

Asia maritime tensions

Philippines secretly reinforces ship at centre of South China Sea dispute

The Sierra Madre has become the most dangerous flashpoint in the Indo-Pacific



The Sierra Madre was run aground on the disputed Second Thomas Shoal by the Philippines in 1999 to help reinforce its claim to the reef, over which China also asserts sovereignty © Bullit Marquez/AP

Demetri Sevastopulo in Washington 3 HOURS AGO

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The Philippines has secretly reinforced a dilapidated warship marooned on a South China Sea reef that is central to an increasingly dangerous dispute with Beijing, according to six people familiar with the operation.

In recent months, the Philippine military has conducted missions to reinforce the Sierra Madre, which is lodged on the disputed Second Thomas Shoal in the Spratly Islands, the people said. It did so due to rising concern that the rusting ship was in danger of breaking apart.

The [Philippines](#) ran the Sierra Madre aground in 1999 to help reinforce its claim to the reef, over which China also asserts sovereignty as part of an expansive claim — opposed by its neighbours — over most of the South China Sea.

An international tribunal in 2016 rejected Beijing's claims to the region and said it had no legal rights to the Second Thomas Shoal, which lies inside the Philippine exclusive economic zone.

EXCLUSIVE ECONOMIC ZONE.

The Sierra Madre has become the most dangerous flashpoint in the Indo-Pacific. In recent months, China's coast guard has used [increasingly violent tactics](#) — firing water cannons, ramming boats and wielding weapons — to block Manila from resupplying Marines who are stationed on the ship.

Manila accused Beijing of conducting a “brutal assault” on Monday that was the most aggressive action at the Second Thomas Shoal since China started interrupting supply missions a year ago. Washington responded by warning Beijing that the US-Philippines mutual defence treaty applied to the Sierra Madre.

The Philippines insists its missions are sending humanitarian supplies to the site. But China accuses Manila of bringing construction materials to reinforce the ship and prevent it from breaking apart and coming off the reef — which Manila denies.

In an interview, Jose Manuel Romualdez, the Philippine ambassador to the US, said Manila was not “strengthening” the ship. “This is a shipwreck, a world war two ship that’s been there since the 1990s, so it needs repair. We’re just doing a humanitarian act of giving these people a decent place to be in because they’re stationed there.”

However, the people familiar with the situation said Manila had secretly reinforced the ship in ways that would extend its life.





“Beijing is probably aware and infuriated that the Philippines has successfully delivered construction materials . . . China has waited 25 years for the ship to disintegrate and slide off the reef and continued escalation against the Philippines suggests that they will not back down and admit defeat,” said Bonnie Glaser, a China expert at the German Marshall Fund.

“The potential for an armed conflict over this tiny, submerged feature is increasing.”

Underscoring the increasingly tense situation around the reef, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr last month warned that he would consider any Chinese action that killed a Filipino as being “very close to . . . [an act of war](#)”.

Zack Cooper, an Asia security expert at the American Enterprise Institute think-tank, said the US and Philippines were “inching closer” to invoking Article V of their mutual defence treaty, which would require them to “meet the common danger”.

“This is no small thing. In Nato, for example, Article V has only been invoked once, in response to the September 11 2001 terror attacks,” said Cooper.

“I suspect that the only way to deter these dangerous actions in the future will be more direct involvement. This could take the form of sailing or flying US assets nearby during Philippine resupply operations, or if China continues to be reckless, US forces could directly assist with resupply operations,” he added.

The US military has already drafted some options. The US Indo-Pacific Command last year proposed sending army engineers to bolster the ship, according to several people.

But the proposal was rejected because some officials viewed it as too risky and because Manila wanted to handle the situation. Indo-Pacific Command and the White House did not comment.

“If some effort was made by the Philippines to secure the Sierra Madre and ensure it cannot easily come off the reef, that would be a bold move to protect Filipino sovereignty and one that Washington was likely not only aware of but also supportive of,” said Eric Sayers, a former adviser to the Indo-Pacific commander.

China’s foreign ministry said on Friday that the Financial Times report had “once

again confirmed” that the Philippines’ claim to only be resupplying the Sierra Madre with supplies for daily life was “a complete lie”.

“The Philippines has been transporting construction materials, and even weapons and ammunition, to their illegally grounded warship, attempting large-scale repairs and reinforcement to achieve permanent occupation,” a ministry spokesperson said.

“The actions of the Philippines seriously infringe upon China’s sovereignty, which China will not accept and will respond to resolutely in accordance with the law and regulations,” he said.

Additional reporting by Wenjie Ding in Beijing

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