



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on December 21, 2022

U.S. Backs Philippines Amid Beijing's Forays in South China Sea

SINGAPORE — The United States on Tuesday reinforced its backing for its military ally, the Philippines, in wake of Beijing's "escalating" forays near the contested Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

"The United States stands with our ally, the Philippines, in upholding the rules-based international order and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea as guaranteed under international law," Department of State spokesman Ned Price said.



Oleksii Liskoni/iStock/Getty Images Plus

The U.S. official published the statement less than a week after the Philippines' Department of National Defence (DND) rebuked China for swarming sections of the South China Sea on December 14.

Moreover, Filipino senators also lambasted Beijing that same day for a heated episode entailing rocket debris between the Philippine Navy and the Chinese Coast Guard in the same area in November.

Washington's statement of advocacy comes around two weeks before Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. travels to China for a state visit January 3-6.

Price said the "reported escalating swarms" of Chinese militia vessels near Iroquois Reef and Sabina Shoal in the Spratlys archipelago interfere with the livelihood of Philippine fishing communities and "reflect continuing disregard for other South China Sea claimants and states lawfully operating in the region."

Besides the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Taiwan claim parts of the Spratly Islands.

DND officer-in-charge Jose Faustino, Jr. earlier remarked that it was "unacceptable" for Beijing to be massing boats around these areas in the eastern part of the South China Sea that are within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ). In Manila, this area is officially known as the West Philippine Sea.

In 2016, the Philippines won a landmark international tribunal ruling that dismissed Beijing's expansive claim over the South China Sea and determined that Manila has sovereign rights over the waters within its EEZ. However, China has refused to accept this ruling.

Price also said that Washington sympathizes with Manila over the rocket debris clash in November between the Philippine Navy and the Chinese Coast Guard off the coast of Thitu Island, which is also part of the Spratlys.

The Philippines had slammed China for "forcefully" taking rocket debris that its navy officers were towing back to shore. On the other hand, China maintained that the object was returned to them after a "friendly negotiation."



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In response to U.S. statements backing the Philippines, the Chinese Embassy in Manila said Price's statement contained "unfounded accusations against China that attempt to stir up troubles and drive a wedge" between China and the Philippines.

The embassy added that it is "only natural" for neighboring countries to have differences, which China and the Philippines have been working on via dialogue and consultation.

"The US keeps meddling in the South China Sea disputes and trying to drive wedges between countries in the region, creating tensions and harming regional peace and stability. What the US has done is not to help anyone but to serve its own geopolitical interests," claimed the embassy.

China called for the United States to stop capitalizing on the South China Sea dispute to "sow discord between China and the Philippines and undermine stability in the South China Sea."

The rocket debris incident happened in the same week U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris visited the Philippines to reinforce Washington's "unwavering commitment" to protect its ally should an armed attack occur in the disputed seas.

In November, Harris announced in a speech while aboard one of the Philippines' biggest vessels patrolling the South China Sea that Washington would set aside US\$7.5 million to enhance the capabilities of Manila's maritime law-enforcement agencies.

Harris said the funding would help the Philippines better tackle illegal fishing, as well as boost monitoring systems and overhaul equipment used in patrolling its waters, including parts of the South China Sea.

Despite American efforts to support the Philippines, it is noteworthy that the latter is by no means proving itself to only cater to American foreign-policy interests. Rather, the Philippines has been undergoing a foreign-policy shift as the current president tries to maintain a delicate balancing act between the United States and China amid the two superpowers' escalating contest for clout in the region.

Marcos, who became the Philippine president in June, has abandoned his predecessor Rodrigo Duterte's pro-China approach to pursue a dual foreign-policy approach. This new strategy would revitalize relations with old military ally Washington while also building deeper economic ties with Beijing.

Observers said this "friends to all, enemies to none" strategy could possibly see the Philippines obtaining security and trade benefits from both nations, while also gaining more bargaining power as the United States and China compete for Manila's favor.

For instance, during the rocket debris clash in November, the Marcos government maintained the Philippine Navy's claim that the Chinese Coast Guard "forcibly" took debris from a Chinese rocket launch they found drifting off the coast of Thitu Island.

John Bradford, senior fellow in the Maritime Security Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), observed that the diplomatic note aims "to register concern while minimizing the chance of escalation" between the Philippines and China.

Bradford said this puts the Philippine leader in a "good position" prior to his state visit to Beijing in January 2023.

"He can arrive with a fresh grievance, to show how the relations between the Philippines and China need to be righted in favor of a more conciliatory approach towards the Philippines. And he's backed by



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what was recently a successful interaction with the United States,” added Bradford.

In August, Philippine Foreign Secretary Enrique Manalo said Marcos and Chinese President Xi Jinping are expected to reboot discussions about possible joint oil and gas exploration in the South China Sea.

Nonetheless, Marcos also said that the Philippines “must find a way” to exploit resources in the South China Sea even without a partnership with Beijing.

Collin Koh, research fellow at the RSIS’ Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, had this observation about Marcos’ foreign policy approach: “One is to send a signal that the US’ Indo-Pacific strategy is moving ahead.... And then from the Philippines, it is essentially telling China that the current Marcos administration is keen to assert itself in the South China Sea.”

Additionally, Koh said the Philippines must persist in being sensitive in dealings with China, as China is Manila’s largest trading partner. In 2021, total bilateral trade between the two countries reached US\$38 billion. China’s military is also far superior to that of the Philippines, whose armed forces continue to mainly depend on the United States.



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