

Tensions ease temporarily between China and the Philippines

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The Chinese and Philippine governments have each recently taken steps to defuse tensions over the disputed Scarborough Shoal, known in China as Huangyan Island, in the South China Sea. A protracted naval standoff in recent weeks had threatened military conflict. While the immediate danger appears to have been averted, none of the underlying issues have been settled.

On May 15, China and the Philippines both issued temporary bans on all fishing in the disputed territory. Manila insisted that it did not accept the legitimacy of the Chinese two and a half month ban on territorial waters that it claims sovereignty over. However, both bans were clearly aimed at preventing or at least postponing another incident like the April 10 clash between a Philippine gunboat and Chinese fishing vessels, which triggered the naval standoff.

Beijing's trade sanctions placed Philippine President Aquino's administration under significant pressure. With thousands of tonnes of bananas reportedly gone rotten in Philippine ports because of Beijing's import restrictions on Philippine agricultural produce, agribusinesses and farmers lobbied the government to ease tensions with Beijing. The tourist industry is also being affected by large cancellations of tourist groups from China, the fourth largest tourist market for the country, after Beijing issued travel warnings.

On May 10, Aquino designated two new special envoys to China. One of the envoys, businessman Cesar Zalamea, is to pursue "initiatives aimed at increasing Chinese investments in the Philippines", including in "new and emerging areas of growth such as the auto industry, information and communications

technology, tourism infrastructure, mining, high value agribusiness, shipbuilding, power plants and renewable energy." The other envoy, Domingo Lee, is to promote Chinese tourism to the Philippines.

On May 18, Aquino personally intervened to prevent a group of Filipinos led by former Marine officer Nicanor Faeldon from sailing to Scarborough Shoal. The group, with media in tow, had reportedly planned to plant a Philippine flag on the islands, but aborted the plan after the president made a last-minute phone call to Faeldon. An Aquino spokesperson said that he had warned that the group's action "might be construed in a negative way."

Chinese state-owned media outlets have toned down their warlike coverage of the Scarborough Shoal standoff. State Councillor Dai Bingguo, whose rank is equal to vice-premier, declared at a conference last week that China "must remain humble and not make other countries feel threatened."

This marked a shift from earlier threatening comments issued by Chinese officials. Vice foreign minister Fu Ying told Philippine diplomats in Beijing that China "is fully prepared to respond to anything Philippines does on the issue" of Scarborough Shoal, remarks that were widely interpreted as an implicit threat of war. Retired Chinese general, Lu Yuan, declared on the government-owned CCTV on May 10: "If the PLA [People's Liberation Army] cannot declare war on the Philippines, why do we still keep such an army?"

Amid this rhetoric, China's navy conducted a large-scale amphibious landing drill in the South China Sea, practising scenarios including deploying marines,

amphibious tanks and helicopters from landing platforms to seize an island. Five Chinese warships were also spotted in the region. Manila had earlier conducted a joint exercise with thousands of US soldiers in the South China Sea, training for similar scenarios of seizing islands and oil drilling platforms that were obviously and provocatively aimed at China.

Beijing's moves to lower tensions reflect mounting concerns within the ruling elite over the repercussions over a military conflict with the Philippines, including the likely involvement of the US.

A May 12 article in the Chinese military's *People's Liberation Daily*, by Wen Bing of the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences, insisted that the government should not allow itself to be "provoked" into a war. "The provoker [i.e., the Philippines] wants to see China become irrational and go into war out of anger, which would subsequently lead to a violent clash between China and the US," Wen wrote. "It wants to see abrupt changes in the situation in the South China Sea, and continued turmoil there, so it can take advantage of the confusion for its own gain."

Ruling circles in Beijing are also acutely conscious of the potential domestic consequences of military conflict, including social and political unrest. Hu Xingdou of the Beijing Institute of Technology told the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* on May 14: "China's biggest headache is domestic conflict, not border disputes. Of course, an external war could be used to divert domestic dissatisfaction for a while, but a war in the South China Sea would eventually fuel domestic problems, because the US might be dragged into it."

The Philippines—whose military forces are among the weakest in South East Asia—only risked a military conflict with China over the disputed islands in the South China Sea because it had received assurances of support from the Obama administration.

Washington has deliberately inflamed tensions in the South China Sea. It has ratcheted up what were limited and regional disputes by urging China's neighbours to aggressively press their claims and by insisting that the

US has a "national interest" in "freedom of navigation" in the region. These moves form part of Obama's "pivot" to Asia, aimed at strategically encircling China. Senior US officials, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, have indicated that Washington would be obliged to militarily assist the Philippines on the basis of the two countries' 1951 mutual defence treaty.

On May 13, a nuclear-powered American attack submarine, USS North Carolina, docked at the Philippines' Subic Bay. The *Philippine Star* noted: "The submarine's sudden appearance [has] bolstered speculations that the US military is closely watching the security development in the region and is particularly concerned over the prevailing territorial standoff between the Philippines and China over Panatag [Scarborough] Shoal."

The continued US interventions in the China-Philippine territorial dispute underscore the reality that tensions in the South China Sea have only eased temporarily. The fishing bans will expire in a few weeks, again creating a potential trigger for conflict.



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