

Tense naval stand-off in the South China Sea

Joseph Santolan
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A tense standoff between Philippine naval vessels and Chinese marine surveillance ships is currently unfolding in the South China Sea.

On April 10, the Philippine naval flagship Gregorio del Pilar encountered and boarded eight Chinese fishing vessels in the u-shaped lagoon of the Scarborough shoal, in disputed waters. The shoal is 124 nautical miles west of the coast of the northern Philippine island of Luzon. According to a press release issued by the Philippine government, the fishing boats contained coral, giant clams and live sharks collected from the region.

Claiming that the Chinese fishermen were operating illegally in Philippine waters, the Philippine navy prepared to arrest them. Two Chinese surveillance ships, Zhonggou Haijian 75 and Zhonggou Haijian 84, sailed into the mouth of the shoal, interposing themselves between the Philippine ship and the fishing boats. One of the Chinese ships radioed to the Philippine gunboat that these were Chinese waters and that the Philippine navy should withdraw. The captain of Gregorio del Pilar answered that the shoal was Philippine territory.

Tense diplomatic negotiations between China and the Philippines ensued during Wednesday and Thursday. Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario said the presence of Chinese fishing vessels was “a clear violation of Philippine sovereignty.” He added that while he “hoped to arrive at a diplomatic solution ... if the Philippines is challenged it is prepared to secure its sovereignty.”

Beijing responded by denouncing the “harassment of Chinese fishermen” by armed Philippine naval personnel, and insisting the shoal was within Chinese

territorial waters. The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs stated that Scarborough shoal was an “integral part of Philippine territory.”

On Thursday, China deployed a third marine surveillance vessel to the standoff. The Philippines deployed a coast guard ship and then withdrew the Gregorio Del Pilar, saying it needed refuelling but would be redeployed to nearby waters. The confrontation continues.

The *China Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, issued an editorial denouncing Manila’s actions as “beyond tolerance” and a “blatant challenge to Chinese territorial integrity.”

The stand-off is the worst in a string of military confrontations in the South China Sea over the past year. This strategic sea and key waterways such as the Strait of Malacca are central to Washington’s plans to control China’s shipping lanes for energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East. Each of the increasingly sharp disputes between China and Vietnam, and China and the Philippines, over the past year has been the direct result of the calculated policy of provocation being carried out by US imperialism.

Washington, under the Obama policy of a ‘pivot to Asia,’ has established agreements for the rotational basing of US troops in Australia and in the Philippines, and declared that the US has a ‘national interest’ in the South China Sea. These moves have encouraged the Philippines to take a more aggressive stance in its territorial disputes with China.

On April 16, US troops will be conducting joint war games with the Philippines in the disputed waters of the

South China Sea. The exercises are pointedly targeted at China and involve the storming of oil rigs. The annual war games will include 4,500 US and 2,300 Philippine troops. Usually only involving Manila and Washington, this year's joint exercises have been expanded to include forces from Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Australia, South Korea and Japan. If the standoff is not resolved in the next two days, these war games will be conducted while Philippine and Chinese vessels sit within gunshot of each other.

During a meeting in Washington on April 4, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Singaporean Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen reached an agreement for the United States to deploy more of its littoral combat ships to Singapore. All these moves on Washington's part are designed to encircle and contain China.

On March 29, Chinese military spokesman Yang Yujun announced that China and Russia would be holding joint military maneuvers in the open Pacific, involving 10 Russian warships and a Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) fleet with a guided-missile destroyer. Reports indicate that both surface and underwater exercises will be conducted. The *Asia Sentinel* described the joint war games as "the largest ever held by the PLA navy in the West Pacific."

Just four years ago, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo signed an agreement with her counterparts in Vietnam and China for the joint exploration and development of the South China Sea. Washington's political machinations in the region aimed at undercutting Chinese influence have turned the area into a powder keg.

Such are the tensions that a dispute over the fishing activities of a few small Chinese boats poses the possibility of setting off a military conflict with far-reaching and potentially catastrophic consequences.



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