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Summary

The Philippine Coast Guard confirmed to the National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea (NTF-WPS) that around 220 Chinese fishing vessels manned by the Chinese maritime militia were moored near Julian Felipe Reef (also known as Whitsun Reef) since March 7. The Julian Felipe Reef is located within the country's EEZ. The response to this was swift.

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The Philippines Caught in the Middle

On March 20, the Philippine Coast Guard [confirmed](#) to the National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea (NTF-WPS) that around 220 Chinese fishing vessels manned by the Chinese maritime militia were moored near Julian Felipe Reef (also known as Whitsun Reef) since March 7. The Julian Felipe Reef is located within the country's EEZ. The response to this was swift. Defense Secretary Lorenzana released a [statement](#) calling on China to "stop this incursion" and to immediately recall all vessels. Secretary Lorenzana also assured the public that the Department of National Defense (DND) was working alongside the PCG and NTS-WPS as well as the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) to handle the matter. The [responses escalated](#): Foreign Secretary Locsin revealed on March 22 that the DFA filed a diplomatic protest; Representative Ruffy Biazon, vice chair of the House committee on national defense and security, stated that this was proof of China's untrustworthiness regarding the West Philippine Sea; and Fernando Hicap, national chair of Pamalakaya, said that the situation required an "unhesitating response and action" from the government. President Duterte reportedly met with the Chinese ambassador, [expressing concern](#) over the large number of vessels within the EEZ and reiterated the 2016 Arbitration award.

China has repeatedly denied violating Philippine sovereignty. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson [claimed](#) at a March 22 press conference that the boats were taking shelter due to bad weather. Meanwhile, the Chinese Embassy in Manila openly [denied](#) that there were Chinese maritime militia. These statements were [debunked in a Foreign Policy article](#) which tracked the presence of Chinese ships in the Philippines EEZ since February 2021.

The international community likewise was not convinced. U.S. State Secretary Anthony Blinken said that the U.S. stood with the Philippines in this matter. Defense ministers from [Japan and Indonesia](#) have stated that their two countries would "oppose any action by China" that would escalate tensions. Australia's Ambassador to the Philippines Steven Robinson stated that [Australia](#) was concerned over any "destabilizing actions" in the South China Sea. [Germany and France](#) expressed alarm on Twitter and called for restraint from "measures which endanger peace, stability, and security" in the Indo-Pacific region.

China's increased presence near Julian Felipe Reef coincided with the first [summit meeting of Quad states](#) between the heads of state of U.S., Japan, India, and Australia. The Quad states agreed to increased regional cooperation on the COVID-19 vaccine and in promoting the "democratic values" of the Indo-Pacific. The summit clearly marked China's "aggression" against member states, notably the economic coercion with Australia, the increased presence near the Senkaku Islands, and the border dispute with India. Many in the U.S. military and senate [backed the significance of the Quad](#) for regional stability and in confronting China.

The U.S.'s recommitment to the Philippines comes in the wake of a meeting between U.S. and China which took place in Alaska. While most of the dialogue is confidential, the opening remarks of both states were "[unusually undiplomatic](#)". The U.S. expressed "deep concerns" over China's actions in the region as threatening to the "rules-based order that maintains global stability". China rebuked this by accusing the U.S. of leveraging military and financial might to "incite some countries to attack China." After this meeting, [both states convened with allies](#) to discuss the Indo-Pacific region. U.S. directed NATO to focus on "challenges that China poses" while China and Russia agreed to "work together against sanctions".

Internal Matters

Meanwhile, the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) remains a contested topic. Early in March, Senate President Sotto [defended the retention of the VFA](#). He revealed that some in the senate desired its expansion to other countries, noting that he shared this idea with the Japanese ambassador. In an opinion piece, former Supreme Court Justice Carpio waylaid the president's suspicion of [nuclear weapons](#) as the VFA does not allow for their presence. Philippine Ambassador to the U.S. Jose Manuel Romualdez hopes that a [list of aid provided by the U.S.](#) will satisfy the president's concerns over the VFA. Amb. Romualdez noted that this list is in line with U.S. recommitment to alliances and linked this with the [ongoing modernization](#) of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. On March 9, two days after China's presence in Juan Felipe Reef was first reported but not yet confirmed, Representative Ruffy Biazon urged the [house panel on VFA](#) to discuss options, citing the need to maintain alliances.

