

## SOUTH CHINA SEA NEWS No. 152

May 2026

*Compiled by CIL Ocean Law and Policy Team*

### ACTS OF CLAIMANT

#### **31 May: South China Sea Power Shift: Vietnam Joins BrahMos Missile Network as Indonesia Nears Deal, Expanding India's Strategic Footprint Across ASEAN**

Vietnam's acquisition of India's BrahMos supersonic cruise missile and Indonesia's advancing negotiations are accelerating the emergence of a distributed ASEAN anti-access network capable of reshaping maritime deterrence, naval operations and strategic competition across the South China Sea.

India's expanding BrahMos missile footprint across Southeast Asia is rapidly transforming the military geometry of the South China Sea, creating a distributed network of supersonic coastal strike capabilities that could significantly complicate the operational freedom of major naval forces in one of the world's most contested maritime theatres.

Vietnam's confirmed acquisition of the BrahMos, following the Philippines' earlier deployment and Indonesia's approach toward a similar agreement, signals the emergence of a regional anti-access architecture capable of imposing increasingly severe operational risks on warships operating within disputed waters.

Rather than representing isolated defence procurements, the successive BrahMos agreements are collectively establishing what defence planners increasingly view as a layered maritime denial corridor stretching across critical sea lanes linking the Western Pacific to the Indian Ocean.

Indian Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh's confirmation at the Shangri-La Dialogue that Hanoi has formally signed the BrahMos deal reflects New Delhi's growing willingness to leverage advanced defence exports as instruments of geopolitical influence and regional security alignment.

The strategic significance of Vietnam becoming the second ASEAN operator extends beyond the acquisition itself, because the deployment introduces an additional node within a widening network of coastal missile forces capable of threatening surface combatants at ranges exceeding 400 kilometres.

<https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/india-brahmos-missile-vietnam-indonesia-south-china-sea-asean-deterrence/>

#### **31 May: China patrols Scarborough Shoal after Philippines warns of threat**

China's military and coast guard said they carried out patrols near Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea on May 31, [a day after the Philippine defence minister said](#) Manila remained under threat from Beijing despite a recent easing in US-China tensions.

Philippine and US forces held a five-day maritime exercise in the same waters last week near the Scarborough Shoal, the third such drill in 2026, to strengthen interoperability and maritime security, the Philippine military said on May 31.

Scarborough Shoal is one of Asia's most contested maritime features and has become a frequent flashpoint between China and the Philippines over sovereignty and fishing rights.

The People's Liberation Army's Southern Theater Command said in a statement on the WeChat platform that its naval and air units carried out combat readiness patrols in the "territorial sea and airspace" of the atoll and its surrounding areas.

"Such patrols serve as an effective countermeasure to cope with all sorts of rights violations and provocative acts," the command said.

The China Coast Guard said in a separate statement that it conducted law enforcement patrols near the Scarborough Shoal, adding that since May, it had dealt with ships engaged in “illegal rights-violation activities in accordance with laws and regulations”, without elaborating.

The Armed Forces of the Philippines said the exercise with the US from May 26 to 30, including visit-board-search-and-seizure drills, underscored both countries’ commitment to stronger defence ties, improved maritime domain awareness and support for a rules-based order at sea.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-patrols-scarborough-shoal-after-philippines-warns-of-threat>

### **30 May: The Philippines is in for a ‘long-term struggle’ with China over territory, Manila’s defense secretary tells CNBC**

The Philippines’ maritime struggle with China is getting increasingly intense, according to national defense secretary Gilberto Teodoro.

The two countries have been locked in a struggle around some disputed territory in the South China Sea. China claims almost all of the sea, including areas that overlap with exclusive economic zones from countries like the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia, and has been building out structures on some shoals in recent years to bolster its claims.

China “continues its acts unabated, and they’re unrepentant with their expansionism,” Teodoro said in an interview with CNBC’s Sri Jegarajah on the sidelines of the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. “We are in for a long-term struggle.”

“It’s our exclusive economic zone,” Teodoro continued, “and future Filipinos need it in a 7,600-island archipelago with a big population which is subject to the ravages of climate change.”

Teodoro noted that the Philippines has tried to resolve the issue through negotiations, and previously filed an [arbitration](#) case on it under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

When asked what success would look like on that front, Teodoro said it “would be stopping China’s further advancement” and any construction of artificial islands in the area.

