025, according to data from the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

To bolster its deterrence against China, the Philippine military is increasingly turning to Korea for arms procurement, drawn by Korea's reliable delivery timelines, competitive quality and ally status with the United States. The Philippines has either purchased or is considering the purchase of a wide range of Korean defense assets, from frigates to fighter jets, as it works to modernize its military forces from the ground up, an initiative known as the Horizon Military Modernisation Programme.

The move came as U.S. President Donald Trump underscored the importance of defending the first island chain — a strategic line of archipelagos stretching from Japan through Taiwan down to the edge of the South China Sea — alongside its allies, including the Philippines. As a critical part of the first island chain, Manila has stepped up its defense in response.

Re-Horizon 3, the current phase of the military modernization program with a \$35 billion budget, focuses heavily on improving the country's naval and aerial defense capabilities, with new frigates, patrol vessels and advanced fighter jets.

<https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2026-01-15/business/industry/Philippines-taps-Korean-weapons-to-bolster-deterrence-as-South-China-Sea-clashes-surge/2498571>

### **15 Jan: Australia is investing in defence infrastructure at five military sites in the Philippines**

Australia's defence spending this year is set to include infrastructure projects at five military bases in the Philippines. The bases are all located on the island of Luzon, in proximity to the contested South China Sea and self-governing Taiwan — two major flashpoints in regional relations. The investments come as Australia and the South-East Asian nation are expected to sign a new pact to increase collaboration between their defence forces.

A Defence spokesperson confirmed to the ABC the government had "identified opportunities to develop military facilities at five locations" on Luzon.

The island is the largest and most populated in the north of the country on the contested West Philippine Sea and Taiwan strait.

"Australia is committed to strengthening our defence relationship with the Philippines and supporting the Armed Forces of the Philippines, including defence infrastructure, in areas such as logistics, training and fire safety," the spokesperson said.

"Work on this defence infrastructure will commence in 2026, and will be consistent with Philippine sovereignty and ownership."

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2026-01-15/australia-defence-investment-bases-philippines-us-china/106220666>

**5 Jan: US strike on Venezuela to embolden China's territorial claims, Taiwan attack unlikely, analysts say**

The U.S. [attack on Venezuela](#) will embolden China to strengthen its territorial claims over areas such as Taiwan and parts of the South China Sea but will not hasten any potential invasion of Taiwan, analysts said.

Chinese President Xi Jinping's considerations about Taiwan and his timeline are separate from the situation in Latin America, influenced more by China's domestic situation than by U.S. actions, they said.

Still, analysts said, President [Donald Trump's](#) audacious attack on Saturday, capturing Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro, hands China an unexpected opportunity that Beijing will likely use in the near term to amplify criticism of Washington and bolster its own standing on the international stage.

Further out, Beijing could leverage Trump's move to defend its stance against the U.S. on territorial issues including Taiwan, Tibet and islands in the East and South China seas.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/us-strike-venezuela-embolden-chinas-territorial-claims-taiwan-attack-unlikely-2026-01-04/>