

SOUTH CHINA SEA NEWS No. 151

April 2026

Compiled by CIL Ocean Law and Policy Team

ACTS OF CLAIMANT

30 April: China conducts combat readiness patrols in Scarborough Shoal

China's military said on Thursday (April 30) its naval and air forces conducted combat readiness patrols in the Scarborough Shoal and surrounding areas in the disputed South China Sea.

"Such patrols serve as an effective countermeasure to cope with all sorts of rights-violation and provocative acts. They are meant to resolutely safeguard China's territorial sovereignty and uphold peace and stability in the South China Sea," Chinese military's Southern Theater Command said in a statement.

The Philippine embassy in Beijing did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-conducts-combat-readiness-patrols-scarborough-shoal-2026-04-30/>

27 April: PLA showcases YJ-20 hypersonic missiles as Balikatan drills heat up South China Sea

The Chinese military aired footage over the weekend of [YJ-20 hypersonic anti-ship missile](#) launches, as joint [US-Philippines-Japan](#) drills heighten tensions in the disputed South China Sea.

China Military Bugle, a social media account run by the People's Liberation Army, posted a video on Sunday of the PLA Navy conducting strike tests at sea, including multiple YJ-20 launches.

The post did not specify when and where the missiles were fired. However, the footage was released two days after Beijing said a naval fleet led by Type 055 destroyer Zunyi had "[recently conducted](#)" live-fire drills and joint air-sea exercises in waters east of Luzon, a Philippine island near Taiwan.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3351593/pla-showcases-yj-20-hypersonic-missiles-balikatan-drills-heat-south-china-sea>

27 April: Philippines and US stage counter-landing drills with allies near South China Sea

As simulated enemy boats and unmanned craft closed in on the shores of Palawan island facing the South China Sea, Philippine and US forces conducted counter-landing drills on April 27, repelling a mock assault by using live fire against designated targets and intercepting threats.

The display of advanced weapons capabilities and operational readiness was part of the annual Balikatan or "shoulder-to-shoulder" exercises, bringing together forces from the Philippines, the United States, Australia and New Zealand to rehearse coastal defence manoeuvres and test their ability to work together to protect territorial waters.

Philippine military chief, General Romeo Brawner, underscored the location's strategic value, noting that Palawan faces the South China Sea and lies opposite the Kalayaan Island Group, part of the Spratly Islands that Manila regards as part of its exclusive economic zone.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/philippines-and-us-stage-counter-landing-drills-with-allies-near-south-china-sea>

24 April: China stages navy drill as US and Philippines embark on Balikatan 2026

Beijing has held naval exercises in waters east of a Philippine island near Taiwan in an apparent response to nearby [annual military drills hosted by Manila and Washington](#).

The People's Liberation Army Southern Theatre Command said on Friday that a naval fleet had "recently" held drills in waters east of Luzon, the northernmost major island of the Philippines. The drills were "a necessary action taken in response to the current regional situation", said the command, which oversees the South China Sea.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3351353/china-stages-navy-drill-us-and-philippines-embark-balikatan-2026>

22 April: PLA's new Type 076 'drone carrier' to take part in South China Sea training drills

China's next-generation "[drone-carrier](#)" [amphibious assault ship](#) is en route to the South China Sea for critical sea trials, the military announced on Tuesday, in the same waters where the US, [the Philippines](#) and [Japan](#) are conducting large-scale joint military exercises and the aircraft carrier Liaoning is apparently sailing to.

"The Sichuan, our country's first Type 076 amphibious assault ship, has set sail from Shanghai for relevant waters in the [South China Sea](#) to carry out scientific research trials and training missions, testing the performance of multiple on-board systems and platforms," the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy's official Weibo account said.

The brief notice added: "This is a routine cross-regional trial and training exercise organised in accordance with the vessel's overall construction plan and is not directed at any specific target."

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3350932/chinas-new-type-076-drone-carrier-take-part-south-china-sea-training-drills>

22 April: Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency to deploy new multi-role ships in South China Sea

The Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) will deploy its two new Multi-Purpose Mission Ships (MPMS) to the South China Sea.

MMEA director-general Admiral Datuk Mohd Rosli Abdullah said the vessels will serve as motherships and are part of the agency's capability development programme.

He said the second vessel would have specifications almost identical to the first and is expected to be completed by the end of 2027, while the first MPMS is slated for completion as early as February 2027.

<https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2026/04/1423806/mmea-deploy-new-multi-role-ships-south-china-sea>

22 April: China and Philippines taking 'baby steps' towards better relations: Manila's ambassador

The Philippines is trying to gradually establish "stable foundations" for its relations with China before tackling tougher problems such as the long-running [South China Sea dispute](#), according to the country's ambassador to Beijing.

