

Collision between Chinese and Philippine vessels in South China Sea brings war tensions in the region to a breaking point

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On June 17, a Chinese Coast Guard vessel and a Philippine Naval vessel deliberately collided in the disputed waters of the South China Sea during a resupply mission being conducted by Philippine forces. Confirmed details are still limited, but several Philippine sailors are reported to have been injured. The Chinese Coast Guard boarded the Philippine vessel and confiscated guns from the Philippine troops.

Tensions in the South China Sea, as in much of the world, are at a fever pitch, fuelled above all by the war drive of US imperialism. Washington has latched onto the collision to issue bellicose denunciations of China and other imperialist powers have followed suit.

On June 15, a revision to the Chinese Coast Guard law went into effect that authorised it to seize foreign ships and detain, for up to thirty days, crews suspected of trespassing in Chinese-claimed waters for investigation, and for an additional thirty days in the event of a “complex” investigation. The upshot of the revised code is that China’s Coast Guard vessels can now perform discretionary law enforcement activities in Chinese-claimed waters. The revised law contains immense potential for the escalation of conflict in both the South and East China Seas.

Washington saw in the new code not the threat of escalating conflict, but the opportunity. On June 16, the letter of the law not yet dry, the US sent a guided missile destroyer for a transit of the South China Sea alongside a Philippine vessel as well as a Canadian and a Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force ship. This was an unprecedented joint sail-through of the region and the first time that Canada has participated in such exercises.

Manila announced in response to the revised Chinese law that it would stage increased patrols of the disputed waters. It deployed a resupply mission to the Second Thomas Shoal, where it knew that Chinese Coast Guard vessels lay in wait.

In 1999, the Philippines Navy ran the BRP Sierra Madre, a US-built craft transferred to the Philippine Armed Forces,

aground on the Second Thomas Shoal and stationed soldiers on the derelict hull. This slapdash basing operation, closer in character to Robinson Crusoe than to any recognisable military asset, has become the centre of tensions in the disputed South China Sea.

The recurring resupply missions staged by Manila to the handful of troops on the Second Thomas Shoal used to be symbolic declarations of sovereignty, but now they are provocations, each one a deliberate, even staged, confrontation with Chinese ships. Monday’s collision was the worst thus far.

The Chinese Coast Guard on Monday reported that a Philippine supply ship had “ignored China’s repeated solemn warning” and “deliberately and dangerously” approached a Chinese vessel in “an unprofessional manner,” resulting in the collision. “The Philippines is entirely responsible for this,” they claimed.

The Philippine military remained silent on the incident for twelve hours. No statements were released to the press.

The Pentagon stepped in and issued a statement on June 17. While the Philippine government remained silent, the US military announced that a Philippine sailor had been injured and Philippine vessels damaged. This information was released by Secretary of Defense spokesperson, Army Major Pete Nguyen to the US Naval Institute (USNI) News.

USNI initially wrote: “While the Pentagon referred USNI News to the Philippine government for additional details, Manila has not released imagery nor a timeline of events.”

However, Jay Tarriela, spokesperson of the Philippine National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea, posted on Twitter/X on Thursday a carefully curated video that purportedly showed “how blatantly they (China) use physical attacks and violence to prevent our soldiers from completing the legitimate and humanitarian resupply mission to our troops on board BRP Sierra Madre.” The West Philippine Sea is the name used for portions of the South China Sea to claim sovereignty over large areas of the

region and sow nationalist divisions.

The stories being told by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) to the press are now growing with each new telling. The Philippine soldiers, the AFP claims, fought off the Chinese with “their bare hands.” They reported that a soldier in the Philippine Navy “sustained severe injury” in the collision. By Wednesday the number of soldiers reported injured had grown from one to eight, with one allegedly having lost his thumb.

Washington is already seizing on the event to spew the language of war. Pentagon Press Secretary Maj. Gen Pat Ryder declared China’s actions to be “provocative,” “reckless,” and said that “it could lead to something bigger and more violent.”

US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell, in a conversation with Philippine Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs Maria Theresa Lazaro, declared that the 1951 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) “extends to armed attacks on Philippine armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft—including those of its Coast Guard—anywhere in the South China Sea.”

The MDT states in Article IV, cited by Campbell, that an “armed attack on either party in the Pacific area would be dangerous to its own peace and safety” and would be met “in accordance with its constitutional processes.” Over the past 15 years, in its attempts to goad Manila into an ever more provocative role, Washington has attempted to present the language of Article IV as an “iron-clad” mutual commitment to go to war with China.

Campbell’s declaration attempts to extend the “Pacific area” to include “anywhere in the South China Sea”—these are distinct bodies of water—and in the process includes a good deal of territory to which neither Manila nor Washington has any claim. He further expanded Washington’s supposed commitment to include Philippine Coast Guard vessels. With these historically baseless claims, Washington is goading Manila into provoking war with China.

The State Department issued a separate statement that the “PRC [People’s Republic of China] vessels’ dangerous and deliberate use of water cannons, ramming, blocking maneuvers, towing damaged Philippine vessels, endangered the lives of Philippine service members, is reckless, and threatens regional peace and stability.”

More than any other actor, it is Washington that threatens regional—and world—peace. It has based medium range missiles in the northern Philippines, targeting China. China has no comparable missiles in any country, let alone in one of such proximity, like Cuba to the US. Washington has opened military bases in the Philippines under the terms of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) and

from them stages operations that flagrantly prepare for war with China in the South China Sea.

Following Washington’s lead, the Embassies of New Zealand, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and Canada all issued statements condemning China’s actions. Philippine Defense Minister Gilberto Teodoro Jr told the press, “China’s dangerous and reckless behavior in the West Philippine Sea shall be resisted by the AFP.”

Images of the confrontation taken by the Chinese Coast Guard and published on the Chinese news site, *Global Times*, are revealing. The majority of the vessels involved were very small craft, including dinghies. The Pentagon, which just ran a guided missile destroyer through the region, is resorting to the language of war over a confrontation between vessels that are in their majority no larger than a school bus.

Vietnam, which also claims a significant portion of the South China Sea, has over the past year been accelerating its process of island reclamation by dredging, in a manner akin to that of China, and resupply missions, similar to those conducted by the Philippines. But tensions between China and Vietnam remain at a far lower level. The tensions between China and the Philippines are fuelled above all by the United States.

The pressure of Washington has brought Philippine politics to the brink of open warfare. Legislators tied to Washington’s war drive are conducting a racist witch-hunt of alleged Chinese spies in the country. Vice President Sara Duterte, tied to the China-oriented sections of the bourgeoisie associated with her father, former President Rodrigo Duterte, resigned on Wednesday from the Marcos cabinet as both Secretary of Education and as vice-chair of the government’s anti-communist taskforce. This is widely seen as the opening shot in a struggle for power between US- and China- oriented sections of the political establishment.



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