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Summary

Continuing its incursion in Philippine territory, China once again proclaimed its ownership over the West Philippine Sea. China's foreign ministry spokesperson said that the Philippines should stop "complicating the situation" and urged respect for China's sovereignty. The National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea (NTF-WPS) reported that several vessels identified with the Chinese Coast Guard remain in the West Philippine Sea despite repeated diplomatic protests.

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Heat on China: The Philippines

Continuing its incursion in Philippine territory, China [once again proclaimed](#) its ownership over the West Philippine Sea. China's foreign ministry spokesperson said that the Philippines should stop "complicating the situation" and urged respect for China's sovereignty. The National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea (NTF-WPS) reported that several vessels identified with the Chinese Coast Guard [remain](#) in the West Philippine Sea despite repeated diplomatic protests. As of April 13, China has [at least 240 ships](#) throughout the vast expanse of the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ), many of which are located at Burgos Reef (Gaven Reef). Surveillance around [late April 2021](#) found that Chinese Coast Guard maritime vessels and Chinese commercial fishing vessels were also spotted in Sabina Shoal, Bajo de Masinloc, Ayungin Shoal (Second Thomas Shoal), and around the waters of the municipality of Kalayaan.

Vociferous reactions across various sectors of the Philippines appeared. Members of the Senate filed a [resolution](#) condemning China's repeated intrusions, many of whom [demanded](#) that Chinese maritime militia vessels leave Philippine territory. Bayan Muna Representative Carlos [Zarate called on President Duterte](#) to send in the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) in a bid to "stand up for our fisherfolk and our territory". [Others were just as strong](#): Branches of the military have pledged that patrols will continue in the West Philippines Sea and the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) lodged another diplomatic protest on April 28. National Security Adviser Hermogenes Esperon Jr. insinuated that the Philippines can take a page from China and put up [structures](#) in the West Philippine Sea. [There was more](#): Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana outright called the Chinese vessels "intruders" and DFA claims that it has filed at least 80 diplomatic protests against Chinese incursions since the beginning of the current administration.

Additionally, civil society are also getting involved. [Eight business groups](#) issued a joint statement calling on China to withdraw from the Julian Felipe Reef. Several members of the academe, such as the Professors for Peace and some members of the [De La Salle University Political Science and International Studies Departments](#), have also issued a statements on safeguarding security in the West Philippine Sea.

President Duterte received fierce criticism from across the country. Many continue to accuse the president of serving China's interest rather than the Philippines'. Esperon addressed one issue by saying that there was [no verbal agreement](#) between the president and China regarding fishing in contested territory. [President Duterte](#) himself has stated that any attempt to assert Philippine sovereignty against China will result in bloodshed and opts not to go down that road. Although, he added that should China attempt to claim resources such as oil in the West Philippine Sea, he will send [military/gray ships](#). In the meantime, white ships of the PCG have [increased their deployment](#) of patrol vessels. PCG Spokesman Commodore Armando Balilo said that PCG supports a "whole-of-nation" approach. In line with this, Senator Lacson clarified that while there were several officers complaining about the president's maritime policy, the [Philippine military](#) still supports the president.

Heat on China: The Indo-Pacific, the U.S., and the European Union

April was a good month for the United States (U.S.) in the Indo-Pacific region. China partially backed down in the Juan Felipe Reef, the European Union was more vocal in supporting the rules-based order, and U.S. allies around the region stepped up their defense of their maritime territory.

As an ally of the Philippines, the U.S. [warned China](#) that any armed attack against the Philippines would trigger the US-PH Mutual Defense Treaty. Philippine Ambassador to the U.S. Jose Manuel Romualdez said that U.S. vessels were continually being [deployed](#) as part of freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS). The warning coupled with the increase in naval presence, both U.S. and Philippines, and the Balikatan operations mid-April was enough for China to [withdraw](#) the majority of its vessels from Julian Felipe Reef.

However, the prevalence of the situation prompted the European Union (EU) to issue a statement on Chinese activity in the region. The statement called for [peace and stability](#) through compliance with UNCLOS and through the finalization of the ASEAN Code of Conduct. The EU's attitude towards the region has concretized into a [new strategic focus](#). This plan is long-term and is open to cooperate with any entity in the Indo-Pacific that shares EU's commitment to the rule of law. EU engagement is meant to sustain the peace and stability.

Opposition towards China continues to grow and strengthen within the region as well. Japan added [Germany](#) to its list of European allies to its two-plus-two framework, joining U.K. and France. The U.K. has previously stated that its [carrier will dock in Japan](#), symbolizing closer ties. Vietnam has begun to improve its [maritime militia](#), which includes 46,000-70,000 fishermen. These fishermen partake in a range of missions, sometimes in cooperation with the Vietnamese Navy.

