



Situation Room

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

Period under review: from **24 April 2023** to **14 May 2023**.

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

Situation analysis recap:

- On 24 April, the Chinese government asked other countries to not perceive it as a threat, likely as a response to the new Australian defence strategic review that marked the Chinese activities in the South China Sea as a threat to a global rules-based order and mentioned that the Chinese military build-up is one of the largest and most ambitious since the end of the Second World War.
- On 25 April, media reported that Malaysian state-owned energy company Petronas will continue the oil and gas exploration activities within Malaysia's Exclusive Economic Zone despite Chinese objections. China considers parts of the Malaysia's Exclusive Economic Zone as its own territory.
- On 26 April, China's Maritime Safety Administration stated that Chinese forces will conduct a military exercise in the South China Sea on 27 April, without any further information.
- On 27 April, Chinese military forces deployed two navy ships to take part in the joint military drills with Singapore's navy. The two ships were identified as the guided missile frigate *Yulin* and the minesweeper *Chibi*. These joint drills are next in a line of the Chinese military exercises that were recently conducted in partnership with other Southeast Asian Countries.
- On 28 April, the Philippines Coast Guard reported two incidents with the Chinese navy that occurred on 21 and 23 April in the South China Sea and accused the Chinese Coast Guard of conducting irresponsible manoeuvres in the area of the Second Thomas Shoal, a disputed area between the two countries.
- On the same day, Chinese foreign ministry responded to the Philippines' accusation, stating that the Philippine vessels made an intrusion into Chinese territorial waters as a deliberate provocation.
- On 29 April, the US called for China to stop harassing Philippine naval vessels in the South China Sea as a response to the two incidents that had occurred few days before and pledged full support to the Philippines in a time of growing tensions between the two great global powers.
- On 30 April, it was revealed that the US response to the incidents between Chinese and Philippine Coast Guard ships in the South China Sea also included a warning that any attack on Philippine naval vessels or aircraft patrols would trigger a defence response from Washington.

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- On 1 May, Philippines president Ferdinand Marcos Jr. stated that China has decided to discuss fishing rules in the South China Sea and that he is pursuing an establishment of a direct line of communication with Beijing on maritime disputes in the contested region, despite recent naval incidents.
- On 2 May, the White House announced that the US will further strengthen the economic and military relations with Philippines, including the adoption of new defence guidelines on operations in the air, on the sea, on land, in space, and in cyberspace. The US is also planning to send three C-130 transport planes and a few naval patrol vessels to the Philippines armed forces. This information came the day after the US president Joe Biden hosted Philippines president Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in Washington where they talked about current geopolitical situation in the South China Sea and US-Philippines relations.
- On 4 May, the US and Philippines adopted new defence guidelines on how the US will respond if the Philippines were to come under attacked. The guidelines focus on cooperation on the Philippines defence modernisation and threats in the form of asymmetric, irregular, hybrid warfare, and grey-zone tactics across several domains. This adoption was followed by a response from the Chinese foreign ministry, which criticised what it called US interference in the regional South China Sea issues.
- On 9 May, Chinese foreign ministry dismissed the accusations that their maritime militia vessels deliberately approached a part of the South China Sea which belongs to Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone and where Indian and ASEAN countries were conducting joint military exercises. The two-day sea phase of the ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise, AIME 2023 began two days before and included ships and aircrafts from India, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Brunei.
- On 11 May, White House National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, met with his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, in Vienna. Both Washington and Beijing are looking to establish more in-person engagements between high-ranking officials and keep lines of communication open amid current tensions between the two. Topics of the talks were Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Taiwan, global and regional security issues, and other transnational problems such as the illicit global trade in narcotics.
- On 12 May, European Union ministers made progress on how to reduce the EU's economic reliance on China. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, stated that the EU will continue to see China as an economic competitor and political rival, but will still consider it as a partner on important global issues.
- On the same day, the US Army Chief of Staff James McConville met with Indonesian defence minister Prabowo Subianto to discuss stronger cooperation, including joint military exercises, amid growing tensions with China in the South China Sea.

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- On 14 May, it was reported that the Philippines Coast Guard set up five buoys equipped with the national flag in five areas within the 322 km Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone in the South China Sea, following two incidents between Chinese and Philippines naval vessels in the disputed region.

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