

Asia maritime tensions

Indonesia says it drove Chinese coastguard ships out of disputed waters

Beijing's sweeping maritime claims and muscular enforcement actions have been creating friction in South China Sea



China's coastguard has frequently clashed with rival claimant states in the South China Sea in recent years © Jam Sta Rosa/AFP/Getty Images

Kathrin Hille in Taipei 10 HOURS AGO

China's coastguard has entered a stand-off with its Indonesian counterpart in the southernmost reaches of the South China Sea as it attempts to enforce Beijing's expansive territorial claims.

Indonesia's Maritime Safety Agency, or Bakamla, on Thursday said it had for the second time this week driven Chinese coastguard ships out of waters under Indonesian jurisdiction, where the vessels had been disrupting resource survey work.

The agency on Wednesday said two days earlier it "expelled" a Chinese coastguard vessel from waters north of Indonesia's Natuna islands near the Norwegian-flagged vessel Geo Coral, which is prospecting for Jakarta's state-owned energy company Pertamina in the gas-rich waters. According to ship tracking data, the vessel, China Coast Guard 5402, later returned to the area.

There were no indications of violence in the incidents. But the Chinese patrol in waters in which [Indonesia](#) has exclusive economic rights under international law shows how Beijing's sovereignty claims over almost all of the South China Sea, and its increasingly muscular enforcement efforts, are creating friction with coastal states in the region.

Chinese coastguard ships have frequently and violently clashed with the Philippines over the past two years as they have tried to [obstruct Manila's resupply missions](#) to military outposts or patrols of reefs within its exclusive economic zone.

Manila has tried to counter Beijing's actions by publicising the incidents. While other coastal states have been more muted in handling disputes with China, they have faced similar coercion. Several Vietnamese fishermen were [severely injured in an attack](#) this month by Chinese maritime law enforcement officials.

Indonesia is not a claimant to South China Sea islands or reefs outside its exclusive economic zone, in contrast to Vietnam and the Philippines. But an apparent overlap between Indonesia's exclusive economic zone and the nine-dash line that China uses to delineate its sweeping claims in the South China Sea has repeatedly led to disputes over fishing and drilling.

China's foreign ministry on Thursday called the coastguard ship's movements routine patrols in waters under Chinese jurisdiction. A spokesperson said Beijing was willing to enhance consultation with Indonesia and "appropriately handle maritime differences".

[China](#) in 2015 acknowledged Indonesian sovereignty over the Natuna islands. But the next year, its coastguard forcibly recovered a Chinese vessel from an Indonesian coastguard ship that had seized it for illegal fishing.

In 2021, China started sending law enforcement and maritime survey ships into waters under Indonesian and Malaysian jurisdiction after drilling started there for new oil and gas projects.

Chinese government vessels have kept up almost constant patrols near Luconia Shoals, a cluster of reefs just off the coast of Sarawak, a Malaysian state on the island of Borneo.

The current stand-off began on October 17 with the arrival of a Chinese coastguard ship near the Geo Coral, which has since been taking turns with a fellow vessel patrolling in the vicinity. Jakarta has been shadowing it with coastguard ships, backed by maritime surveillance aircraft and a naval vessel.

A video that Bakamla published on YouTube on Wednesday showed an Indonesian coastguard ship shadowing a Chinese vessel two days earlier. Indonesian officers could be heard telling China Coast Guard 5402 over radio that it was in waters under Indonesian jurisdiction and asking about its intentions.

The Chinese vessel broadcast back, claiming the Indonesian ship was in waters under Chinese jurisdiction. “China has indisputable sovereignty over the islands of the South China Sea and adjacent waters,” the broadcast said. It also claimed Chinese rights to everything including the seabed and the subsoil of those waters.

Bakamla said it would “continue to conduct intensive patrols and monitoring in the waters of north Natuna to ensure that seismic survey activities run without interference and to maintain Indonesia’s sovereignty and sovereign rights”.

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