

Confrontation between China and Vietnam in the South China Sea

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On September 29, two Chinese Coast Guard vessels confronted a Vietnamese fishing boat in the disputed waters of the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. The Coast Guard boarded the vessel, which it claimed was illegally fishing in Chinese waters, confiscated its catch, and expelled the fishing boat from the region of the Paracels.

The Vietnamese government claimed that during the encounter the Chinese Coast Guard assaulted the crew of the fishing vessel, injuring ten. The captain of the fishing boat told a Vietnamese newspaper that three of the crew suffered broken bones. An account published by Voice of America, a news outlet that functions as a broadcaster of US government propaganda, was far more lurid, alleging that the Chinese coast guard beat the Vietnamese fishermen with iron pipes.

Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson, Pham Thu Hang, issued a statement on October 2 saying that "Vietnam is extremely concerned, indignant and resolutely opposes the brutal behavior of Chinese law enforcement forces against Vietnamese fishermen and fishing vessels operating in the Paracel archipelago of Vietnam."

China's Foreign Affairs ministry stated, "The on-site operations were professional and restrained, and no injuries were found." The *Global Times*, a newspaper that presents the views of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA), claimed that footage of the confrontation showed that the Chinese authorities intercepted, boarded, inspected and expelled a Vietnamese boat from the Paracel islands, but that these measures were conducted with "restraint and in full accordance with the law."

The confrontation between the Chinese Coast Guard and the Vietnamese fishermen expresses similar tensions to those driving confrontations and collisions

with the Philippines on the eastern side of the South China Sea. The confrontations there similarly include allegations of injuries and broken bones.

A contributing factor to this upsurge in confrontations was a revision to the Chinese Coast Guard law that went into effect in mid June, authorizing the seizure of foreign ships and detention, for up to 30 days, of crews suspected of trespassing in Chinese-claimed waters. China's Coast Guard vessels were deputised to perform discretionary law enforcement activities in Chinese-claimed waters. China extended the law enforcing capacity of the Coast Guard as a means of enforcing its interests without the use of actual military vessels.

But while this legal change contributed to the frequency of confrontations, it is not what is fuelling the underlying tensions. All regional actors are positioning themselves in preparation for an armed conflict in the South China Sea that is increasingly likely and imminent. China has secured control over the Paracels and has engaged in island construction to facilitate resupply and deployment. Vietnam has engaged in rapid island construction in the Spratlys. The Philippines is maintaining and attempting to improve a makeshift basing facility in the Spratlys as well.

The maritime and territorial disputes in the South China Sea are complex, overlapping, and long-standing. China and Taiwan both claim historical right to nearly the entirety of the sea. The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia all claim parts.

It is the United States, which has no legal standing in the disputes nor any historical right in these waters, that has destabilised the region, turning what largely amounted to a geopolitical footnote into a plausible site for World War III. From Hillary Clinton's assertion in

2010 that the US had a “national interest” in the South China Sea, to Washington’s deployment of a medium range missile system to the Philippines in 2024, every escalation of tensions has been the result of US machinations.

US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller issued a statement on October 4 saying that the United States was “deeply concerned by reports of the dangerous actions by PRC law enforcement vessels ... We call on the PRC to desist from dangerous and destabilising conduct in the South China Sea.”

It is the United States, however, not China, that has destabilised the South China Sea. Under the administration of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, the Philippines has come to function as the leading proxy of US interests in the immediate region. Under his presidency, the Pentagon is actively developing bases throughout the Philippines, in keeping with the terms of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). The US operates a secret drone facility in Pampanga on the island of Luzon, and these drones have flown over, documented, and likely coordinated, every confrontation between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea since the beginning of the year.

In keeping with this role, the Philippines issued statements denouncing China’s recent confrontation with Vietnam. Where Hanoi raised bilateral protests with the Chinese embassy, Manila attempted to escalate the matter by invoking international law.

Philippine National Security Adviser Eduardo Año issued a statement on October 4 accusing the Chinese of an “unjustified assault,” adding that “the use of force against civilians blatantly violates international law.”

Manila has no right to denounce “unjustified assaults” on fishermen. In 2013, a Philippine Coast Guard vessel opened machine gun fire on an unarmed Taiwanese fishing vessel and its unarmed crew in the Bashi Channel. They fired more than fifty rounds and killed a 65-year-old fisherman. As an excuse, the Coast Guard claimed it thought the vessel was from mainland China, not Taiwan.

While the Philippines routinely denounces China for its land reclamation and island construction in the South China Sea, such activity has largely stalled over the past two years. It is Vietnam that is engaged in island construction. Over the past two years, Vietnam has reclaimed and expanded more land in the South

China Sea than it had over all prior years combined.

In the six months from December 2023 to June 2024, Vietnam reclaimed 955 hectares, according to the US-based Asia Maritime Transparency Institute (AMTI). This is more than half the total amount that China has ever reclaimed. In the past two years, while China has constructed next to nothing, Vietnam has reclaimed as much land as China ever did.

While the Philippines has filed complaints in the past against Vietnamese land reclamation in the disputed South China Sea, alleging that such activities alter the status quo and complicate territorial disputes, they have filed no such protests against the flurry of the past two years. This silence is in keeping with the geopolitical goals of Washington, which is attempting to pull together Vietnam and the Philippines as allies and proxies for a future war with China.



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