<https://www.cnb.com/2026/05/30/philippines-in-for-struggle-with-china-on-territory-defense-secretary.html>

### **29 May: Ship-Tracking Data Reveal Hidden Risk of China-Vietnam Showdown**

A flurry of Vietnamese island fortifications and intensifying Chinese activity show the rising odds of confrontation in the South China Sea.

As the Iran war spurs questions over American military strength, the US last month sought to reassure allies in Asia by staging some of its biggest drills yet to deter China in the Pacific Ocean, including around Taiwan and in the South China Sea.

Yet hidden from view, the risk of a clash is increasing between China and Vietnam. The action is most heated in the Spratly Islands, where Vietnam has emulated Chinese President Xi Jinping in building and fortifying about two dozen artificial islands among a crowded cluster of reefs and shoals.

A Bloomberg News analysis of ship-tracking data from [Starboard Maritime Intelligence](#) identified more than 100 Chinese vessels — including at least 45 linked to state-backed entities such as the coast guard and maritime militia, according to Starboard — that passed within 10 nautical miles of Vietnamese-controlled sea features during the past year, nearly double the 57 vessels that did so from May 2022 to April 2023.

Chinese patrols were especially concentrated around three features: Sand Cay, a tiny sandbar transformed into a fortified garrison with a helipad, as well as Namyit Island and Petley Reef, both of which received new harbors and other upgrades. The number of Chinese vessels that passed within 10 nautical miles of those three features rose to 89 in the 12 months that ended April 30, up from 50 during the same period three years earlier, shortly after Vietnam ramped up construction and reclamation activities. By UN convention, every nation can establish a territorial sea up to a limit of 12 nautical miles. Sea features can include reefs, sandbars and islands.

The findings show how Vietnam is standing up to China even as President To Lam looks to balance ties between the superpowers, particularly with the Middle East conflict threatening fuel supplies and President Donald Trump sowing doubts about the US commitment to the region. The tensions at sea expose the limits of any cooperation between China and Vietnam, which aligns with the US and its allies in seeking to deny Beijing the ability to dominate one of the world's most crucial maritime trade routes. Hanoi's leaders have also coordinated more with fellow Southeast Asian nations despite having competing territorial claims.

“The strategy is meant to beef up Vietnam's deterrence capability in the sense that Vietnam could more efficiently deploy our forces against any aggressive tactics by the Chinese,” said Nguyen The Phuong, a maritime security expert at the University of New South Wales, who researches Vietnam's military. “Expanding those islands is an activity that has the potential to increase the chance of a maritime confrontation.”

<https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2026-south-china-sea-tensions-vietnam/>

### **28 May: China says it drove away Dutch warship near disputed Paracel Islands**

China's military said on Wednesday that it had used measures including electronic interference to drive away a Dutch warship near the disputed Paracel Islands, and in a rare move accused the Dutch navy of triggering “miscalculation”.

The People's Liberation Army's (PLA) Southern Theatre Command, which oversees the South China Sea, said in a post on its official WeChat account on Wednesday evening that the Dutch frigate De Ruyter had “illegally intruded into China's Xisha Islands” and that its shipborne helicopter had “repeatedly taken off and entered Chinese airspace”.

The Paracel Islands, known as Xisha in China and Hoang Sa in Vietnam, lie just over 300km (190 miles) from Hainan, China's tropical island province.

The Southern Theatre Command “organised naval and air forces” and “took necessary measures including verbal warnings and warning electronic interference” to expel the ship, the command's spokesman Zhai Shichen said.

Zhai condemned the Dutch navy's actions as “seriously infringing on China's territorial sovereignty and the security of its sea and airspace, seriously violating international law and basic norms of international relations, and seriously undermining peace and stability in the South China Sea”.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3355089/china-says-it-drove-away-dutch-warship-near-disputed-paracel-islands?module=inline&pgtype=article>

### **27 May: China warns against ‘forming cliques’ after ‘Quad’ raises alarm over South China Sea tensions**

China warned today that countries “forming cliques” and provoking conflict were “unpopular”, after ministers from the United States, India, Japan and Australia raised concerns over stability in the East and South China Seas.

