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Beijing's Assertiveness in the South China Sea Has Brought Manila Closer to Its Allies and Partners

By Amrita Jash and Varshini S

SYNOPSIS

Tensions between Chinese and Philippine vessels deployed near Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea are at an all-time high. China's assertiveness has pushed the Philippines to strengthen its defence ties with its ally, the United States, and its partners, Japan, Australia, and India. What more can we expect of developments in the South China Sea going forward?

COMMENTARY

On 2 May 2024, at a meeting in Hawaii, the defence chiefs of Australia, Japan, the Philippines and the United States, issued a [joint readout](#) which objected to the dangerous use of coast guard and maritime militia vessels in the South China Sea, and reiterated serious concerns over China's obstruction of Philippine vessels' exercise of freedom of navigation and the disruption of supply lines to the Second Thomas Shoal, where the Philippines had intentionally run aground an old ship to press its claims to the shoal. This reaction came following several serious incidents between the vessels of China and the Philippines in the South China Sea.

Chinese Assertiveness in the South China Sea

On 30 April 2024, Chinese coast guard ships fired high-pressure water cannons at two Philippine vessels near the disputed Scarborough Shoal, causing damage to both. Manila, which has filed 153 complaints against China's coastguard and fishing vessels since President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. took office in mid-2022, denounced Beijing's use of water cannons as "illegal, coercive, aggressive, and dangerous".

The escalations took a more [serious](#) turn on 17 June, when an encounter between Chinese and Philippine vessels resulted in a Filipino serviceman losing a finger. The

train of events has raised fears of a wider conflict between the two countries. A recent survey report in the [South China Sea Morning Post](#) showed that 73 per cent of the 1,200 Filipinos surveyed favoured “further asserting the Philippines’ territorial rights through military action, such as expanded naval patrols and troop presence in the West Philippine Sea”.

So far, Manila has stood its ground against China’s coercion. But it has also simultaneously been deepening its strategic alignment with allies and partners, notably the US, Japan, Australia and India.

The Philippines Reaches Out to Friends

What has become increasingly apparent is the proactive role of Washington and Tokyo in not just condemning China’s behaviour but in extending support to Manila. On 19 March, during his visit to Manila, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken underscored Washington’s “[ironclad defence commitment](#)” citing shared concerns about China’s actions that threaten the “common vision for a free, open Indo-Pacific, including in the South China Sea and the Philippines exclusive economic zone”.

The US has also [reaffirmed its obligation](#) under “Article IV of the 1951 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty”, which extends to armed attacks on Philippine armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft anywhere in the South China Sea.

Also important to note was the US-Philippines-Japan Trilateral Meeting, which saw its first summit on 11 April 2024. The [joint statement](#) at the summit explicitly opposed China’s coercive actions and raised serious concerns over its “repeated obstruction of Philippine vessels’ exercise of high seas freedom of navigation and the disruption of supply lines to the Second Thomas Shoal”.

Besides strong rhetoric, Manila’s military exercises with its allies and partners in the South China Sea have also increased recently. In April, six warships and four aircraft from Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the United States [conducted](#) a joint patrol in the South China Sea. This was the first combined multinational patrol and the first in which Japanese vessels and aircraft participated.

Furthermore, in April-May, the US and the Philippines conducted “[Exercise Balikatan](#)”, the 39th iteration of the largest annual bilateral exercise between the two militaries. As reported, the two countries also plan to undertake, together with Japan, a trilateral coast guard exercise this year, which for the first time, will see Philippine and Japanese personnel embark on a US Coast Guard vessel patrolling the Indo-Pacific.

To add to Manila’s security, Japan and the Philippines [signed](#) the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) on 8 July. This was a bilateral defence agreement to promote interoperability between the military forces of the two countries.

The Philippines has also ramped up its defence cooperation with other partners, such as India. On 19 April 2024, India delivered BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles to Manila as part of a US\$375 million deal signed between the two countries in 2022. As reported, the Philippines is establishing a BrahMos anti-ship missile base at a [naval](#)

[installation](#) facing the South China Sea, which can target ships up to 290-300 km away.

Furthermore, under its revised 10-year modernisation plan worth US\$35.62 billion approved by President Marcos Jr., the Philippines has confirmed its plans to acquire submarines to strengthen its territorial defence in the West Philippine Sea.

With this train of events in the South China Sea and the diplomatic and military support coalescing around the Philippines, what can we expect of developments going forward?

Possibility of Further Escalation

A Philippines' security official reportedly said on 24 July that the Philippines had reached a "provisional agreement" with Beijing on its resupply missions to the ship at the Second Thomas Shoal. However, given the rising trend of incidents at sea and the unresolved sovereignty issue, it is likely that Chinese harassment of Filipino fishermen, possibly leading to collisions between the vessels of both sides, would continue. This would lead to further protests by both sides and their stronger military presence in the region.

At some point, possibly as the result of an accident or a miscalculation, it could lead to a skirmish between their coast guard vessels. This could get the US involved as its commitment to the Philippines' security is, as Secretary Blinken put it, "ironclad". Japan and Australia, being partners of the Philippines, would likely provide support to the Filipinos as well.

Prospect of NATO Involvement

Further afield, the countries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) loom on the horizon. The China-Philippines row has provided a boost to the alliance's solidarity. To meet the increasing challenge of Chinese military power in the East, NATO is reportedly planning to set up [a liaison office in Tokyo](#), which is expected to open next year. This will give the alliance its first-ever permanent footprint in the Indo-Pacific.

On 10 July 2024, at the Washington Summit held in Washington, the leaders of NATO issued a declaration [calling out](#) China as "a decisive enabler of Russia's war against Ukraine". What is evident is the growing solidarity among the Western allies against what they see as China's disruption of freedom of navigation of the sea and the rules-based international order. The continuing escalation of tensions between the Philippines and China would reinforce this view and likely hasten NATO's naval presence in the region.

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