

**SOUTH CHINA SEA NEWS No. 150**  
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*Compiled by CIL Ocean Law and Policy Team*

**ACTS OF CLAIMANT**

**29 March: PLA, CCG conduct patrols around Huangyan Dao in South China Sea**

The China Coast Guard (CCG) on Sunday conducted law enforcement patrols in the territorial waters around China's Huangyan Dao and its surrounding areas in the South China Sea.

The CCG said in a statement that since March, it has stepped up patrols in the area, handling illegal and infringing vessels according to law and regulations, while intensifying control over relevant maritime zones to safeguard China's territorial sovereignty and maritime interests.

On the same day, naval and air units of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Southern Theater Command also carried out combat readiness patrols in the territorial waters and airspace of Huangyan Dao and surrounding areas.

<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2026-03-29/China-Coast-Guard-patrols-Huangyan-Dao-in-South-China-Sea-1LUscmQZpBe/p.html>

**28 March: Manila, Beijing resume talks on South China Sea, energy security**

The Philippines and China have resumed high-level talks this week over the disputed South China Sea, exploring preliminary steps towards oil and gas cooperation while addressing energy and fertiliser supply issues amid the ongoing Middle East conflict, the Philippine foreign ministry said.

The 11th round of talks under a bilateral consultation mechanism established in 2017 was the first such meeting since January 2025.

Manila “firmly reiterated its principled positions,” raising concerns about incidents threatening Filipino personnel and fishermen, and underscoring the importance of diplomacy, communication, and adherence to international law, the ministry said, in a statement on March 28.

Both sides discussed initial exchanges on oil and gas cooperation and emphasised stable energy and fertiliser access.

The talks come after President Ferdinand Marcos Jr [declared a state of national energy emergency](#) earlier this week, citing oil supply disruptions due to the Middle East conflict and announcing efforts to diversify fuel imports, including sourcing from China.

The talks also addressed renewable energy, agriculture, trade, and potential people-to-people initiatives, such as visa-free travel and direct air routes, the ministry said.

The Philippines added both sides “continued to make progress” to shore up confidence at sea, including communication between their coast guards.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/manila-beijing-resume-talks-on-south-china-sea-energy-security>

**24 March: Philippines' Marcos says Mid-East war may spur energy talks with China in disputed sea**

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr is open to restarting talks with Beijing on a joint oil and gas project in a [disputed area of the South China Sea](#), saying [the war in Iran](#) may provide the impetus for a breakthrough.

Mr Marcos and Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2023 agreed to resume discussions on a joint oil and gas development in the waterway, which has been stalled for years.

“That’s something we’ve been talking about for a great deal, but territorial disputes are getting in the way of that,” Mr Marcos said on March 24.

“Maybe this provides impetus for both sides to come to an agreement,” he said, referring to the [conflict in the Middle East](#). “That’s something we are exploring. Everything that might be of help, we are certainly pursuing.”

The remarks signal a possible further easing of tensions between the Philippines and China, which have ramped up since Mr Marcos took office in 2022.

Mr Marcos has bolstered military ties with the United States to help safeguard the Philippines’ claims in the South China Sea, [leading to repeated clashes](#) with Chinese ships deploying water cannon against Philippine ships and crew.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/philippines-marcos-says-war-may-spur-energy-talks-with-china-in-disputed-sea>

### **23 March: ‘No dispute about it’: Beijing defends construction on Paracel Islands in South China Sea**

“The Xisha Islands are an inherent part of China’s territory and there is no dispute about it,” foreign ministry spokesman Lin Jian said on Monday, using the Chinese name for the archipelago.

“China’s necessary construction activities on its own territory are aimed at improving the living conditions of the islands’ residents and serving local economic development,” Lin said, without specifying the location of the activities.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3347603/no-dispute-about-it-beijing-defends-construction-paracel-islands-south-china-sea>

### **22 March: Vietnam protests as China’s Paracels build-up escalates at Antelope Reef**

Hanoi has protested to Beijing over Chinese land-reclamation activities in the disputed Paracel Islands in the South China Sea, following reports of accelerated dredging and landfill operations at [Antelope Reef](#).

“Vietnam resolutely opposes such activities, makes representations and affirms its position on this matter,” Vietnamese foreign ministry spokeswoman Pham Thu Hang said on Saturday.