In clear but unstated references to China, foreign ministers from the so-called Quad grouping had criticised “dangerous manoeuvres by military aircraft” and “ramming and blocking actions in the South China Sea”, as they met in New Delhi yesterday.

The ministers reiterated opposition to “destabilising or unilateral actions” that threaten stability in the region, in a joint statement following talks.

China, which views the Quad grouping with suspicion, rejected those concerns today, warning against interference in its maritime affairs.

“At present, the situation in the East China Sea and South China Sea remains overall stable,” foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning told a news briefing.

“Relevant countries should stop interfering in maritime issues around China and genuinely respect regional countries’ efforts to safeguarding peace and stability,” she said.

“Forming cliques, creating tension and provoking conflict are unpopular.”

<https://www.malaymail.com/news/world/2026/05/27/china-warns-against-forming-cliques-after-quad-raises-alarm-over-south-china-sea-tensions/221596>

### **24 May: Taiwan and China coast guards in standoff at top of South China Sea**

The [Taiwanese](#) and [Chinese](#) coast guards were engaged in a tense standoff for the second day near the strategically located Pratas islands at the top of the South China Sea, Taiwan’s Coast Guard said on Sunday.

China claims democratically governed Taiwan as its own territory, a position the government in Taipei rejects.

China has pressured Taiwan by increasing its military presence around the island, and Taipei is on high alert for further Chinese actions after President Xi Jinping discussed Taiwan with U.S. President Donald Trump in Beijing this month.

Lying roughly between southern Taiwan and Hong Kong, the Taiwan-controlled Pratas are seen by some security experts as vulnerable to Chinese attack due to their distance - more than 400 km (250 miles) - from Taiwan island.

Taiwan’s Coast Guard said on Saturday it had spotted a Chinese Coast Guard ship heading to the Pratas and immediately sent its own ship which broadcast warnings and the two sides “engaged in an intense verbal confrontation over sovereignty via radio.”

The Chinese ship broadcast that it was on a routine mission and that China had sovereignty and jurisdiction over the Pratas, the Taiwan Coast Guard said.

“Please do not destroy peace. You should return and strive for democracy. That is the correct way to serve your country,” the Taiwan ship broadcast back, according to video provided by its coast guard.

China’s Taiwan Affairs Office did not respond to a request for comment.

A Taiwan Coast Guard official told Reuters the Chinese ship was 21 nautical miles to the northeast of the Pratas and the standoff was continuing as of Sunday afternoon.

China’s wording on having jurisdiction and sovereignty was unusual as was the length of its stay in the waters so close to the Pratas, the official added, speaking on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the situation.

The coast guard said on Friday night it had also driven away for the second time this month the Chinese research ship “Tongji” in waters close to the island.

<https://www.cnn.com/2026/05/24/taiwan-and-china-coast-guards-in-standoff-at-top-of-south-china-sea.html?shem=rimsfwouoe>,

### **18 May: China opposes Philippines' illegal construction on South China Sea islands**

A Chinese defense spokesman said on Monday that China firmly opposes any construction activities by the Philippines on Chinese islands and reefs that it has illegally occupied in the South China Sea.

Jiang Bin, the spokesman for China's Ministry of National Defense, made these remarks at an online news briefing in response to media reports citing satellite images that showed the Philippines is accelerating infrastructure upgrades on illegally occupied islands and reefs in the Nansha Islands.

The reports indicated that Manila plans to expand a harbor on Mahuan Island and extend the runway on Zhongye Island.

Jiang stated that China has indisputable sovereignty over the Nansha Islands and their adjacent waters. "We firmly oppose construction activities by the Philippine side on all illegally occupied Chinese islands and reefs, including Zhongye Island and Mahuan Island," he said.

Jiang warned that China will take necessary measures to safeguard its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests.

<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202605/18/WS6a0b1167a310d6866eb49453.html>

### **18 May: Chinese scientists land on Sandy Cay reef as tensions with Philippines spike once again**

Chinese scientists landed on a disputed [South China Sea reef](#) over the weekend in the latest assertion of Beijing's sovereignty claims.

The uninhabited sandbank, [Sandy Cay, has become a growing flashpoint](#) following a series of encounters between Chinese and Philippine coastguard, military and fishing vessels.

