

Analysis

China-Philippines dispute could escalate into superpower conflict, say analysts

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Expert warns of 'significant escalatory potential' after Chinese coastguards used water cannon on Philippine boat

A territorial dispute between China and the US-aligned [Philippines](#) is at increasingly high risk of escalating into a conflict involving the two superpowers, analysts have said, after Chinese coastguards used a water cannon on a Philippine boat.

Global concern about China's naval activities is growing as the country expands and modernises its military, and shows increasing aggression in its claims over the South China Sea and Taiwan. Joint drills with Russia – during which [a flotilla sailed near Alaska](#) this weekend – have also heightened concern over military coordination between Beijing and Moscow.

On Saturday, China's coastguard [directed water cannon at a Philippine coastguard](#) resupply vessels en route to the Second Thomas Shoal in the Spratly Islands, which Beijing also claims. Philippine military personnel are living onboard a grounded former warship, the Sierra Madre, deliberately scuttled at the Shoal in 1999 to reinforce Manila's claims. China's coastguard also used water cannon against a Philippine supply crew in November 2021.

The Philippine coastguard has accused the Chinese crew of illegal conduct and dangerous manoeuvres, and its government has summoned the Chinese ambassador to lodge a diplomatic protest. Its foreign ministry said it was unable to reach Beijing counterparts during the incident.

The US, EU, France, Japan and Australia were among nations to voice support for the Philippines and concern over China's actions. Washington also reaffirmed its commitment to obligations under a mutual defence treaty, to defend the Philippines if its public vessels and forces come under armed attack.

Blake Herzinger, a research fellow at the University of Sydney's United States Studies Centre, said there was "significant escalatory potential" in the Philippine holdings of the South China Sea. "Beijing's risky behaviour in the region has the potential to draw the two powers into conflict even without intending to do so," Herzinger said.

What activity would trigger the treaty, and how close the weekend's incident came, remains unclear, said Alessio Patalano, professor of war and strategy in east Asia at King's College London. Both sides have released footage of the confrontation. The Philippine coastguard spokesperson, Jay Taryela, also released [photos](#) purporting to show boats from China's maritime militia assisting the interception of the Philippines supply mission.

But Patalano said the US was sending Beijing a message that it considered activity in disputed areas such as the Shoal as covered by the treaty.

"If these things continue to escalate there will be a serious conversation with the US and Philippines on how to cooperate so the Philippines remain firmly in control of the situation as much as possible."

Beijing says its coastguard was "professional and restrained" in having "lawfully stopped" two Philippine vessels which it accused of violating Chinese sovereignty.

Under the administration of its president, Bongbong Marcos, who succeeded Rodrigo Duterte in June 2022, the Philippines has strengthened its ties and increased cooperation with the US, particularly in pushing back on China's territorial claims.

Amanda Hsiao, senior China analyst with the Crisis Group, said Beijing had traditionally sought to draw a line between Philippine transportations of humanitarian supplies and of construction equipment to the Shoal. Statements suggested it was blaming this incident on the Philippines for transporting the latter.

"This is unlikely to be the primary motivation," she said on Twitter. "The use of a more forceful (though not new) tactic is likely more tied to Beijing's concerns with the Marcos administration's US tilt and more forward-leaning South China Sea policy than the specifics of the resupply."

China's claim of sovereignty over about 90% of the South China Sea was found by the Hague in 2016 to have no legal basis, but Beijing continues to ignore that ruling and has boosted its presence in the region, in particular through its coastguard.

"China has created a coastguard with a mission to expand Chinese control in the South China Sea. This is all based on a warped historical narrative that bears little relation to the evidence," said Bill Hayton, the author of *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*.

Combined with the growing cooperation between Washington and Manila in pushing back on China, "this is setting up a cycle of action and reaction that is becoming more dangerous", said Hayton.

Reactions were still escalating on Tuesday. China's foreign ministry repeated calls for the Philippines to immediately remove the Sierra Madre from the Shoal and "restore it to its unoccupied state".

In reply, a senior Philippine national security council official said they would never abandon their post, and would do "whatever is necessary" to resupply it.

At the same time China's coastguard was challenging Philippine vessels in the South China Sea, its navy was conducting joint drills with Russia off the coast of Alaska. The exercise raised some concern about the growing cooperation between Beijing and Moscow, whose leaders declared a "limitless" partnership in 2021, but did not draw the same opprobrious reaction from the US as the Philippine incident.

Available information suggests the 11 Chinese and Russian warships were in the US's exclusive economic zone, where the UN convention on the law of the sea (Unclos) says foreign military activity is legal as long as it doesn't intrude into territorial waters.

The US deployed four US Navy destroyers to the area, but government and military statements did not suggest the presence was a threat. Alaska senators Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan, however, described the activity as an “incursion” and called for increased military funding for their region.

“Reacting by calling this a threat, or an incursion, is playing into Beijing’s hands in particular, as it commonly labels legal US maritime activity in the same way when objecting to it,” said Herzinger, from the Sydney-based United States Studies Centre.

The US government frequently conducts freedom of navigation exercises, including in places like the Taiwan strait and South China Sea, to reassert the rights under UNCLOS.

However, Herzinger added: “The US has long been the only power capable of projecting significant combat power far from its shores without much fear of similar operations being conducted near its own homeland – these kinds of operations are intended to shake the foundation of that long-held assumption of relative insulation.”

Helen Davidson in Taipei

P.S.

- The Guardian. Tue 8 Aug 2023 11.23 BST:

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