She said Hanoi had “ample historical evidence and legal grounds” to assert sovereignty over the [Paracel Islands](#), including Antelope Reef, in accordance with international law.

She added that any foreign activities in the waters without Vietnam’s permission were “completely illegal and invalid”.

It was unclear when the protest was lodged, but last week Chinese and Vietnamese foreign, security and defence ministers agreed in Hanoi to “properly” address maritime disputes.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3347467/vietnam-protests-chinas-paracels-build-escalates-antelope-reef>

### **21 March: Philippine military uncovers alleged new Beijing spy tactics in South China Sea row**

At least three Filipinos with ties to the country’s military have been arrested on suspicion of spying for Beijing, allegedly leaking information that sparked maritime confrontations in the disputed [South China Sea](#).

The case, which came to light last year during an ongoing multi-agency counter-intelligence effort, marks a new strategy of recruiting Filipinos for espionage instead of planting individuals with fake local identities in the country, according to Philippine Navy Rear Admiral Roy Vincent Trinidad.

China has rejected the allegations, calling them “malicious smears”.

One suspect allegedly used a modified mobile phone with a messaging app concealed within the video game *Tetris* to communicate with handlers, while payoffs involved cash hidden in fake food deliveries.

The three did not work together, even though two were overseen by the same person.

“What we are seeing are individuals operating through a similar modus operandi, some of those involved appear to have acted independently while being approached through comparable recruitment channels,” Trinidad told This Week in Asia.

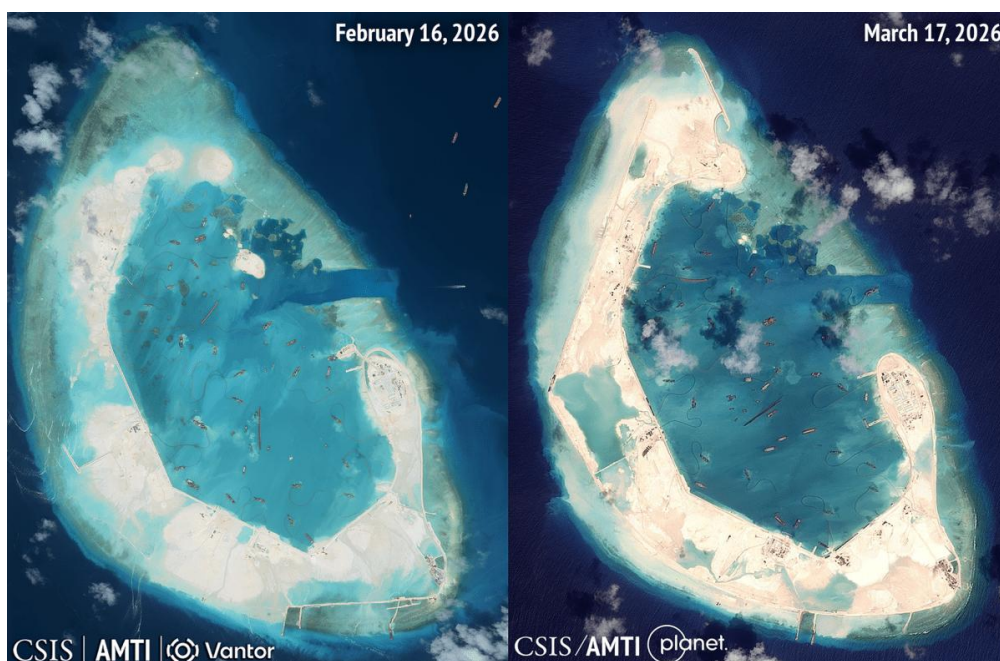
Debriefings revealed that some of these activities have been “ongoing for several months to a few years, depending on the individual case”, he said.

<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3347461/philippine-military-uncovers-alleged-new-beijing-spy-tactics-south-china-sea-row>

### 19 March: Antelope Reef Could Now Be the Largest Island in the South China Sea

[Media reporting in early 2026](#) has highlighted new Chinese dredging and landfill activity at Antelope Reef in the Paracel Islands. This is the first significant artificial island-building Beijing has undertaken in the South China Sea [since 2017](#). But the more consequential—and underreported—development may be the projected size of the artificial island. If construction proceeds at the pace seen in satellite imagery, Antelope Reef is set to become China’s largest feature in the Paracels and potentially in the entire South China Sea, equaling or even surpassing the size of Mischief Reef in the Spratlys.