"We need a new equilibrium in our relations with China. Both sides [have agreed] to take incremental or baby steps towards that," Jaime FlorCruz told the South China Morning Post.

“That means a relationship that is stable, that is predictable, that is not subject to jerks [and] ups and downs ... We’re trying to manage our differences while at the same time searching for convergence of interests.”

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3350870/china-and-philippines-taking-baby-steps-towards-better-relations-manilas-ambassador>

15 April: China moves to block entrance to disputed South China Sea shoal

China is employing ships and a barrier to tighten control of the entrance to the Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea amid roiling tension with the Philippines over the disputed feature, satellite imagery obtained by Reuters shows.

Scarborough is one of Asia's most hotly disputed maritime sites, where some diplomats and analysts fear [long-running](#) frictions and confrontations could degenerate into armed conflict.

The presence of four fishing boats, a Chinese naval or coast guard ship and a new floating barrier comes as the Philippines sends its own coast guard and fisheries vessels to support its fishermen frequently driven away by larger Chinese patrols.

Photographs taken on April 10 and 11 show the fishing boats anchored along the entrance to the shoal, in addition to a floating barrier stretching across it in the April 11 image.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-moves-block-entrance-disputed-south-china-sea-shoal-images-show-2026-04-15/>

13 April: Philippines accuses China of using cyanide to poison South China Sea atoll

The Philippines says it has discovered cyanide on Chinese boats near a disputed South China Sea atoll, warning the substance could be used for “sabotage” against local fish populations.

Security officials from the Philippines said on Monday that laboratory tests confirmed the presence of the toxic substance in bottles seized by the Philippine navy last year at Second Thomas Shoal, a submerged reef in the Spratly Islands of the South China Sea.

The officials warned that the cyanide could have had serious consequences for marine life and weakened the reef supporting a warship that Manila grounded on the atoll to reinforce its maritime claim.

“We wish to underscore that the use of cyanide in Ayungin Shoal is a form of sabotage that seeks to kill local fish populations, depriving navy personnel of a vital food source,” Cornelio Valencia, National Security Council spokesperson, told a news conference, using the Philippines’ name for the atoll.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/13/philippines-accuses-china-of-using-cyanide-to-poison-south-china-sea-atoll>

9 April: Philippines opens key coast guard base in the disputed South China Sea

The Philippines unveiled a major coast guard base Thursday on an island in the [South China Sea](#) to serve as a “steadfast sentinel of our sovereignty” in a disputed region closely guarded by China’s forces.

Chinese officials did not immediately react to the Philippines’ opening of its coast guard district command on [Thitu Island](#), which has been occupied by Filipino forces and civilians for decades but is also claimed by Beijing.

Chinese coast guard and other government-linked ships frequently patrol outlying waters off the island, which is also claimed by Vietnam and Taiwan. Chinese and Filipino forces have had tense but mostly minor confrontations in outlying waters in the past.

In new incidents on Thursday afternoon, the Philippine coast guard accused Chinese forces of firing flares toward its patrol aircraft in what it said was “a clear and deliberate act of bullying” that endangered Filipino personnel over the disputed Subi Reef and Mischief Reef, which are occupied by China. Philippine coast guard Rear Adm. Jay Tarriela did not immediately provide other details. There was also no immediate reaction from Chinese officials.

<https://apnews.com/article/south-china-sea-thitu-island-philippines-0880f88576273345a9efe850e0dbfef6>

7 April: Indonesia's navy probes suspected unmanned sub found off Lombok

Indonesia's navy is investigating a suspected unmanned underwater vehicle discovered in waters north of Gili Trawangan, Lombok, officials said on Tuesday.

Navy Spokesperson Rear Admiral Tunggul said a team of experts would conduct a detailed technical assessment to determine the device's origin, function and any data it may contain.

“The navy will carry out an in-depth examination to identify the device, including its origin, purpose and stored data,” he said when confirming the case in Jakarta.

<https://en.antaranews.com/news/411549/indonesias-navy-probes-suspected-unmanned-sub-found-off-lombok>

7 April: Anwar to urge Asean, China to fast-track South China Sea Code of Conduct at May summit

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim today said he will urge his regional counterparts and China to expedite the conclusion of Code of Conduct (COC) on the South China Sea at the Asean Leaders' Summit in Philippines next month.

Barring some recent tensions between China and the Philippines, Anwar said the contested waters remain relatively calm despite attempts to project the situation otherwise, particularly by the West.

