



Situation Room

**** SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE ****

Period under review: from 01 August 2021 to 30 September 2021.

[This report is based on publicly available sources to describe a changing situation. Information subject to change.]

Situation analysis recap:

- On 9 August, the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken accused China of bullying in the South China Sea and warned the UN Security Council that a conflict would have serious global consequences for security and for commerce. He also added that when a state faces no consequences for ignoring international rules, it fuels greater impunity and instability everywhere and the responsibility of all countries, not just claimants to the islands and waters of the South China Sea, is to defend the rules that the international community has agreed to follow for the peaceful resolution of maritime disputes. His comment sparked a strong rebuke from China.
- After Blinken's accusation, China's deputy UN Ambassador Dai Bing accused the United States of stirring up trouble out of nothing, arbitrarily sending advanced military vessels and aircraft into the South China Sea as provocations and publicly trying to cause hostility between regional countries. Dai added that China considers the US as the biggest threat to peace and stability in the disputed region.
- The foreign ministers of Japan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations agreed on the importance of freedom of navigation in the contested Sea, where China has conflicting territorial claims with some of the 10-member bloc.
- India deployed four warships early in August to the South China Sea and the Western Pacific in an assignment that ran for two months. The deployment included exercises with India's Quad partners and bilateral exercises with the Vietnamese Peoples' Navy, Republic of Philippines Navy, Republic of Singapore Navy, and the Indonesian Navy.
- US Vice President Kamala Harris has accused China of using coercion and intimidation to back unlawful claims in the disputed area. Her comment came during a seven-day trip (at the end of August) to Singapore and Vietnam that was aimed at standing up to China's growing security and economic influence globally. During her trip, Harris's agenda focused on defending international rules in the South China Sea, strengthening US regional leadership and on expansion of security cooperation between countries.
- On 17 August, China launched live-fire air and sea exercises near Taiwan in response to what it called external interference and provocations by Taiwan forces.
- On 28 August, China's defence ministry protested the passage of the *USS Kidd*, a guided-missile destroyer, and the US Coast Guard cutter, the *USCG Munro* through the Taiwan Strait.
- On 1 September, China instituted a new rule that requires ships to identify their names, call signs, current positions, next ports of call and estimated times of arrival with Chinese authorities upon entering the country's territorial waters (the rule also applies for the self-proclaimed territorial claims in the South China Sea). The Philippine Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana has promised that Manila will ignore China's amended maritime law.
- A US destroyer, the *USS Benfold*, sailed on 8 September near the Spratly Islands, days after China imposed new maritime identification rules. The destroyer sailed within 20 kilometres of Mischief Reef, a portion of the Spratly Islands upon which the Chinese have built military facilities.
- The UK, US and Australia have announced a security pact named Aukus in the Asia-Pacific in an effort to counter China. It will allow Australia to build nuclear-powered submarines for the first time,

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using technology provided by the US. Analysts says that the Aukus pact, which will also cover AI and other technologies, is one of the countries' biggest defence partnerships in decades.

- China has condemned and labelled the Aukus agreement as an irresponsible act. Foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian has said it undermines regional peace and stability and intensifies the arms race. On the other side, UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace has said China is embarking on one of the biggest military spending in history by heavily upgrading and modernising its navy and air force.
- Chinese President Xi Jinping has warned against interference from external forces in the region, as Australia ignores Beijing's disapproval about its decision to acquire US nuclear-powered submarines. Moreover, Australia has promised to defend the rule of law in airspace and waters where China has staked contested claims.
- China has increased its military presence in the South China Sea. Furthermore, the country is enhancing its ability to seize islands with military exercises that include amphibious landing vessels and other combat forces. So far, China has conducted 20 naval exercises involving elements of island capture in the first half of 2021, far exceeding the 13 such exercises last year.
- German frigate *Bayern* has sailed into the disputed areas of the South China Sea. On 15 September, China denied frigate's entry into a Chinese harbour. The ban will last until German mission comes to an end. The German warship is set to operate in the area for six months. Beijing also asked Berlin to respect its regional efforts to maintain peace and stability.
- Indonesia has deployed five navy vessels around its Natuna islands in the North Natuna Sea (located in the southwest part of the South China Sea) after Chinese and US vessels were detected nearby in international waters. Even though the vessels had not caused any disturbance, Indonesia's position on the North Natuna Sea stays firmly in protecting national interests within the Indonesian jurisdiction in accordance with national law and international law that have been ratified.
- China and Singapore conducted joint maritime drills in the South China Sea in order to boost the two navies' mutual trust and to enhance the level of military cooperation between both countries.
- At the end of second week in September, the *USS Carl Vinson* aircraft carrier has started to operate again in the contested Sea. At the end of the month it was joined by another carrier, the *USS Ronald Reagan*. At the same time, a UK warship made transit through Taiwan Strait.
- UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has warned of a potential new Cold War between China and the United States. He called both to repair their dysfunctional relationship before problems between the two large and deeply influential countries spill over even further into the rest of the planet.

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