Antelope Reef lies within the Crescent island group in the southwestern part of the Paracels. It is located approximately 162 nautical miles from Sanya Port in China’s Hainan province and 216 nautical miles from Da Nang, Vietnam. Previously one of China’s [smallest outposts in the Paracels](#), Beijing began major dredging at Antelope [in October 2025](#), and in recent weeks has begun preliminary construction on some areas of the reef.



Using recent commercial satellite imagery from Vantor, AMTI measured the estimated area of reclaimed land at Antelope Reef at roughly **1,490 acres**. That figure is striking when compared with the scale of China’s features elsewhere in the Paracels. The area’s current largest feature is Woody Island which, despite hosting an air and naval base along with Sansha “city” which administers all of the South China Sea, measures only around 890 acres. Mischief, the largest Chinese outpost in the South China Sea, measures 1,504 acres of total land area—a minimal difference from Antelope’s current size.

Antelope Reef could now accommodate a 9,000-foot runway of the type China has [already constructed](#) at Woody Island, Mischief Reef, Subi Reef, and Fiery Cross Reef. The northwestern side of the new landmass at Antelope, which extends over 11,000 feet, has been fashioned with a noticeably straight outer edge perfect for an airstrip.

While several features in the Crescent island group have harbors, the lagoon at Antelope Reef would dwarf those. This could allow more coastguard along with large numbers of maritime militia to maintain a presence at the reef, as has been common in [recent years at Mischief Reef](#). Antelope’s size would also enable it to accommodate the [robust infrastructure](#) seen at Woody and China’s “big three” outposts (Mischief, Subi, and Fiery Cross) in the Spratlys, including diesel power plants, underground storage facilities, coastal defense emplacements, surface-to-air and anti-ship missile facilities, as well as numerous surveillance and electronic warfare installations.



Preliminary construction has begun on select portions of the reef. Over 50 small, grey-roofed structures and a helipad have been built near the entrance to the lagoon. Foundations for a larger structure measuring 100 by 60 yards have appeared in the southern corner of the lagoon where several jetties have taken shape. It’s likely that at least some of these early structures are temporary facilities that will later be replaced with more permanent infrastructure, as was seen during the construction of China’s Spratly outposts.

On its surface, an additional major outpost in the Paracels would provide Beijing with incremental, rather than monumental, gains to its capabilities in the South China Sea. Assuming Antelope is developed into a military facility on par with China’s other large outposts, it will extend the reach of Chinese sensing capabilities closer to Vietnam’s shores and provide additional capacity and redundancy for its naval and air assets in the northern South China Sea. Antelope’s proximity to Hainan could also give Beijing an opportunity to expand its efforts to establish a civilian presence in the Paracels. While this may not significantly change the strategic picture in the South China Sea, Beijing is certainly signaling its ability to continually

expand its occupied features — a message perhaps intended most directly for Hanoi, whose own [reclamation and landfill activities](#) in the Spratlys remain ongoing.

Ultimately, Beijing's plans for Antelope Reef are uncertain. Satellite imagery can estimate the likely area of reclaimed land, but what will be vital to look out for is how China will develop the island once dredging is complete. Still, the projected scale alone suggests that Antelope could become one of the most important outposts China has built in the South China Sea.

<https://amti.csis.org/antelope-reef-could-now-be-the-largest-island-in-the-south-china-sea/>

### **16 March: Philippines rejects Beijing's claim to sovereignty over entire South China Sea**

The Philippines said on Monday it rejected Beijing's assertion of sovereignty over the entire South China Sea, disputing a claim by China's embassy that a Filipino diplomat had once conceded the disputed Scarborough Shoal was not part of Philippine territory.

"China must be reminded that maritime and territorial claims are subject to established international legal procedures and dispute settlement mechanisms, not through unilateral proclamations or social media posts," Philippine foreign ministry spokesperson Rogelio Villanueva told a briefing.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/philippines-rejects-beijings-claim-sovereignty-over-south-china-sea-2026-03-16/>

### **15 March: In joint patrols with China, Vietnam steers course between two powers**

Chinese and Vietnamese personnel will carry out a joint naval patrol and training exercise in the Gulf of Tonkin this week, extending a practice that has continued despite [long-standing competing maritime claims](#).