Maintaining alliances and partnerships has been beneficial to the Philippines in terms of other maritime security aspects. On March 5, the [Fjord FSTR](#), a high-speed ferry built at the shipyard in Balamban, Cebu began a journey to Denmark. Austal Philippines, a part of the Australia-based shipbuilding company Austal Group, was commissioned by Fjord Line to build a 109-meter catamaran large enough to house 1200 passengers and over 400 cars. It is reported to be the largest aluminum vessel ever launched from the Philippines. The Philippine embassy in Denmark said the launch coincided with the 75th anniversary of Philippine-Denmark diplomatic relations. On March 9, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) released the [results of a study](#) on illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. The report summarized the findings of research conducted by USAID, BFAR, Rare Philippines, the University of the Philippines (UP) Marine Science Institute and the UP School of Statistics. The report highlighted the significant impact of illegal, unreported, unregulated (IUU) fishing on the Philippine economy. This report comes after the PCG, the Philippine Marines, and local law enforcement conducted a raid at Roxas, Palawan on March 6 and [seized](#) P160 million worth of giant clams.

Analysis

China's actions continued to escalate across the region since the passing of its [controversial Coast Guard Law](#). The [Chinese military dedicated March](#) to a month-long drill in a desire to meet modern military warfare requirements. The U.S. has been critical of China's military advancement, citing [concerns over its navy](#), now the largest in the world. Elements of that navy have been [spotted in Japanese waters](#) for the first time on March 20. There have been renewed concerns of a potential [invasion of Taiwan](#), a potential flashpoint of the decade, by the Chinese Navy bolstered by the Chinese Coast Guard and the maritime militia. One U.S. admiral warns that an invasion of Taiwan could occur [within the next six years](#). A [conflict in the Indo-Pacific](#) region is a hot topic of discussion.

Fortunately, the international community has not been silent. In addition to their [condemnation](#) of China's presence at the Julian Felipe Reef, concerned states have continued their opposition to Chinese activities. A [German warship](#) is

to set sail for Asia this coming August, a first since 2002. [Britain](#) seeks to expand its influence in the Indo-Pacific and began with its biggest foreign and defense policy review since the end of the Cold War. [South Korea](#) seeks to pass a Special Measures Agreement, a six-year extension of a deal with the U.S.

The escalation of tensions has risen to the point that U.S. and China are now [bluntly expressing their points of view](#), as seen in the Alaska talks. While some had anticipated a “reset” of a relationship with China, the Biden administration has not withdrawn its support for Taiwan. The U.S. has stepped up its recommitment throughout the region. Taiwan, the Quad, and the Philippines have received increased support. The U.S. coordinating with select states in the region [differs](#) from the previous two administrations’ policy in confronting China.

The effect is not lost on the Philippines. The Philippines [publicly expressed thanks for](#) U.S. support against the Chinese presence at the Julian Felipe Reef. [Mr. Generoso Calonge](#), top diplomat to Iraq, said during his confirmation hearing that diplomatic protests were not enough. He called on the Philippines to actively involve its allies, particularly the U.S., in defending national sovereignty. Decisive action in the Philippines was lacking when China occupied Mischief Reef. Maritime law expert Prof. Jay Batongbacal said that [vigilance was necessary](#), even if the Chinese withdraw from Julian Felipe Reef. This sentiment was shared by Defense Secretary Lorenzana who said that there would be an increased presence of the Philippine Navy and the PCG in sovereignty patrols.

However, the defense of national sovereignty should go beyond words and statements issued from the Philippine government. Concrete actions should be taken to ensure that breaches like this would not happen again in the future. Empowering and arming the navy, coastguard, airforce and army with skills and technologies to do their functions should be a part of this process. At its current state, the Philippines would not be able to do this alone which brings us back to the issue of preserving alliances. While cooperation with other countries besides the U.S. secures the independent foreign policy of the Duterte administration, it cannot be denied that the [issue maintaining the VFA](#) remains paramount. Across the legislature, the defense establishment, and the academic community, there is consensus that the continued alliance with the U.S. would be beneficial to the Philippines. [Ambiguity over the fate of VFA](#) will only add to the worries of the country and allow China to continue its activities unhindered. The Philippines would do well to take decisive actions on this front and join the international community in making direct steps in opposing China’s unlawful activities. China and the Philippines should be able to cooperate on other aspects such as economic and health security without having to compromise our national territory and sovereignty. To the world, this would be the proof that China indeed is a benevolent power capable of adhering to the established rules-based order and upholding peace in the region.