# South China Sea tensions spike as Philippines rebukes China's claim at Sandy Cay



The South China Sea dispute between China and the Philippines has escalated amidst ongoing territorial and maritime confrontations, raising concerns over regional stability and the potential for wider conflict. The latest tension unfolded near Sandy Cay, a group of three sandbars less than 200 kilometres off the Philippine coast, where the Philippines firmly rejected China’s territorial claim. The dispute intensified after a Chinese state-owned newspaper published images of Chinese coast guard officers holding a Chinese flag on Sandy Cay, prompting a Philippine maritime response. The Philippines’ coast guard, along with navy and maritime police personnel, landed on the sandbars to unfurl the Philippine flag, a move condemned by Beijing as "illegal."

This confrontation represents the latest chapter in a series of territorial disputes over the South China Sea’s rich and strategically vital waters, involving multiple Southeast Asian countries including the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Vietnam. These nations assert various claims over the South China Sea and its numerous islands, shoals, and reefs, while China asserts sovereignty over nearly the entire area, including significant spaces within the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of its island neighbours, through its controversial 'nine-dash line.'

At the core of the dispute are claims to key areas such as the Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal, with the Philippines grounding most of its claims on geographical proximity and international law as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Meanwhile, China's sweeping claims, dating from a map drawn in the 1940s, have been invalidated by an international tribunal in The Hague in 2016, which ruled decisively in favour of the Philippines. Despite this, China has expanded its military presence, including the militarisation of natural and artificial islands, and the deployment of coast guard and naval vessels to patrol these contested waters.

The ongoing maritime confrontations include collisions, ramming of vessels, the use of military-grade lasers, and water cannon attacks. A notable incident occurred in August, when the Philippine coast guard vessel BRP Teresa Magbanua sustained considerable damage after being repeatedly rammed by a Chinese ship near Sabina Shoal, part of the Spratly Islands within the Philippine EEZ. Commodore Jay Tarriela of the Philippine coast guard criticised the Chinese actions, stating that the Magbanua "would not withdraw from the region despite the harassment, bullying activities and escalatory action of the Chinese coast guard." China, however, asserted that the Philippines’ vessel pursued a collision course.

Secondary flashpoints include the Second Thomas Shoal, where a small Philippine military detachment maintains a presence amid repeated Chinese interference. The Philippines reported Chinese coast guard ships temporarily blinded its crew with lasers and conducted dangerously close manoeuvres, such as demarcated incidents in February 2023 involving the BRP Malapascua vessel. In December 2023, video footage released by the Philippine coast guard showed Chinese ships using water cannons against smaller Philippine vessels near Scarborough Shoal—a territory controlled by China since 2012 despite its geographic proximity to the Philippines.

Experts characterise China’s tactics as 'grey-zone' strategies, which fall below the threshold of outright military conflict but effectively assert control over contested regions. Dr Euan Graham from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute explained that China uses these tactics "to progressively eat away at the status quo in the South China Sea while staying under the threshold of crisis," thereby exerting dominance over large areas of the sea and enhancing its strategic leverage over Southeast Asia and broader Northeast Asia.

The broader significance of these disputes lies in the South China Sea’s critical economic and strategic importance. More than $2 trillion of trade flows annually through these waters, which also hold potential reserves of oil and natural gas. Fishing is a major economic activity, supporting millions in the Philippines and beyond. Control over the sea is a central priority for Beijing, linking to its desire to challenge the longstanding role of the United States as the regional security guarantor. The US has strengthened its alliances with regional partners, including the Philippines, under agreements like the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) of 2014, facilitating joint patrols and military aid. Other US-aligned allies, including Japan and Australia, have increased naval cooperation with the Philippines as part of efforts to deter further Chinese advancement.

Dr Gregory Poling, Director of the Southeast Asia Programme at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), commented on China’s expansive claims: "The very existence of the Nine-Dash Line, I think, is an affront to these countries... China is imposing the idea that these waters are disputed on smaller countries, where everybody else gets 200 miles, the Chinese get 1,000 miles."

These overlapping claims and frequent confrontations continue to pose complex challenges. The potential for a protracted naval or military conflict between China and the Philippines remains a concern, one with implications that could affect regional and even global geopolitical dynamics. The situation continues to attract significant international attention, as stakeholders weigh the interests of sovereignty, security, and economic access in a region that remains highly contested and strategically vital.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

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* <https://www.ft.com/content/ae6acb23-7b09-4783-8ebb-9e88b5126361> - This report discusses China's seizure of Sandy Cay, a disputed sandbank near the Philippines' Thitu Island, marking the first formal Chinese occupation of a previously unoccupied land feature in the area in years, and the subsequent Philippine response.
* <https://www.ft.com/content/68f0351e-235a-45a0-9106-fcb10e24be63> - This article covers China's declaration of sovereignty over Sandy Cay, a disputed sandbank in the South China Sea, and the Philippines' swift response by deploying naval and law enforcement personnel to affirm its territorial claim.
* <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-36771749> - This article reports on the 2016 international tribunal ruling that invalidated China's expansive claims in the South China Sea, supporting the Philippines' case and highlighting the ongoing disputes over territorial sovereignty.
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* <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14658771/China-Philippines-war-high-seas-two-countries-rammed-ships-blockaded-tiny-South-China-Sea-islands-territorial-battle-threatens-spiral-WW3.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data