The Philippines said the Chinese-flagged research vessel Xiang Yang Hong 33 had been spotted near the reef on Saturday, escorted by two coastguard ships.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3353947/chinese-scientists-land-sandy-cay-reef-tensions-philippines-escalate-once-again>

### **13 May: Asserting ASEAN presence in South China Sea**

Another summit, another missed opportunity.

That was one regretful outcome of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) summit, held last week in Cebu under this year's chairship of the Philippines, as far as concluding the long-delayed Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea (SCS) is concerned.

It had been 23 years since Asean members and China signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the SCS on Nov. 4, 2002, expressing their commitment to the security and peaceful resolution of territorial disputes in the region. Negotiations for a COC, which would operationalize the agreement, had been in the works for decades, but achieving the goal remains elusive. It was certainly not for lack of trying, but China's persistent claim of ownership over almost the entire SCS and its political and economic influence over the Asean members have cast a barrier to the adoption of an acceptable and binding code.

To his credit, President Marcos put that goal back on the agenda of the 48th Asean Summit and Related Meetings as this year's chair of the 11-member regional bloc. But the Middle East war, which severely impacted the oil-importing Asean nations, took much of the leaders' attention away from the long-simmering conflict in their own backyard.

#### **United and firm stand**

At the end of the Asean heads' retreat in Cebu, they vowed to "ENDEAVOUR to conclude the negotiation of an effective and substantive Code of Conduct in the South China Sea in accordance with international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law

of the Sea (UNCLOS);...” They called for the full use of guidelines endorsed by the foreign ministers of Asean and China in 2023 to “expedite the conclusion” of the COC.

Mr. Marcos’ frustration was palpable when he addressed the matter in a press conference after the summit. “So, again, that is one of our aspirations as chair of Asean for 2026, that we find at the end of the year, that we actually have a code of conduct,” the President said, adding that the situation in the SCS has become “more unreadable.” All the Asean members, he said, have “a different approach when it comes to the People’s Republic (of China)” and so he could not answer if he was optimistic that the target would be achieved this year.

Despite this impasse, the Asean issued a united and firm stand against aggression in the SCS through a separate Asean Leaders’ Declaration on Maritime Cooperation, in which they reaffirmed “our shared commitment to maintaining and promoting peace, security, stability, and prosperity in the region, as well as to the peaceful resolution of disputes, including full respect for legal and diplomatic processes, without resorting to the threat or use of force, in accordance with international law, including the 1982 (Unclos).”

### **Philippine proposal**

Though the declaration did not mention China, as expected due to Asean’s traditional neutrality and noninterference policy, it was nevertheless a strong message against Beijing’s actions in the SCS areas being claimed by several Asean nations, including the Philippines.

More importantly, the Asean leaders adopted a Philippine proposal to establish an Asean Maritime Center (AMC) that would consolidate the region’s efforts to ensure respect for territorial rights under Unclos and the peaceful resolution of maritime claims, as well as to secure freedom of navigation and overflight in the SCS.

“The idea of the maritime center is to make a cohesive organization that will put together all the efforts of all the different countries, Asean and even other countries outside of Asean, who have an interest [in peace in the SCS],” Mr. Marcos said. “There was a very wide consensus amongst members on the things that need to be done and how we need to do it. Since we proposed the idea, we are offering the Philippines to be the home of that center,” he added. The nitty-gritty of the center, however, will still be threshed out.

### **Not a move against China**

The President was careful to stress that the setting up of the AMC was not a move against China. “What we are looking for, or what is the ultimate reason for having this maritime center, is not to confront or not to somehow push back on any single force or any single country,” he said.

Still, having the AMC would be another victory for the Philippines in its battle against persistent incursions in the West Philippine Sea following the 2016 arbitral ruling it won against China. In the absence of the COC, the Asean center—if given enough powers and resources to monitor movements in the SCS— could potentially help deter more aggressive actions by China against its smaller neighbors.

It is high time for Asean to assert its authority and exercise its responsibility to keep the peace in the SCS, which provides resources and livelihood for its 700 million population while being a vital shipping route for global trade. By establishing the AMC, the Asean will have an important presence to ensure that peace and security reign in the SCS.

