



Mathurin Hybrid Initiative

Global Advisory  
Report

**South China Sea  
Dispute: China-  
Philippines  
Relations in the  
Contested Waters**

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17/10/2023

The Philippines has recently been at the centre of a territorial dispute with China in the South China Sea in which China has adopted tactics to deter Filipino boats from the contested area. This can be seen in a recent collision between a Chinese coast guard ship and a Filipino supply boat near the Ayungin Shoal. This confrontation between Manila and Beijing is one of many, reflecting China's consistent efforts to limit Philippines involvement in the disputed waters. For instance, Chinese vessels have deployed water cannons and lasers in recent months to stop Filipino coast guards from approaching the shoal. In 1999, Manila intentionally grounded the Sierra Madre, a World War II-era landing ship, to maintain and strengthen their presence in the area. Since then, Filipino marines have kept watch aboard as it gradually deteriorated, leading to several supply runs to sustain the ship. During these supply runs, China has controlled access to the Sierra Madre by selectively permitting or obstructing resupply ships depending on their relations with the Philippines. However, with the impending collapse of the Sierra Madre, the Philippines is under pressure to maintain its presence on Ayungin Shoal, while China seeks to ensure the Ship's demise.

### What is the South China Sea?

The South China Sea is a marginal sea that is part of the Western Pacific Ocean, it is surrounded by China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Philippines. It is a major shipping route in which an estimated third of global shipping, worth trillions of dollars, pass through each year. Furthermore, it holds significant economic potential as much of



of the area remains unexplored. For example, the US Energy Information Agency stated that the South China Sea contains at least 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 11 billion barrels of oil. This demonstrates the importance of these waters to the surrounding nations and their interests, given the significant economic opportunities they hold. As a result, the region is part of complex territorial disputes involving several countries, including China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Taiwan and Brunei.

Source: (BBC, 2023)

China claims a significant portion of the territory within an area defined by its “nine-dash line”. The line, composed of nine dashes, reaches extensively to the south and east from its most southern province of Hainan. China asserts that its rights to the area can be traced back centuries, to a period when the Paracel and Spratly Island chains were under the control of the Chinese nation. Despite this, several countries have challenged China’s nine dash line claim, with Vietnam contesting that it has controlled the Paracels and Spratly islands since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Philippines, another major claimant, asserts ownership over Scarborough Shoal and Spratly islands, using its close proximity as the foundation for its claim. As a result of these conflicting claims, there has been several clashes between China and other claimants. Although there has been attempts to facilitate a resolution, these efforts have been unsuccessful, with many nations arguing that the power imbalance between them and China leaves them at a disadvantage. Therefore, an appropriate solution is yet to be found due to divisions on how to resolve the dispute.

### **South China Sea Dispute: *Philippines and China***

The recent conflict between the Philippines and China is not a new development, there have been multiple standoffs spanning several decades. The Philippines and China both claim Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal, it is an area that the Philippines argues it has the right to control as it is part of its Exclusive Economic Zone. Furthermore, in 2013, the Philippines pursued international arbitration against China through the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea to challenge its claims. In 2016, the tribunal supported the Philippines’ case, declaring that China had violated the sovereignty of the Philippines. In response to this outcome, China ignored the ruling and continued to actively assert its dominance in the South China Sea.

Following the installation of the new government in the Philippines, relations between the two nations has also undergone a significant change. Under the former President Rodrigo Duterte, the nation pursued friendly relations with China, however, under the newly elected President Marcos, the country’s foreign policy was reversed, prioritising relations with the US. This is evident when the Philippines granted the US access to key military bases and conducted large joint military drills between the two nations. The US has also begun to participate in the discussion around the South China Sea, reiterating its support for the Philippines under the 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty which allows them to defend each other in the event of an armed attack. After the recent incident, Biden affirmed that any attack against Filipino vessels, or armed forces would lead to the Mutual Defence Treaty to be enforced. Additionally, President Marcos has also taken on a stronger stance over the South China sea, implementing an assertive transparency campaign in which he uses the influence of the media to showcase China’s role as an aggressor in the dispute. This has influenced the recent dynamics in the South China Sea, with China showing a more lenient approach by allowing the Philippines to make supply runs to the Sierra Madre.

**Conclusion:**

As activities in the South China Sea continue to unravel without appropriate regulations, tensions have begun to rise. China's increased monopoly over the South China Sea and its disregard for the tribunal proceeding has left many nations unsettled. In addition, China has also built artificial islands in Spratly and Paracel Islands, housing military outposts equipped with berthing area, airfields and resupply facilities to maintain their military and paramilitary presence in the area.