Analysis

China's reaction has been equally strong. [Chinese President Xi Jinping](#) made a statement saying that the world should focus on issues such as climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the post-pandemic global economic recovery. Anything other than what Chinese ships were doing across the region should be prioritized by other countries. China was quick to reassert its claims and challenged both [the Philippines](#) and [the EU](#).

The militarization in the region progresses as China continues to unlawfully assert itself. In late April, President Xi commissioned [three new vessels](#) into the Chinese Navy, which is already identified to be the [largest navy in the world](#). Among the functions of these new vessels were nuclear retaliation and island seizing. All meant to flex China's force when necessary and safeguard its illegal territorial and maritime claims. The advances in Chinese production also extend to its existing technological infrastructure. China's Sansha City serves as a base that supplies and reinforces various outposts across the South China Sea. [China's government procurement contracts](#) reveal that China plans to acquire various components from least 25 different companies around the world and utilize these items in Sansha City, the applications of which include surveillance, maritime law enforcement, vessel interception, and defense capabilities. This range of defense allows China to [drill within contested territory](#) without worry of retaliation.

The increased militarization of the region has concerned many in the Philippines, particularly President Duterte who asserted that reclaiming territory cannot come without bloodshed. Rep. Zarate previously expressed [concern with the Philippines' involvement on the Balikatan exercises](#) as tensions rise in the region, fearing that the Philippines would get stuck in the power play between the US and China. He also called on both China and U.S. to [demilitarize](#) the South China Sea, warning that the region could be a “potential flashpoint for trouble.” Former Supreme Court Justice Antonio Carpio said that amid China’s aggressive behavior, it was imperative for rival claimants in the region to [voluntarily settle](#) their disputes. He said the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia could agree to an arbitration on the Spratly Island. Justice Carpio said that no matter the outcome, the act of arbitration itself would show the world of China’s refusal to participate and increase global pressure. [Rommel Banlaoi](#), president of the Philippine Association for Chinese Studies, said that it was time for both the Philippines and China to talk and work on “lowering of tensions in the area”. He also said that the two countries can cooperate on areas of marine environmental protection and joint law enforcement cooperation.

The Filipino people’s reaction to China is not just coming from within the security sphere, but also emerging from the economic and livelihood sector. The Philippines identified Chinese maritime militia vessels within its EEZ, near [Panganiban/Mischief Reef](#), having been there since late March. Worse, fishermen from San Antonio, [Zambales](#) said that there were at least 20 Chinese vessels anchored on the international nautical highway, with the PCG unable to expel them. The presence of Chinese vessels throughout Philippine EEZs has [hampere fish catch](#), estimated at P300 million a year. Public and civil society participation can certainly add pressure on the government to prioritize actions to counter such infringements on Philippine waters. A [statement from the NTF-WPS](#) revealed that more assets have been deployed to sustain sovereignty patrols, sustain life at sea operations, and intensify operations against illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.

The desire to defend Philippine sovereignty and regional security has grown significantly in the past few months. The country is seems to be following [Vietnam’s](#) foreign policy on building strategic partnerships. In early April, Philippine Defense Secretary Lorenzana and [U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin III](#) spoke to each other on various security issues including the West Philippine Sea and the importance of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA). The show of force by the U.S. managed to produce benefits to the Philippines, increasing the chances for the VFA’s retainment. The Palace said that Congress should [amend](#) the Archipelagic Baselines Law, claiming that it weakened the Philippines’ claims in the region. Additionally, with the desire for a “credible defense”, the Philippine Navy has announced the plans to enter deals within the “submarine community”, particularly on [submarine rescue](#). This comes after the unfortunate incident of the loss of the entire crew of a [downed Indonesian submarine](#). The PCG has previously supported a “whole-of-nation” approach, a policy that has previously been attributed to the government’s anti-communist campaign. What exactly that pertains regarding the West Philippine Sea remains to be seen.

This month of April, Philippines is making good progress in confronting the threats to its sovereignty, but it can certainly do more. The Philippines can be more proactive in the region, by forging alliances with other states in the Indo-Pacific. One idea is to form [trilateral partnership](#) with other major powers such as India and Japan. Both countries can help the Philippine connect to the wider region while simultaneously strengthening the line against Chinese incursions, which they also have an experience with. Just as Japan collaborated with U.S. and Australia on [submarine communication cables](#) with the intent of countering Chinese expansion, the Philippines can do the same with its neighbors on a variety of projects. Most importantly, events and activities this month have highlighted that the retention of the VFA is a strong good step in maintaining the alliance system which will prove significant in defending Philippine sovereignty as well.