<https://asianews.network/asserting-asean-presence-in-south-china-sea/>

## **12 May: Sinking Ships in the South China Sea**

**Japan, the Philippines and the U.S. are Redefining Western Pacific Alliances During a Missile-heavy Balikatan**

An audible click preceded the plumes of exhaust that the two Japanese anti-ship missiles left in their wake. The Type 88 missiles unfolded their wings and cruised toward the ship at a steady subsonic speed, finding their mark six minutes after launch.

The target: BRP *Quezon* (PS-70), a World War II-era corvette formerly used by the Philippine Navy located around 46 miles off Northern Luzon.

The first missile plowed into the superstructure. Its 450-pound warhead sent a cloud of destruction several dozen feet over *Quezon* and threw shrapnel into the surrounding waters. An audible applause was heard from the observers post, mostly from the Filipino and Japanese defense leadership that saw this year's Balikatan as the beginning of a fruitful relationship for their nations.

Their jubilation may have distracted them from the second missile's fate. Upon reviewing the sinking exercise footage, the other subsonic anti-ship munition – following three seconds behind the first – flew above the dust cloud of destruction billowing from *Quezon* and missed. Nonetheless, the 83-year-old hull slipped below the waters off Luzon, indicating a successful test of maritime strike and coastal defense – and a new era for Balikatan.

Overlooking the Paoay Sand Dune, Culili Point is one of two desertified landscapes used throughout the first week of May by Balikatan 2026's combined forces to [simulate the defense of](#) the Philippines against a notional aggressor.

To sink *Quezon*, exercise planners said they brought together the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force's (JGSDF) 1st Surface-to-Ship Missile Regiment, the U.S. Marine Corps 3rd Marine Littoral Regiment and the U.S. Army's Multi-Domain Command Pacific. Each of the units took real and simulated shots at the waters off Ilocos Norte, which represents the border between the South China Sea and the Luzon Strait.

At the Paoay firing site, the first on the scene were two U.S. Marine Air Defense Integrated System (MADIS) vehicles flanking a single U.S. Navy-Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS). Approximately 100 meters to their rear, 70 JGSDF personnel prepared a six-missile-equipped launcher for the live-fire. Ringing the area was a force of locally-based Philippine Marines that provided security for the launchers.

Two M142 High Mobility Rocket Artillery Systems (HIMARS) from the U.S. Army's new Multi-Domain Command Pacific, also known as the 7th Infantry Division, were positioned to fire at the 83-year-old corvette at another site located 30 miles north of the Marine and Japanese contingent.

Overhead, American MQ-9 Reaper and Japanese ScanEagle drones provided video feeds and targeting data for the ground-based anti-ship missiles. Philippine and Canadian frigates also participated in the exercise.

<https://news.usni.org/2026/05/12/sinking-ships-in-the-south-china-sea>

### **8 May: ASEAN summit ends with only a push to fast-track oil share pact**

Southeast Asian leaders were united on Friday in calling for a regional fuel-sharing framework to be ratified quickly, as their summit ended without a plan for a more immediate response to the impacts of the [Middle East crisis](#).

Leaders meeting on the Philippine island of Cebu stressed the urgency of a joint approach beyond the [oil-sharing](#) pact for the region that depends heavily on oil imports, making it particularly exposed to the unprecedented energy supply disruption caused by the effective closure of the [Strait of Hormuz](#).

Chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, expressed optimism that the members' ratification of the voluntary, commercial-based framework would be completed as soon as possible, but said the mechanics needed to be worked out.

"We're trying to examine everything we can do," he told a press conference when asked about frustrations that the plan could not be implemented immediately.

"How is the sharing? Who gets what? How do you pay for it? Do you pay for it? Is it an exchange? ... We haven't done it before," he said.

"And what do we do about the others who are also in need? Who comes first? Those are the questions that still need to be decided."

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/southeast-asian-leaders-seek-strategy-ease-impacts-iran-war-2026-05-08/>

#### **May 8: Marcos says ASEAN fuel-sharing scheme still needs to be ironed out**

At the press conference, Mr Marcos suggested that deeper ASEAN-China economic cooperation depended on progress in talks on the long-delayed [Code of Conduct on the South China Sea](#), which sets out ways for ASEAN and China to peacefully manage conflicts in the disputed waterway.

"We cannot institutionalise any of those things until the Code of Conduct is finalised," he said, referring to broader mechanisms for regional economic cooperation with China.