“Neither us (Asean) nor China have shown any sort of antagonism, animosity, or for that matter, any intention to escalate the tensions.

“We have action relations in trade, commerce, military, and in every field possible,” he said at the inaugural Kuala Lumpur-Ankara Dialogue 2026, here, today.

“So, whether it is the Indian Ocean or the South China Sea, we (Asean) maintain our right and our fierce independence in attempting to resolve our problems and differences.

<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2026/04/07/anwar-to-urge-asean-china-to-fast-track-south-china-sea-code-of-conduct-at-may-summit/215414>

3 April: Forgotten Faces in the Contested South China Sea

Vietnamese fishers, especially those who have faced physical violence from Chinese forces, suffer in silence.

In early 2010, a few months after he received Vietnamese honorary citizenship, André Menras, a French national, decided to set foot on Lý Sơn Island in Quảng Ngãi province – a plan he had long nurtured. His visit was motivated by more than admiration for the island, known for the maritime brigade during the 17th century under the Nguyễn dynasty that protected the stormy territorial waters. He was especially determined to visit fishers in the disputed waters of the Paracel Islands (known in Vietnamese as Hoàng Sa, which literally means yellow sands), where the Vietnamese government asserts indisputable sovereignty – but China asserts operational control.

In particular, Menras wanted to talk with the families of Vietnamese fishers who had been attacked by Chinese vessels. Menras wished to share daily life with the fishing community,

understand the material and psychological impact of the attacks on these secluded families, and, importantly, meet local authorities to obtain a list of affected families and fact-check their situations. He was gathering evidence to make a documentary to draw global attention to the fact that tens of thousands of fishers from central Vietnam are being subjected to what Menras called the “daily terrorism of Beijing’s navy” in the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos.

“As I am now a citizen of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the fishermen became my compatriots, and their problem became mine, directly or politically,” Menras wrote in his 2024 book “Vietnam, le Meilleur et le Pire” (Vietnam, the Best and the Worst).

<https://thediplomat.com/2026/04/forgotten-faces-in-the-contested-south-china-sea/>

2 April: Why China and Vietnam are shifting from confrontation to calm in South China Sea claims

Despite land reclamation efforts in the fiercely contested [South China Sea](#), an unusual silence has fallen between Beijing and Hanoi over their rival claims.

Observers said this suggested both sides were prioritising pragmatism to keep tensions in check.

In March, months into reports suggesting continued Chinese dredging activities at [Antelope Reef](#) in the [Paracel Islands](#), Hanoi broke its silence by [lodging a protest with Beijing](#) over what it called “illegal and invalid” foreign activities.

“Vietnam resolutely opposes such activities, makes representations and affirms its position on this matter,” Vietnamese foreign ministry spokeswoman Pham Thu Hang said in a statement on March 21.

Without mentioning Antelope Reef, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lin Jian said the next day that the “construction” carried out in the Paracels was “aimed at improving the living conditions of the islands’ residents and serving local economic development”.

This approach appears consistent with how maritime disputes between the two have played out over the past few years.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3348763/why-china-and-vietnam-are-shifting-confrontation-calm-south-china-sea-claims>

1 April: China's Type 055 destroyer Anqing completes its first live-fire training at sea

China's Type 055 guided-missile destroyer Anqing (Hull 110) completed its first live-fire training in the East China Sea, showcasing its operational readiness. Recently commissioned into the Chinese People's Liberation Army Eastern Theater Command, the destroyer participated in the exercise with various vessels. Equipped with advanced early warning and detection systems, the officers and soldiers aboard Destroyer Anqing are also conducting early warning and detection training in complex electromagnetic environments, using real maritime and aerial targets.

<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2026-04-01/China-s-Type-055-destroyer-Anqing-completes-first-live-fire-training-1LZIJdaWOIw/p.html>

1 April: China Is Building Another Massive Base in the South China Sea

After a hiatus of nearly a decade, China is jump-starting its island-building campaign in the South China Sea—and turning a once-obscure reef into what could be its largest military base in the [disputed waters](#).

The construction at Antelope Reef could give Beijing another runway, more missile facilities and additional surveillance installations, analysts say, and serve as a backup to its existing [military footprint](#) in the region. And because it is relatively close to the Chinese

mainland, it also offers Beijing a chance to increase civilian infrastructure, bolstering its argument that the area is part of China.

The status of the South China Sea has long been disputed between China and countries in the region. Beijing's island-building campaign has strengthened its hold on the waterway and given it control of a thoroughfare that would be vital in any conflict over Taiwan, the self-governing island that Beijing claims. The U.S., meanwhile, has supported other countries such as the Philippines in pushing back against the Chinese claims.

