



Situation Room

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

Period under review: from **6 March 2023** to **10 April 2023**.

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

Situation analysis recap:

- On 6 March, Chinese foreign minister, Qin Gang, made a statement that Taiwan is a part of the People's Republic of China's territory, and that the US is risking a confrontation with its support for Taiwan's independence.
- On 8 March, a Philippine official said that their coast guard began a new strategy of publicising all Chinese actions in South China Sea that are perceived as aggressive violations, to show the world that the Chinese Navy acts with hostility in the disputed waters.
- Philippines have also increased the number of their maritime patrols after the incident with a Chinese ship pointing a military-grade laser at one of their ships over two months ago. The US released a statement after this incident in which it said that it would defend the Philippines if it came under attack.
- On 16 March, the Australian deputy prime minister and defence minister Richard Marles said that Australia did not make any commitment to the US that would include military involvement in a possible future Chinese-US conflict over Taiwan.
- On 17 March, Chinese foreign ministry accused the AUKUS members of creating a NATO replica in the Pacific region to counter China and that they are embodying a cold-war era mentality.
- On 20 March, the People's Republic of China and Cambodia began their first naval drills, named China-Cambodia Golden Dragon 2023, which lasted until 8 April and involved more than 3000 military personnel and 300 vehicles on both sides. Cambodia's deepening ties with China including Chinese investment in modifying Cambodia's naval bases, and the dismantling of US-made facilities in Cambodia, raised concerns in the US, Australia, and other countries with interests in the South China Sea.
- On 22 March, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr stated that the US military forces will get expanded access to four new Filipino military bases, including one in the region overlooking the South China Sea, and that the Philippines strengthened ties with Australia and Japan, two key regional US allies.
- On 23 March, China accused the US guided-missile destroyer *USS Milius* of illegally entering Chinese territorial waters in the South China Sea close to the contested Paracel islands. The US responded with

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a statement in which it said that the Chinese accusations are false, and that the *USS Milius* had operated in the international waters.

- In the context of this incident, Chinese officials warned the US that it would face consequences if such actions were continued in the future. These tensions came after the US shot down an alleged Chinese spy balloon over US territory, China's different stance on war in Ukraine, and the US support for Taiwan.
- On 25 March, Vietnamese Fisheries Surveillance vessel had a close encounter with the Chinese Coast Guard ship in the South China Sea inside the Vietnamese Exclusive Economic Zone, defined by the international maritime law.
- On 1 April, China stated that it is prepared to cooperate with the other Southeast Asian countries to create an agreement over South China Sea code of conduct and that it is ready to promote peace and stability in the disputed region. The countries in the region have been discussing and negotiating the Code of Conduct for almost two decades.
- This statement came after Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim visited Beijing and said that Malaysia is ready to negotiate over disputes in the South China Sea.
- On 5 April Taiwan President Tsai ing-wen met with the Speaker of the US House of Representatives Kevin McCarthy. McCarthy became the highest-ranking US official to meet a Taiwanese representative on US soil since 1979 when the US broke off official diplomatic ties with Taipei. China immediately condemned the meeting and announced large military exercises in response.
- During the meeting both Tsei and McCarthy expressed support for the strong bonds between the countries. Tsei emphasises the threat to Taiwanese democracy presented by mainland China. Both leaders also stressed the need to speed up military defensive arms deliveries to Taiwan.
- On 8 April, Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) began a three-day military exercise named "Joint Sword" in the Taiwan Strait, where Chinese troops conducted combat readiness patrols. Units also simulated a direct strike against Taiwan. This was a direct response to the meeting between Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen and the Speaker of the US House of Representatives Kevin McCarthy in California on 5 April. The naval part of the exercise included a practice encirclement and blockade of Taiwan. The exercise concluded on 10 April.

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