Mr Marcos said finalising the code remained one of the Philippines' aspirations as ASEAN chair in 2026, though he acknowledged that member states hold differing positions on dealing with Beijing.

Dr Koh found Mr Marcos' comments striking, as ASEAN has traditionally sought to separate economic cooperation with China from maritime disputes.

"To me, it sounds very out of place. Why would they want to allow their economic well-being... to be beholden to a process that is not confirmed to be propagated this year?" he said, referring to ASEAN member states that are not South China Sea claimants.

ASEAN leaders also adopted a declaration on maritime cooperation, including establishing an ASEAN Maritime Centre aimed at coordinating maritime security and safety efforts in the region.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/marcos-says-asean-fuel-sharing-scheme-still-need-to-be-ironed-out>

#### **4 May: China Coast Guard takes lawful measures against an illegal landing by Philippine crew on Tiexian Jiao**

The China Coast Guard (CCG) carried out maritime law enforcement and exercised territorial jurisdiction by landing on Tiexian Jiao in the South China Sea on Sunday. The operation came after five Philippine crew members illegally set foot on China's Tiexian Jiao of the Nansha Qundao the same day, the Global Times has learned from the CCG.

Photos show CCG law enforcement officers patrolled Tiexian Jiao, displayed the Chinese national flag to demonstrate national sovereignty, and collected video evidence of the Philippines' illegal activities and ecological damage to the reef. Footage also shows that after landing on the reef, CCG officers cleaned up pollutants discarded by Philippine personnel, including plastic bottles, foam boards and plastic bags. They also conducted a full inspection of Tiexian Jiao with metal detectors.

According to sources, five Philippine crew members illegally set foot on Tiexian Jiao on Sunday, ignoring repeated dissuasion and warnings from the Chinese side. [CCG law enforcers identified the intruders and tackled the incident in accordance with the law, effectively safeguarding China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests.](#)

Insiders told the Global Times that the CCG carries out comprehensive inspections on Tiexian Jiao to prevent Philippine personnel from hiding markers and other illegal items on the reef. Such operations fully embody China's exercise of sovereignty and jurisdiction over its own territory.

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202605/1360269.shtml>

#### **4 May: Philippines accuses Chinese ships of illegal marine research**

The Philippine Coast Guard said four Chinese vessels were conducting illegal marine scientific research in its waters and threatened to deploy aircraft and boats to repel them.

“PCG has determined that they are conducting illegal marine scientific research without the legal authority or prior consent of the Philippine government, in clear violation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,” according to a statement posted on Facebook by Coast Guard spokesman Rear Admiral Jay Tarriela.

The Philippines will deploy aircraft and vessels to drive away the Chinese ships, he said.

The Chinese foreign ministry, in a statement, urged the Philippines to “immediately cease its dangerous actions” and keep distance from Chinese boats.

It said the Chinese research vessels “are conducting normal scientific research activities and navigating normally in waters under Chinese jurisdiction, in accordance with Chinese domestic law and international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea”.

Two of the Chinese vessels were spotted off Itbayat, a municipality in the northernmost province of Batanes, while one was near Rizal, Palawan, within the vicinity of the disputed Jackson Atoll, and the other [close to Scarborough Shoal](#), the Philippine Coast Guard said.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/philippines-accuses-chinese-ships-of-illegal-marine-research>

#### **3 May: China, Philippines trade accusations over South China Sea**

China accused the Philippines of landing personnel on a disputed reef in the South China Sea on Sunday as Manila said it would dispatch ships to drive off Chinese vessels it said were conducting research illegally.

- The exchange extends a run of heightened tension between China and the Philippines, a U.S. ally, over Sandy Cay, an unoccupied sandbar in the South China Sea.
- On Sunday, China's Coast Guard said it had identified five Philippine personnel who had landed on Sandy Cay, an action Beijing termed "illegal," according to state-run media outlet Global Times. The report did not specify what - if any - further action China had taken.
- Manila said last week it had dispatched its coast guard to Sandy Cay after state media reports showed Chinese coast guard personnel arriving on Sandy Cay holding a Chinese flag.
- Ties between China and the Philippines are strained over territorial disputes in the South China Sea, where Beijing claims sovereignty over almost the entire waterway.
- Also on Sunday, a spokesman for the Philippine Coast Guard said Manila had identified four Chinese vessels conducting what it called illegal research in its waters and threatened to deploy aircraft and ships to force them to move away.
- China's foreign ministry and the Philippine embassy in Beijing did not immediately reply to requests for comment.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-philippines-trade-accusations-over-south-china-sea-2026-05-03/>

### **1 May: China holds naval, air patrols near Scarborough Shoal as Philippines, US stage drills**

China's military said on Thursday (Apr 30) its naval and air forces held combat readiness patrols near the Scarborough Shoal in the disputed South China Sea.