<https://www.wsj.com/world/china/china-south-china-sea-military-base-3ebf3dc2>

31 March: 'Not an escalation': NSC says China activities in [South China Sea] part of 'standard operations'

The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) confirmed that Chinese naval and air patrols were monitored over Bajo de Masinloc or Scarborough Shoal over the weekend, shortly after the Bilateral Consultative Mechanism (BCM) between Manila and Beijing was conducted in Fujian, China.

"We were able to monitor the Southern Command of the PLA [People's Liberation Army] Navy. They conducted naval and air patrols over Bajo de Masinloc, basically a day after the BCM meeting," Rear Admiral Jay Tarriela, PCG spokesperson for the [South China] Sea, told reporters on the sidelines of the National Symposium on the Law of the Sea and the West Philippine Sea in Pasig City on Tuesday.

<https://www.abs-cbn.com/news/nation/2026/3/31/nsc-says-china-activities-in-west-ph-sea-part-of-standard-operations-1718>

31 March: 90 Chinese warships, coast guard vessels spotted in [South China Sea] in March

A total of 90 Chinese warships and coast guard vessels were monitored throughout March across four key features in the [South China Sea], a senior naval official reported Tuesday.

"Specific to the WPS, we have documented the persistent and unauthorized presence of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and China Coast Guard (CCG). For this month, a total of 90 different vessels were monitored across (four) key features," Philippine Navy (PN) spokesperson for the WPS Rear Admiral Roy Vincent Trinidad said during a press briefing at Camp Aguinaldo in Quezon City.

This is much higher than the 62 Chinese warships and coast guard monitored last February.

<https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1272151>

31 March: Philippines to rename disputed South China Sea islands

The Philippines said on March 31 it will rename more than 100 island features in a bid to reinforce its "sovereignty" in the disputed South China Sea, including areas claimed by China. The features to be renamed under President Ferdinand Marcos's executive order belong to the Spratly archipelago, site of repeated confrontations between Philippine and Chinese vessels.

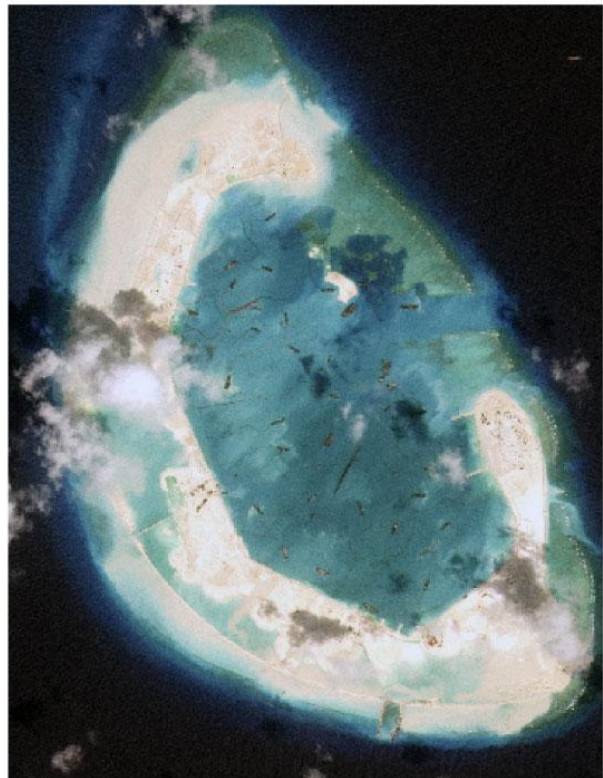
Beijing claims the South China Sea in nearly in its entirety despite an international ruling that its assertion has no legal basis.

Manila most prominently used the renaming mechanism in 2012 under the Benigno Aquino administration, when it dubbed areas of the crucial waterway nearest its coast the West Philippine Sea.

"More than 100 Kalayaan Island Group (KIG) features will have Philippine names... which strengthens administration and governance, as well as sovereignty, in Palawan and the West Philippine Sea," the presidential palace said in a statement on March 31.



Dec. 19, 2025



March 7, 2026

The work at Antelope Reef, which according to satellite imagery includes jetties, a helipad, gray-roofed structures and a new coastline that looks suitable to be a runway, caught some analysts by surprise. Antelope Reef is in the Paracel Islands, an archipelago in the northern part of the South China Sea that is firmly controlled by China, though Vietnam and Taiwan also have claims there.

