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Summary

The Philippines and the Indo-Pacific region faced major developments in the world while continuing to deal with long-standing trends in the first month of 2021. COVID-19 continues to be a grave concern. The Philippines turned to China for relief with over 25 million vaccines to be supplied. The first batch of 50,000 vaccine doses is set to be delivered in February originating from China's Sinovac Biotech.

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Maritime Developments from the U.S. and China

The Philippines and the Indo-Pacific region faced major developments in the world while continuing to deal with long-standing trends in the first month of 2021.

COVID-19 continues to be a grave concern. The Philippines turned to China for relief with over 25 million vaccines to be supplied. The first batch of 50,000 vaccine doses is set to be delivered in February originating from China's Sinovac Biotech. Vaccine czar Carlito Galvez has [praised this](#) and stressed that in a period of a global pandemic, it essential to care for people; adding that issues such as the disputes in the West Philippine Sea should be set aside for the "global commons". [Senator Risa Hontiveros took issue with this](#). She asked Galvez for reassurance that in pursuing vaccine diplomacy, the national interests of the Philippines were not being conceded. This prompted the vaccine czar to say that the government was not compromising its claims in the West Philippine Sea.

The senator was not alone in addressing concerns of national sovereignty. On New Year's Day, a Chinese military transport plane was reported to be at Kagitingan Reef in the West Philippine Sea. The transport was said to test plane equipment and possibly deliver personnel and supplies. University of the Philippines' maritime expert Dr. Jay Batongbacal [warned](#) that despite being the farthest Chinese made reef from the Philippines, a fully operational airbase on the reef would place major installations in the country within striking distance of a Chinese attack. A few days later, an NGO called the Pinoy Aksyon for Governance and the Environment (PAGE) wrote a [letter](#) to Senator Richard Gordon, chair of the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee, over an allegation that the Grande and Chiquita Islands (off Subic Bay) and Fuga Island (Cagayan) were being sold to a Chinese company for development. PAGE called on Senator Gordon to investigate the Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority and the Cagayan Economic Zone Authority on the deals.

Despite all these, Chinese ambassador Huang Xilian reaffirmed China's commitment to friendly relations with the Philippines. [In an exclusive interview](#), Amb. Huang spoke of three key messages: anti-pandemic efforts, post-pandemic economic recovery, and safeguarding sovereignty. All interconnected issues. He also spoke on how the

issues in the South China Sea do not represent the totality of the relationship between the two countries. Beijing, the ambassador said, is committed to safeguarding the national sovereignty and dignity of the Philippines.

A few days after that reassurance, China passed its new [Coast Guard Law](#) on January 22nd. The law authorizes China's Coast Guard to use lethal force—exact wording was “all necessary means”—to stop or prevent a threat from foreign vessels. China's foreign ministry defended the bill to be within the standards of international law.

The new law caused controversy and garnered condemnation around the world. Former Supreme Court Justice Antonio Carpio likened it to a [“legal virus.”](#) He said that such law destroys any hope that the ASEAN Code of Conduct can bring peace to the disputed territories. Other major officials in the Philippines also voiced their opposition. Foreign Affairs Secretary Teddy Locsin Jr. filed a [diplomatic protest](#). Senators Richard Gordon and Francis Tolentino expressed outrage and [demanded China to explain](#). Senator Tolentino and Dr. Batongbacal called on the Philippines and other ASEAN states to [unite against the law](#) and issue a joint protest before the United Nations. The ASEAN has yet to make any official statement on the matter.

Following China's passing of the Coast Guard Law, the Philippines experienced regular incursions into its exclusive economic zones by various Chinese vessels. Some of these are as follows. A fisherman narrated how he was [barred from entering a sandbar near Pag-asa Island](#) on the 25th by a Chinese Coast Guard vessel accompanied by at least seven other vessels. A Chinese dredger, [the Zhonhai 68](#), was spotted off the coast of Orion Point, Bataan on the 27th with its automatic identification system transponder turned off. Finally, a Chinese research vessel, the [Jia Gen](#), was spotted off the coast of Bato, Catanduanes on the 28th, arriving without government authorization three days beforehand. The Jia Gen is the same survey ship that was spotted in September 2020.

The Philippines was not alone in experiencing repeated Chinese incursions in January. China began the new year by asserting itself into Taiwan's air defense identification zone the same day that Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen [expressed](#) her administration's willingness to engage in dialogue with China. [This trend intensified to eight confirmed incursions over twelve days since New Year's](#). By the end of January, there were 27 days of confirmed incursions by Chinese aircraft. Two of which occurred after the passing of the Chinese Coast Guard Law and were described as particularly [“large incursions”](#) due to the increase in numbers and the inclusion of bombers.

The new U.S. administration under President Joe Biden was quick to reassure its allies of its support in the event of an attack. Members of President Biden's staff and the president himself [reassured their counterparts in Japan](#) that the Senkaku Islands fell under the scope of their 1960 Security Treaty. Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Locsin likewise [received similar reassurance](#) from the U.S. Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana [expressed optimism](#) at the new U.S. administration.

Nearly a week after passing the new Coast Guard Law, China threatened Taiwan that any serious call for [independence “means war.”](#) The U.S. reaffirmed its commitment to Taiwan's defense and Taiwan urged China not to underestimate it.

Analysis

As demonstrated in the campaign against the COVID-19 pandemic and in terms of securing national sovereignty, the Philippines and other states in the Indo-Pacific region continue to face China as a major challenge in the conduct of foreign and maritime policy. Various experts have warned against China's use of vaccine diplomacy and its support for the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea that may be used to advance China's regional agenda. China's actions in January 2021 have done nothing to contradict those [warnings](#). This has become more evident with the passing of the new Coast Guard Law. Three separate incursions in the Philippines' EEZ within a week and the greater show of force in Taiwan's ADIZ for two consecutive days alongside a threat of war are proof of China's growing assertiveness.

Recent events have shown how severely lacking the Philippines is in terms of maritime enforcement. This is all the more evident if we take into account China's expanded reach with its bases in the South China Sea and [the](#)

development of new aircraft carriers with electromagnetic catapults. The inability of the Philippines to properly reinforce its maritime borders is only exacerbated by the new Coast Guard Law. Any confrontation between the Philippines and China could lead a violent result.

But there is some small comfort. The Indo-Pacific was reassured of US' commitment and involvement under President Biden. Alongside Japan and Taiwan, the Philippines received confirmation from the new administration's support in the event of an attack. Some officials have even expressed their support for former President Trump's "[tougher approach to China](#)." The Philippines can have confidence in its ally's support, provided there are no back-and-forth pronouncements as what happened with the Visiting Forces Agreement last year.

In the maritime arena, a clear and firm stance by the Philippine government would be beneficial to the national security in the same manner as many have called ASEAN member states to collectively denounce and protest the Chinese Coast Guard Law. Various sectors of Philippine society have made their voices heard over the course of the month. From NGO groups like PAGE to fisherfolk groups such as the *Pambansang Lakas ng Kilusang Mamalakaya* (which [called on authorities](#) to punish the Zhonhai 68), to members of the academe, and to members of the Senate, Filipinos across the political spectrum have been unified in the defense of national sovereignty and the desire for a cessation of Chinese incursions. Despite the current predicament of COVID cases in the country, the national government should be careful and mindful not to let China's vaccine diplomacy affect its responsibility to preserve territorial sovereignty.