The patrols come in response to annual regional drills from April 20 to May 8, bringing together forces from Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, the United States, Japan, Canada and France to showcase advanced weapons capabilities and operational readiness.

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/world/naval-air-force-military-patrol-south-china-sea-6093416>

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

### **20 May: U.S. Wants to Construct Philippine Coast Guard Maintenance Facility, Repair Fuel Depot in Palawan**

Washington is seeking funding to construct a Coast Guard maintenance center and refurbish a joint airfield fuel depot that could bolster Philippine security infrastructure near the South China Sea, according to recent documents.

The Pentagon released notices within the last month for upcoming projects at key facilities in Palawan used by the Philippine Coast Guard and the Armed Forces in the Philippines. These efforts mark the latest in American support for Philippine forces on the island province bordering territorial dispute hotspots in the South China Sea. Manila uses ports and airfields on Palawan to stage forces that are frequently in contact with Chinese forces around the Spratly Islands. Manila and Beijing have frequently clashed in a hybrid conflict around contested maritime features since 2022.

One of Washington's new initiatives aims to fund an intermediate logistics maintenance center at Buliluyan Port, which is frequented by PCG cutters ahead of patrol and resupply missions in the South China Sea. Manila's maritime security agency currently has to stretch its limited fleet of 13 ocean-capable cutters across the Southeast Asian nation's massive exclusive economic zone. The PCG also lacks organic maintenance facilities in Palawan, forcing cutters and other equipment to sail further into the Philippines for repairs and refits.

A forward-based maintenance facility can enable more sustainable and frequent PCG operations in the South China Sea, a capability that may improve Manila's posture against China's large force of forward-deployed warships and cutters attempting to impose Beijing's claims.

<https://news.usni.org/2026/05/20/u-s-wants-to-construct-philippine-coast-guard-maintenance-facility-repair-fuel-depot-in-palawan>

### **5 May: HMS Spey conducts freedom of navigation operation around disputed Islands in the South China Sea**

The Ministry of Defence announced today that Royal Navy OPV, HMS Spey, has exercised navigation rights and freedoms around the heavily disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

HMS Spey conducted maintenance in Singapore in the early part of 2026 and completed trials a FOST certification period off Malaysia in April, before heading north to the Spratlys. The photo (above) supplied by the MoD, appears to show her being shadowed by a Chinese Type 054A Frigate. The RN has conducted Freedom of Navigation Operations on a regular basis. In

June 2025, HMS Spey conducted a transit of the Taiwan Strait, and in September 2025, HMS Richmond did the same in company with US and Australian warships.

<https://www.navylookout.com/hms-spey-conducts-freedom-of-navigation-operation-around-disputed-islands-in-the-south-china-sea/>

## **2 May: Japan's US-2 joins Balikatan exercises in South China Sea**

A ShinMaywa US-2 aircraft of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) splashed down in South China Sea as part of a joint casualty evacuation drill for the [Balikatan exercises](#) last April 27, according to photos released by the US Indo-Pacific Command on May 2.

The drill, which took place near Oyster Bay in Palawan—a staging point for Philippine military resupply missions to the Spratly Islands that is being developed with US assistance into a maintenance hub for patrol boats— was just one of several events taking place across the Philippines for this year's Balikatan.

The US Navy's landing dock ship USS Ashland (LSD-48) worked alongside the JMSDF's ShinMaywa US-2 for the exercises. Some crew members of the US-2 aircraft were transferred by lifeboat to the USS *Ashland* to rehearse critical patient movement and medical response procedures in realistic maritime conditions. The US-2 is designed for search-and-rescue missions and can take off and land on both water and runways, including in rough sea conditions.

<https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2026/05/japans-us-2-joins-balikatan-exercises-in-south-china-sea/>