[Recent flashpoints](#) have been around [Scarborough Shoal](#) in the east and in the more-disputed Spratly Islands further south. Vietnam has embarked on an [island-building campaign](#) of its own in the Spratlys, and has been rapidly catching up to China in creating new land.

<https://www.wsj.com/world/china/china-south-china-sea-military-base-3ebf3dc2>

OTHER STATES AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

20 April: US begins 'biggest ever' Philippines war games in thick of Middle East conflict

Thousands of American and Philippine troops, joined for the first time by a significant contingent of Japanese forces, began [annual military exercises](#) on Monday (Apr 20) set against the backdrop of the Middle East war.

The war games will feature live-fire exercises in the north of the country facing the Taiwan Strait, as well as a province off the [disputed South China Sea](#), where the Philippines and China have engaged in repeated confrontations.

In one drill, the Japanese military, which is contributing about 1,400 personnel, will use a Type 88 cruise missile to sink a World War II-era minesweeper off the coast of northern Luzon island.

More than 17,000 soldiers, airmen and sailors are taking part in the 19-day Balikatan, or "Shoulder-to-Shoulder", exercises - about the same number as last year's edition - including contingents from Australia, New Zealand, France and Canada.

Balikatan comes as Iran and the United States, along with Israel, edge towards the end of the two-week ceasefire that halted the Middle East war, ignited by surprise US-Israeli strikes on Iran.

Without providing precise numbers, Wortman, commander of the Marine Expeditionary Force, later told reporters that approximately 10,000 US personnel would take part in the exercises. Philippine military chief General Romeo Brawner added that US Indo-Pacific Command chief Admiral Samuel Paparo had assured him at the war's outbreak that this year's Balikatan would be "the biggest ever".

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/world/us-philippines-war-games-middle-east-conflict-japan-south-china-sea-6067121>

20 April: Japan to test commitment to South China Sea in Philippine-US drills

Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) will take part in annual military drills led by the Philippines and the U.S. starting Monday. This marks the first time Japan will fully participate in the exercises, even as geopolitical tensions rise in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait.

Japan's deepening defense cooperation with the two nations and other like-minded countries will be put to the test, as will its commitment to the security of the South China Sea, where the Philippines and China are locked in a territorial dispute.

The SDF will send its largest-ever contingent with 1,400 members to the Philippine-U.S. Balikatan exercises, reflecting Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's proactive defense policy.

<https://asia.nikkei.com/politics/international-relations/south-china-sea/japan-to-test-commitment-to-south-china-sea-in-philippine-us-drills>

18 April: U.S. plans to deploy more missile launchers to the Philippines despite China's alarm

The United States plans to deploy more high-tech missile systems to the Philippines to help deter aggression in the South China Sea, where the treaty allies on Tuesday condemned what they called China's "illegal, coercive, aggressive, and deceptive activities."

Beijing has repeatedly expressed alarm over the installation in the northern Philippines of a U.S. mid-range missile system called the Typhon in 2024 and of an anti-ship missile launcher last year. It said the U.S. weapons were aimed at containing China's rise and warned that these were a threat to regional stability.

China has asked the Philippines to withdraw the missile launchers from its territory, but officials led by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. have rejected the demand.

U.S. and Philippine officials held annual talks Monday in Manila on broadening security, political and economic engagements and boosting collaboration with regional security allies.

The U.S. and the Philippines outlined in a joint statement Tuesday specific defense and security plans for this year, including joint military exercises, Washington's support to help modernize the Philippine military and efforts "to increase deployments of U.S. cutting-edge missile and unmanned systems to the Philippines."

The longtime allies "underscored their support for preserving freedom of navigation and overflight, unimpeded lawful commerce and other lawful uses of the sea for all nations," the statement said.

"Both sides condemned China's illegal, coercive, aggressive and deceptive activities in the South China Sea, recognizing their adverse effects on regional peace and stability and the economies of the Indo-Pacific and beyond," it added.

<https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/photo/71401438>

8 April: Philippines, US join forces with Japan, Australia in SALAKNIB 2026

The Philippine Army and the United States Army Pacific (USARPAC) have joined forces with the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force and the Australian Army for the 2026 iteration of the Philippines–United States Joint and Combined Exercise SALAKNIB.

Launched on April 6 at Fort Ramon Magsaysay in Palayan City, Nueva Ecija, the exercise aims to strengthen soldiers' capabilities in mission command systems interoperability, joint warfighting through aviation integration, combined arms operations, and operations in land-dominated environments.

<https://pia.gov.ph/news/ph-us-join-forces-with-japan-australia-in-salaknib-2026/>