The joint manoeuvres will take place as part of the [China-Vietnam Border Defence Friendship Exchange](#), which will include medical and cultural exchange events, China's defence ministry said on Sunday.

They will be conducted in waters off China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region and Vietnam's Quang Ninh province, as well as the Gulf of Tonkin, known in China as the Beibu Gulf, the ministry said.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3346656/joint-patrols-china-vietnam-steers-course-between-two-powers>

### **15 March: Chinese PLA conducts joint landing and beach assault drill**

The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) amphibious assault ship Hainan recently conducted a multi-service, multi-arm three-dimensional delivery drill under realistic combat conditions. Land and sea forces were successfully deployed ashore.

Units from the Chinese PLA Navy, Army, Air Force and Rocket Force carried out coordinated island landing and amphibious assault missions.

The Type 075 amphibious assault ship ensured the rapid and large-scale transport of troops and equipment for island landing and amphibious operations.

<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2026-03-14/Frigates-Ganzhou-Wenshan-conduct-combat-training-in-South-China-Sea-1LvH5EV1HdC/p.html>

### **14 March: Frigates Ganzhou, Wenshan conduct combat training in South China Sea**

The Southern Theater Command Navy recently organized the frigates Ganzhou and Wenshan to conduct cross-day and cross-night combat training in the South China Sea, testing and

enhancing the combat capabilities of officers and soldiers in complex environments. Through target search and information sharing, the warships continuously tracked and locked onto the target, carrying out firepower strikes under the cover of night to successfully destroy it. During the maritime training period, the formation also performed several practical training subjects, such as navigation supply, anti-terrorism and anti-piracy, and spot checks and capture, further honing the on-the-spot handling capabilities of commanders and the coordination skills of the crew.

<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2026-03-14/Frigates-Ganzhou-Wenshan-conduct-combat-training-in-South-China-Sea-1LvH5EV1HdC/p.html>

### **13 March: Thousands of Chinese boats mass at sea, raising questions**

Thousands of Chinese fishing boats have been massing in geometric formations in the East China Sea, in coordinated actions that experts believe are part of Beijing's preparations for a potential regional crisis or conflict.

Monitoring ship-tracking data on Christmas Day, Jason Wang could tell something "unusual" was underway as fishing boats swarmed into two parallel inverted Ls, each about 400 kilometres (about 250 miles) long.

Wang could see the roughly 2,000 fishing boats among the many thousands of vessels that ply the busy waterway through their automatic identification systems (AIS) -- a GPS-type signal that commercial ships use to avoid collisions.

The vessels, which were as close as 500 metres (1,640 feet) to each other, held their positions for about 30 hours in near gale-force winds and then suddenly scattered.

"Something didn't look right to me because in nature very rarely do you see straight lines," said Wang, chief operating officer of ingeniSPACE, which analyses satellite imagery and ship signals data.

"We've seen like two, 300, up to a thousand (Chinese fishing boats congregate), but anything exceeding a thousand I thought was unusual."

<https://sg.news.yahoo.com/thousands-chinese-boats-mass-sea-043002479.html>

### **3 March: [South China Sea]: Navy monitors over 60 Chinese vessels in February**

The Philippine Navy on Tuesday said it monitored more than 60 Chinese vessels across key features in the [South China Sea] in February.

From Feb. 1 to 28, the Navy tracked 62 Chinese vessels from the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA-N) and the China Coast Guard (CCG) operating near strategic features in the disputed waters, according to a statement.

At Ayungin Shoal, authorities monitored 17 vessels, including 15 from the CCG and two from the PLA-N. The low-tide elevation is located 194 km off Palawan.

The Navy said the monitoring was part of broader maritime domain awareness operations covering the country's waters. In February alone, it tracked 18,360 vessels nationwide, the majority of which were foreign ships. More than 13,523 vessels responded to radio challenges issued by Philippine authorities, while 4,837 did not reply.

<https://www.inquirer.net/469534/west-ph-sea-navy-monitors-over-60-chinese-vessels-in-february/>

## OTHER STATES AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

### **27 March: Philippines, France sign military pact amid South China Sea tensions**

The Philippines and France have signed a visiting forces agreement that would allow them to conduct joint military training in each other's territory, as Manila expands defence ties amid rising tensions with Beijing in the South China Sea.

