

Second Thomas Shoal incident: A provocation made in Washington

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A maritime collision on Sunday in the South China Sea involving Chinese and Philippine vessels has all the hallmarks of a provocation hatched in Manila and Washington to blacken Beijing's name.

The incident revolves around a longstanding dispute over control of the Second Thomas Shoal—a coral reef barely above sea level at low tide. To assert its claims, the Philippines has stationed a unit of Marines on a derelict World War II era US warship, BRP Sierra Madre, that was deliberately grounded on the reef in 1999.

China continues to insist that the shoal, part of the Spratly Islands, is its territory and claims that the Philippines had agreed to remove the warship from the reef. In August, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr declared that he was unaware that such a deal existed, adding that even if it did, he was now rescinding it.

Chinese coast guard and other vessels have been deployed to the waters to block Philippine efforts to reach the reef. In August, the Chinese ships used water cannon to harass and prevent Philippine boats attempting to reach the BRP Sierra Madre.

On Sunday, four Philippine vessels apparently attempted to breach the blockade, resulting in at least two collisions with Chinese ships. According to Manila, a Chinese coastguard vessel cut in front of the bow of a small wooden ship, causing it to hit its side. A Chinese maritime militia boat later bumped a Philippine coastguard vessel. No one was injured.

The incident was rapidly seized on by the Philippine government and media to denounce China. “What happened yesterday was a serious and egregious violation of international law,” Philippine defence secretary Gilbert Teodoro declared, branding the maritime confrontation an escalation of China's

“expansionist and aggressive action.”

Philippine President Marcos convened an emergency meeting with top military and security officials to discuss a response. An official of the Chinese embassy was summoned to receive a strongly-worded protest. A statement from the presidential press office blamed the collisions on “dangerous, illegal, and reckless manoeuvres by vessels of the China Coast Guard” and declared that the matter was “being taken seriously at the highest level of government.”

The Chinese embassy responded by lodging a protest with the Philippine foreign ministry, claiming the shoal as Chinese territory and urging Manila to “tow away the illegally grounded warship as soon as possible” and abandon control of the shoal. China also accused the Philippines not only of seeking to resupply its Marine contingent, but of transporting building materials to construct a more permanent presence.

Significantly, the incident was quickly seized upon by the US State Department, which issued a press statement on Sunday (US time) declaring that “the United States stands with our Philippine allies” in the face of China's “dangerous and unlawful actions.”

Ominously, the statement reaffirmed “that Article IV of the 1951 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty extends to armed attacks on Philippine armed forces, public vessels, and aircraft—including those of its Coast Guard—anywhere in the South China Sea.” Article IV declares that an armed attack in the Pacific on either country would mean that each “would act to meet the common dangers in accordance with its constitutional processes.”

In the context of the Biden administration's escalating preparations for war with China, the statement is a menacing military threat. Washington is already fuelling tensions with Beijing over Taiwan by

strengthening diplomatic and military ties with Taipei even while claiming to adhere to the One China policy that acknowledges the island as part of China. Now the US is threatening to transform an incident involving Chinese and Philippine coastguards into the pretext for military conflict.

There is no doubt that Washington had a hand in Sunday's maritime incident. In comments cited in the *Financial Times*, John Bradford, executive director at the Yokosuka Council on Asia-Pacific Studies, noted that "a sizeable chunk of the DC policy elite are directly or indirectly egging the Philippines on" as a part of the effort to stand up to China's so-called "unlawful aggression."

The timing of the Philippine attempt to run the Chinese blockade is also significant. It came on the eve of three days of talks in Beijing with Southeast Asian countries over a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea aimed at easing tensions over conflicting territorial claims. The furore over the Second Thomas Shoal will no doubt poison the atmosphere, making any agreement difficult to reach.

The incident also comes ahead of a visit by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Washington, beginning tomorrow, to meet US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and national security adviser Jake Sullivan. Ostensibly, the Biden administration is seeking to ease tensions with China and foster collaboration. In reality, Blinken and other top officials used a trip to Beijing in June to lay down a series of ultimatums to China, and will do so again this week.

Over the past decade, beginning with the Obama administration, the US has transformed longstanding territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea from a relatively minor regional issue into a dangerous flashpoint for war with China. US warships and warplanes have engaged in escalating provocations by entering Chinese-claimed waters and airspace in the name of "freedom of navigation." The South China Sea is directly adjacent to sensitive military bases on the Chinese mainland that would be obvious targets in any US conflict with China.

The US has also strengthened its military presence in the Philippines next to the South China Sea and encouraged the Marcos administration to take a more aggressive stance towards Beijing. In February, it was announced that Manila would provide Washington with

access to four additional basing locations in the Philippines under the auspices of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). One of the four bases is on the westernmost fringes of Palawan, as close as possible to the disputed Spratly Islands.

Washington's provocations and military build-up in the Indo-Pacific are taking place even as it intensifies the NATO war in Ukraine against Russia and backs Israel to the hilt in its genocidal onslaught on Palestinian people in Gaza, threatening a wider war in the Middle East. In its reckless determination to maintain its global hegemony at any cost, US imperialism is plunging humanity towards a catastrophic global conflict between nuclear-armed powers.



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