



Situation Room

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

Period under review: from 5 June 2023 to 18 June 2023.

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

Situation analysis recap:

- On 5 June, assistant US secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Daniel Kritenbrink, and National Security Council senior director for China, Sarah Beran, met with Chinese diplomats Ma Zhaoxu and Yang Tao. At the meeting, they discussed their current bilateral relationship and efforts to build up open lines of communication between competing powers despite growing tensions.
- On 6 June, the US, Japanese and Philippine coast guard vessels completed law enforcement drills in the South China Sea. The drills involved a scenario in which all three coast guards interdicted and boarded a vessel suspected of carrying weapons of mass destruction (WMD) off the Bataan Peninsula. For the needs of the maritime exercise, the US Coast Guard deployed one of its most advanced cutters, *Stratton*, Japan joined with a large coast guard ship *Akitsuushima*, and the Philippines provided four of their coast guard vessels.
- On the same day, media reported that Chinese defence minister, Li Shangfu, accused unspecified countries of intensifying arms race and increasing security risks while interfering with the internal affairs of others at the Shangri-La Dialogue. These accusations were most likely aimed at the US and its activities in the South China Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific region.
- On 9 June, Japan approved a major revision to its development aid policy with focus on maritime and economic security and its national interests while helping developing nations in the Indo-Pacific region to overcome crucial challenges amid growing China's global influence. The revision focuses on combating climate change, food and energy crisis, as well as improving maritime security, supply chain resiliency and digital transformation. Japanese foreign ministry also stated that they will provide Japanese-made, non-lethal equipment like radars, antennas, small patrol boats or improvements of infrastructure such as ports, for the militaries of these developing nations.
- On 11 June, an anonymous US official told *The Wall Street Journal* that China has been conducting surveillance operations from Cuba since 2019. The source also stated that Beijing had reached a deal with Cuba to upgrade its intelligence collection facilities, improve its intelligence-gathering capabilities in the region and to establish an electronic eavesdropping facility roughly 160 kilometres from the US state of Florida.

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- On 12 June, media reported that China deployed a Y-9 cargo plane variant fitted with intelligence-gathering equipment over Pacific waters east of Taiwan that most likely monitored and collected intelligence on a joint naval exercise between the US, Japan, France and Canada.
- On 13 June, commander-in-chief of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, general Vong Pisen, released a statement saying that Cambodia had yet to agree to the ASEAN plans for joint military drills in the contested South China Sea after Indonesia's military commander, admiral Yudo Margono, announced that all regional ASEAN members already agreed on the joint military exercise. These conflicting reports indicate Cambodia's balancing actions between the ASEAN and the People's Republic of China and increasing competition between the regional actors in the South China Sea.
- On 14 June, the US has confirmed that the secretary of state Antony Blinken will visit China and meet senior Chinese officials, during a long-anticipated trip that had been postponed in February after an alleged Chinese spy balloon drifted over the continental US which was later shot down. The meeting will focus on bilateral issues of concern, potential cooperation on transnational challenges and military-to-military communication.
- On 15 June, Palau's President Surangel Whipps Jr. stated at a news conference that three Chinese boats have made entries into his country's territorial waters to conduct surveying activities without their permission since he took office in 2021 and called for further US assistance to enhance deterrence against China's assertive move in the region.
- On 16 June, the national security advisers of the US, Japan, and the Philippines discussed regional security issues and ways to improve the trilateral alliance. They also talked about regional security challenges including tensions in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, recent North Korean activities and the need for peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.
- On 18 June, the US secretary of state Antony Blinken arrived in China on a high-level diplomatic visit that will focus on stabilising relations between two of the world's largest economies. Neither the US or China expect any important breakthroughs during the meeting, since the two great powers are on opposite sides on a number of issues, such as trade, technology and regional security. Before departure Blinken stated that increasing competition between the US and China requires sustained diplomacy to ensure that it does not turn into a confrontation or even open conflict. This visit is the highest-level visit by any US official in China in nearly five years, but experts warn that it will not be enough to completely stabilise the US-China relationship, since two states have totally different outlook on the global situation, different values, and that mutual respect and strategic trust takes time to be built.

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