

Washington secretly oversees military activity as Philippine and Chinese vessels repeatedly collide in the South China Sea

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Over the past month, Philippine and Chinese Coast Guard vessels have repeatedly collided with each other in the disputed waters of the South China Sea, bringing tensions between the countries to a knife's edge. Both sides claim the other deliberately rammed them; neither shows any sign of backing down. Washington has secretly been directly involved militarily in each of the incidents.

The collisions occur at the Sabina Shoal, a reef and lagoon 75 nautical miles west of Palawan Island in the Philippines, and deemed within the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of the Philippines. The Second Thomas Shoal, about 20 nautical miles due west of Sabina, had been the site of confrontations between the Philippines and China in June and early July, but Manila and Beijing concluded a temporary deal that would decrease tensions during resupply missions to Philippine troops stationed there.

Within weeks of this deal, confrontation erupted at Sabina Shoal, after tensions had been building there for months, in the background to the Second Thomas Shoal events.

In April, the Philippines claimed that China was engaged in an island reclamation project, dredging coral and sand around the Sabina Shoal to construct a habitable facility there. Manila deployed its Coast Guard flagship, BRP Teresa Magbanua, to counter these alleged activities.

Beijing countered that it was concerned that Manila intended to establish the Teresa Magbanua as a permanent military base at the Sabina Shoal, perhaps even running it aground there in the same way that the Philippines had done with the BRP Sierra Madre on the Second Thomas Shoal in 1999. Permanent occupation of disputed features would violate bilateral agreements recently concluded between China and the Philippines, Beijing claimed.

In early May, the Philippine Coast Guard issued a statement claiming that its operation to block Chinese vessels had been successful and would continue.

By early June, several vessels of the Chinese and Philippine Coast Guard fleets were sailing in close confrontation with each other around the Sabina Shoal. A team of researchers from the University of the Philippines Institute of Biology completed an onsite investigation of the Sabina Shoal on June 8 and concluded that the evidence there did not support the claim that China was engaged in reclamation activity. This finding by Philippine scientists, brought out to the reef by the Philippine Coast Guard, was a blow to the claims being made by the Philippine military.

On June 12, Philippine Independence Day, Manila staged a provocative sail through at Sabina Shoal, in close proximity to the

Chinese vessels, and with much media fanfare. No confrontation occurred.

Tensions escalated dramatically, when on August 19, Chinese Coast Guard vessels and two Philippine Coast Guard patrol boats collided. Manila claimed that China "rammed" its vessels. On August 25, Manila sent a Bureau of Fisheries vessel, loaded with journalists, on a "resupply" mission to fishermen at the Sabina Shoal. The Chinese Coast Guard blasted the boat with water cannons, when the ships came within meters of each other.

The Teresa Magbanua, deployed to the Sabina Shoal since April, was running low on supplies, Manila claimed, and they sent Coast Guard resupply missions, which the Chinese Coast Guard blocked. On August 28, the Philippines resupplied the Teresa Magbanua by helicopter. China warned that such resupplies were dangerous and could lead to an aerial incident.

On August 31, the Teresa Magbanua and a Chinese Coast Guard vessel again collided. Each side claimed the other had rammed it.

The tensions show no signs of diminishing. Among the Chinese Coast Guard vessels in the area are two tugboats. The *Global Times*, a Chinese paper closely associated with the People's Liberation Army (PLA), published an editorial on September 2 that stated that one of China's possible options was using these tugboats to tow the Teresa Magbanua out of the vicinity.

The ramming incidents between the Philippines and China are becoming alarmingly common. Sailors have suffered injuries in the process. Both sides blame the other, but the truth of the matter is that in the vast waters of the South China Sea, and despite repeated warnings, they are sailing their vessels within meters of each other. They are playing chicken with coast guard vessels.

Washington has egged on these tensions, instigating and exacerbating them.

Each resupply mission is being secretly conducted as a joint military operation between the Philippines and United States. The US Marine Corps operates a drone facility out of Basa Air Base in Pampanga in the Philippines, one of many basing facilities now operated by the US under the terms of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). The Marine Corps issued a press release taking credit for providing "vital logical support" to the Philippines resupply missions, but the US Department of Defense hastily took this announcement down.

The Chinese Coast Guard reported that a US-operated P-8 Poseidon drone circled overhead during the confrontations and collisions at the Sabina Shoal. Washington is coordinating, documenting, and almost

certainly leading the deliberate escalations of war tensions between the Philippines and China.

Latching onto the crisis that it was instrumental in creating, Washington offered to escalate matters further. Admiral Samuel Paparo, commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, publicly announced that it was “an entirely reasonable option” for the US to deploy naval ships to escort the Philippine resupply missions at the Sabina Shoal.

