



Situation Room

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

Period under review: from 25 April 2024 to 22 May 2024.

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

Situation analysis recap:

- **(25 April)** Taiwan's President-elect Lai Ching-te appointed current Presidential Secretary General Lin Chia-lung as foreign minister and Wellington Koo as defence minister at a time of continuing military threats and diplomatic disputes with China. Defence minister Koo is set to oversee a major modernisation of Taiwan's military, including the procurement of new ships, missile systems, warplanes, and other land-based defences. Both ministers are set to take up their posts on 20 May.
- **(26 April)** US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Chinese President Xi Jinping and other high-ranking officials to discuss important bilateral, regional, and global issues, including China's supply of materials, machine tools and micro-electronics to Russia, tensions around Taiwan and in the South China Sea, human rights, and the production and export of synthetic opioid precursors. Blinken also stated that, while differences between the two great powers are deepening, they have managed to improve bilateral cooperation on subjects such as military communications, use of artificial intelligence, and counternarcotics operations.
- **(30 April)** Philippine Coast Guard spokesman Jay Tarriela reported that two Philippine vessels on maritime patrol were hit with water cannons by four China Coast Guard and six Chinese maritime militia ships near the disputed Scarborough Shoal, which China blockaded and seized from the Philippines in 2012. The incident occurred about 22km from the shoal and then again about 914 meters away, which resulted in damaged railing and canopy on Philippine ships. Chinese vessels are known to use their water cannons to target the radars and communication equipment which are located at the top of the ships superstructure.
- **(1 May)** China's third and most advanced aircraft carrier *Fujian*, which is supposedly equipped with next generation launch catapults, capable of launching a wider range of aircraft from its deck, left Shanghai Jiangnan Shipyard and began its sea trials. These will test the reliability and stability of the aircraft carrier's propulsion and electrical systems.
- **(2 May)** Philippines' Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned China's deputy chief of mission Zhou Zhiyong and accused China of 'harassment' and 'dangerous manoeuvres' after Chinese vessels used water cannons and damaged two Philippine Coast Guard ships.

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- **(3 May)** China publicised what it claims to be an unwritten 2016 agreement between them and the Philippines. Chinese officials claim that this temporary arrangement was made by the former Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte and that it allows small-scale fishing around the islands but also restricts access for the military, coast guard, and other government-owned ships and planes to the 22km limit of Philippines' territorial waters.
- **(5 May)** Defence officials from Australia, the US, Japan, and the Philippines met in Hawaii where they declared their commitment to protecting freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and strengthening their security cooperation.
- **(7 May)** Australian government condemned Chinese aggressive military actions after a Chinese fighter jet dropped flares in the proximity of an Australian navy helicopter which forced the helicopter's pilot to perform evasive manoeuvres. The incident occurred over international waters in the Yellow Sea off the coast of South Korea where Australian navy was taking part in a UN mission to enforce sanctions against North Korea.
- **(9 May)** Largest ever Balikatan joint military exercises between the Philippines and the US concluded with troops of both countries using Javelin missile launchers and howitzers to simulate repelling a maritime invasion along the coast of the South China Sea. The week-long live-fire exercises were held along the shores near the coastal city of Laoag in the Ilocos province in the north of the Philippines and resulted in strengthened military and security partnership between the US and the Philippines.
- **(10 May)** Philippine National Security Adviser Eduardo Ano supported a demand of a top security official to immediately expulse Chinese diplomats allegedly responsible for a reported leak of a phone conversation between one of the diplomats and Philippine Vice Admiral Alberto Carlos, Commander of the Western Command of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. During the recorded call, the Philippine admiral agreed to a new way of transporting supplies to a Philippine-occupied shoal in the disputed South China Sea that would require Manila to notify Beijing if such offshore missions are conducted and would forbid the supply of additional construction materials to the shoal.
- **(11 May)** Chinese officials hosted northern Philippines' key politicians, including Manuel Mamba, governor of Cagayan province and vocal critic of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s move to give the US access to four more military bases under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement.
- **(15 May)** A fleet of approximately 100 small fishing boats under the guidance of Philippine activists sailed to the disputed Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea, where Chinese coast guard and maritime militia ships damaged Philippine vessels with water cannons. This civilian-led supply mission's goals were to sail near small territorial buoys and to distribute food packs and fuel to Philippine fishermen.

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- **(16 May)** The US military released a warning that China is continuing with development of floating nuclear reactors in the South China Sea to strengthen its claim over the disputed maritime territory. While Chinese state media described the marine nuclear power reactors as mobile ‘power banks’ for stationary facilities and other ships, US and Philippines officials reported that floating reactors will be used to supply power to military bases China has built on multiple artificial islands in the South China Sea. Analysts suggest that Chinese building of ships with mobile nuclear reactors will raise tensions and pose an environmental risk in the disputed region.
- **(17 May)** Taiwan’s foreign minister Joseph Wu said that China and Russia are helping each other with their territorial expansion and called on democracies around the world to counter both countries’ military assertiveness in Eastern Europe, in the South China Sea and beyond. These comments were made amid Russian President Vladimir Putin’s meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing, where both presidents reaffirmed their ‘no-limits’ partnership.
- **(18 May)** Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Enrique Manalo and Japanese Ambassador Endo Kazuya signed a \$415 million deal, which will enable Philippines to purchase five patrol ships from Japan that will be used in the South China Sea.
- **(19 May)** Philippines’ military replaced Vice Admiral Alberto Carlos, a key commander overseeing troops in the South China Sea, including those deployed at disputed reefs as a part of the country’s reaction to the evolving security environment. He will be replaced by Rear Admiral Alfonso Torres Jr. who will take the place of the head of the Western Command on Palawan Island.
- **(20 May)** Philippine authorities challenged China to open Scarborough Shoal to international scrutiny after they accused China of destroying the shoal’s marine environment.
- **(22 May)** The recently removed commander of the Philippines Western Command, Vice Admiral Alberto Carlos, accused the Chinese embassy in Manila of recording his phone call with their military attaché without his consent and denied that he forged a deal with China to deescalate tensions in the South China Sea.

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