Philippine Defence Secretary Gilberto Teodoro and French Minister for the Armed Forces and Veterans Catherine Vautrin signed the agreement on March 26 during a meeting in Paris, where they discussed regional security challenges and reaffirmed support for rules-based international order.

The two also called for "the peaceful resolution of disputes" and the need to strengthen supply chain resilience in times of crisis.

"The agreement will greatly bolster bilateral cooperation and offer an adequate level of legal protection to the joint activities between the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the French Armed Forces," the Philippine defence department said in a statement.

Aside from France, the Philippines also has the visiting forces agreements with the U.S., Australia, Japan, and New Zealand.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/philippines-france-sign-military-pact-amid-south-china-sea-tensions-2026-03-27/>

### **24 March: Strait of Hormuz blockage raises Japan fears over South China Sea shipping**

The effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz has rekindled Japan's concerns about relying on the South China Sea as a shipping conduit for energy imports, Takehiko Matsuo, Japan's vice minister for international affairs at the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, said on Monday.

Asian countries rely heavily on oil and liquified natural gas (LNG) through the Strait of Hormuz and have been hit hard by Tehran's de facto blockade after the U.S.-Israeli attacks on Iran that started Feb. 28. Against the backdrop of a disrupted chokepoint, Tokyo has urged Japanese companies to find other trade routes away from the South China Sea and to diversify Japan's energy supply.

Matsuo, speaking at the CERAWEEK by S&P Global energy conference in Houston, Texas, said Japan had three weeks of gas supplies left and that a majority of Japan's LNG imports come from Australia and other Asian countries.

"We recognize that 80% of this energy passes through [the] South China Sea, and it might create another vulnerability for Japan," he said.

<https://asia.nikkei.com/business/energy/strait-of-hormuz-blockage-raises-japan-fears-over-south-china-sea-shipping>

### **6 March: Australia: Statement on unsafe and unprofessional interaction with People's Liberation Army–Navy**

The Australian Government has expressed its concerns to the Chinese Government following an unsafe and unprofessional interaction with a People's Liberation Army–Navy (PLA-N) helicopter.

On 4 March 2026, HMAS *Toowoomba* was in international waters in the Yellow Sea undertaking routine activities as part of Operation Argos, Australia's contribution to the international effort to enforce United Nations Security Council sanctions against North Korea. During these activities, an Australian Defence Force (ADF) MH-60R helicopter launched from HMAS *Toowoomba* was intercepted by a PLA-N helicopter.

The PLA-N helicopter matched the ADF helicopter's altitude before closing in to an unsafe distance. The PLA-N helicopter moved slightly ahead, increased speed and then rolled towards the ADF helicopter, which required evasive action to maintain safe flight.

<https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/releases/2026-03-06/statement-unsafe-unprofessional-interaction-peoples-liberation-army-navy>

### **5 March: Philippine resupply mission data leaked to Chinese intelligence, security official says**

A spokesman for the National Security Council (NSC) of the Philippines on March 5 said some information on the country's resupply missions in the South China Sea was compromised and passed on to Chinese intelligence agents.

His statement came a day after the Philippine government said it apprehended some of its citizens on suspicion of spying for China in a "serious national security matter".

NSC spokesman Cornelio Valencia called the breach "alarming" but limited in scope, adding that the channels used to transmit the information had been shut down.

"Rotation and resupply data fall under operational security because disclosing it can endanger personnel, and that has been compromised," Mr Valencia said.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/philippine-resupply-mission-data-leaked-to-chinese-intelligence-security-official-says>

### **3 March: US patrol flights over South China Sea drop 30% as focus shifts to Middle East**

US land-based reconnaissance aircraft sorties over the South China Sea decreased by around 30 per cent month on month in February, according to a Beijing-based think tank, as the US deploys assets to the [Middle East](#).

The South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative (SCSPI) said on Monday that only 72 US reconnaissance aircraft sorties were detected over the [South China Sea](#) in February. By contrast, 102 US reconnaissance aircraft sorties were observed over the waters in both January and December.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3345278/us-patrol-flights-over-south-china-sea-drop-30-focus-shifts-middle-east>