Such action would bring the United States perilously close to a direct military encounter with China, threatening war. Manila for the time being has declined the offer, but it could be taken up in the immediate future.

Manila justifies actions by citing the arbitral ruling in 2016 of the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) established under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Washington, which is not a signatory to the law in question, drew up and argued the case before the tribunal on Manila’s behalf and now trumpets the ruling as though it invalidated China’s territorial claims to the islands in the South China Sea

The ITLOS Arbitral ruling said nothing about who owned what, whose territorial claims—if any—were valid. Rather, it ruled that a number of features in the disputed waters generated a territorial sea, thus leaving the Philippines Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) largely uninterrupted. The EEZ extends 200 nautical miles from the nearest Philippine coast, creating a baseline.

Legally, an EEZ grants a rather limited set of privileges, the right to economically exploit the resources of the waters, including fishing grounds and possible oil reserves.

Attempts to present the disputes in the South China Sea, now on the verge of war, as being of long historical standing founder on the facts. The rival claims to the region are in truth rather recent historical innovations.

Throughout the entire early history of the region, both the pre-colonial and the colonial periods, the South China Sea did not balkanize and divide the region, but united in a dynamic network of trade. It was the Mediterranean of Asia.

The reefs and shoals of the Spratlys and Paracels were not territory to be claimed, but obstacles to be avoided. To the extent that they showed up on maps it was to identify and warn sailors of danger, not to establish ownership. The use of such ancient maps to establish a modern claim of sovereignty is historically absurd.

The carving up of Asia into spheres of influence by the imperialist powers in the late nineteenth century, carved up the South China Sea as well. Substantial portions of the sea were controlled by the British, the French, the Dutch, the Americans, and the Japanese. Still, no territorial claim was made. The concern of the imperialist powers was not occupying the Spratlys, but asserting the right of “freedom of navigation,” by which they all, but the British in particular, meant the right to sail within cannon-shot of the Chinese coast to establish trade hegemony.

The first real occupation of the heart of the South China Sea and establishment of a presence in the Spratlys and the Paracels was made by the Japanese in preparation for their 1941-42 blitz attack on Southeast Asia. After the war, struggles over decolonization and the Cold War divided the region in new ways. America emerged as the unrivaled imperialist power, and exercised nearly exclusive control over the South China Sea, from its bases in Okinawa, and Subic and Clark in the Philippines. South Vietnam and Taiwan, operating under America’s aegis, began to put forward claims to parts or all of the

Spratlys and the Paracels. Little was done with these claims.

The question of how far a nation’s sovereignty and economic rights extended into the ocean, its extended continental shelf, its territorial sea, and what became known as its exclusive economic zone, was brought up for international legal formulation before the United Nations in the 1970s. The notion of an EEZ was introduced in 1971. These were codified as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982. While the United States has wielded this law internationally to assert its hegemony on the sea, it never ratified the agreement.

The nine (now ten) dash line claim of Taiwan, taken up by the People’s Republic of China, the claim in the Paracels of Vietnam, of the Philippines to the Spratlys, did not exist in any substantive way until last half century. Simmering political tensions over these claims only emerged in the late 1980s. These occasionally erupted in explosive confrontations, such as the battle between Chinese and Vietnamese ships in the Spratlys in March 1988, but this was bound up with the broader ongoing conflict between the two countries and was not caused by the South China Sea dispute.

The full-scale militarization of the South China Sea, in which dubious historical claims to various islets and reefs took on geopolitical significance, occurred at the instigation of Washington. In 2010, then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, speaking at an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) security summit, declared that the United States had a “national interest” in the South China Sea. The assertion was part of the Obama administration’s “Pivot to Asia,” which sought to militarily and politically contain and confront China. Within a year, the region’s reefs and shoals, formerly a matter of largely esoteric quarrels, were transformed into a dangerous flashpoint threatening war.

The 2016 ruling of the arbitral tribunal, argued by Washington’s lawyers, resolved nothing. The islands occupied by China, by Vietnam, by the Philippines, remained occupied, the rival territorial claims went unresolved. The Philippines was granted economic control over certain waters, meaning the right to fish and possibly drill for oil. Military vessels continued to confront each other. Washington threw about its weight, provocatively sailing through the waters and staging live-fire drills and exercising, while misrepresenting the implications of a legal decision issued under an international law to which it is not a signatory.

Under the administration of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, Manila has come to function as the leading proxy of US interests in the region. Washington, working through the Philippine military, and to an extent not yet known, controlling it, has aggressively confronted China in the disputed waters. It is this that brought the region to the brink of military conflict over a collection of reefs, atolls and islets, many completely submerged at high tide.



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