

Taiwan stages naval drills as tensions mount with Manila

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Tensions between the Philippines and Taiwan have worsened dramatically over the past several days.

On May 9, a Philippine Coast Guard cutter turned its machine guns on a small unarmed Taiwanese fishing vessel in waters claimed by both countries. A 65-year-old Taiwanese fisherman was killed. Diplomatic relations between Taipei and Manila have spiralled into an escalating war of words, sanctions and military exercises.

Philippine President Benigno Aquino's government claims that the four Taiwanese fishermen fired upon were illegally fishing in waters within the Philippine exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), of which the Philippines is a signatory, holds that fishermen caught illegally fishing within a state's exclusive economic zone may not be detained or charged criminally. The Philippine Coast Guard opened fire on an unarmed vessel on the open sea—an international criminal act.

Taiwanese President Ma Ying Jeou demanded that Manila issue an apology, punish those responsible, and compensate the victims by May 15. If these demands were not met, he threatened, new Filipino workers would be banned from entering Taiwan.

Last Wednesday, President Aquino provided a formal apology. Ma termed this “a positive step” but said it was insufficient and Taiwan would proceed with sanctions. In the 48 hours since this statement, relations have rapidly deteriorated.

Taiwanese Premier Jiang Yi-huah has issued most of Taiwan's public statements and has taken a sharper tone than Ma. “The Philippines has shown a lack of sincerity in resolving this matter,” he stated Wednesday. “Taiwan will continue to exert pressure on the Philippines. We will not allow any country to

endanger our people's safety or harm our national sovereignty.”

Taiwan ended the granting of working visas to Filipinos and recalled its diplomatic representative to the Philippines. Approximately 35,000 Filipino workers travel to Taiwan every year, the vast majority taking low-paying factory positions. There are currently 87,000 Filipinos legally working in Taiwan.

Premier Jiang further stated that everyone should be prepared for these sanctions “to be in effect for a prolonged period.”

Within hours of the rejection of Manila's apology, Philippine presidential spokesman Edwin Lacierda stated that Aquino was dispatching his personal representative, Amadeo Perez, to Taipei with a formal letter of apology. The letter was said to convey “the Filipino people's deep regret and apology to the family of Mr. Hung Shi-chen as well as to the people of Taiwan over the unfortunate and unintended loss of life.”

The Taiwanese government explicitly rejected the formulation “unfortunate and unintended,” which it said indicated that Aquino's administration was not taking the matter seriously. Taiwanese Foreign Minister David Lin refused to meet with Perez, as did the family of the dead fisherman.

Snubbed, Perez returned home, stating that the Philippines had “gone the extra mile” and “acted uprightly and decently as a respectable member of the international community.”

Yesterday morning, Premier Jiang announced that Taipei was initiating a second stage of “retaliatory measures.” Taiwan issued a red travel warning against the Philippines, advising all Taiwanese citizens to avoid travelling to the country. About 210,000 Taiwanese visited the Philippines last year, contributing

substantially to tourism revenue. All interaction between high-level officials has been suspended, along with joint economic and trade-activity exchanges, fishery cooperation and scientific research cooperation projects.

As a further act of “retaliation,” Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense and Coast Guard Administration announced a military drill in the disputed waters where the fishing vessel was fired upon. The naval exercises were held a scant 21 nautical miles from the Batanes, the northern-most islands in the Philippines.

The exercises involved a destroyer, a frigate and four coastguard ships, as well as fighter jets and a submarine. The naval drills did not use live fire, to avoid “further inflaming tensions,” a military spokesperson stated.

Also on Thursday, the Taiwanese Ministry of Justice announced it was sending a team of investigators, prosecutors and justice personnel to Manila on Friday. Justice Minister Tseng Yung-fu said: “We will perform an in-depth investigation of the shooting. That includes finding out which weapons were used, how it led to the shooting, and who is responsible.”

Philippine Justice Secretary Leila de Lima responded immediately, saying: “As far as we are concerned, there’s no prior coordination nor formal request on such Taiwanese investigators—if there’s any. That’s not allowed. They can’t just go here and investigate without prior coordination.”

The dramatic flare up of tensions is indicative of the perilous potential for conflict throughout the Asia-Pacific region, as a direct product of the provocative drive by the Obama administration to encircle China. Encouraged by Washington, Aquino’s government has been pursuing territorial disputes in the South China Sea against China, leading to a protracted confrontation over the Scarborough Shoal last year. In its “pivot” against China, the US has fanned the flames of nationalism in Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines and other countries in the region.

These moves will have unintended consequences. The US State Department has expressed concern over the conflict between the Philippines and Taiwan. Acting deputy spokesman Patrick Ventrell told a press briefing that the US urged the Philippines and Taiwan “to refrain from actions that could further escalate tensions in the region and undermine the prospects for a rapid

and effective resolution of differences.”

Washington is concerned that the dispute is strengthening China’s position. China has viewed the Philippines-Taiwan row as a favourable development in terms of its own interests. It has been appealing to Taipei for “cross-strait” cooperation with Beijing over the South China Sea.

Beijing views Taiwan, including its territorial waters, as part of China. Moreover, China has also been in dispute with the Philippines over islets in the South China Sea. An editorial in the state-controlled *Global Times* stated: “Taiwan’s action gives China a higher moral ground to take resolute countermeasures against the Philippines ... We should encourage Taiwan to take the lead role in this incident, while never shirking our responsibility.”

A Chinese general, Luo Yuan, told the *People’s Daily* yesterday that two Chinese fleets loaded with live ammunition were now patrolling the South China Sea, ready to coordinate with Taiwan, in order to “defend the common interests of the Chinese nation” against the Philippines.

A conflict between Taiwan and the Philippines is not part of Washington’s agenda. But the Obama administration’s aggressive “pivot” to Asia to counter China has made such confrontations almost inevitable.



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