

Asia maritime tensions

Beijing's flag-planting in South China Sea revives tensions with Manila

Philippines sends forces to Sandy Cay in response to latest Chinese moves in Spratly Islands



An aerial view of Sandy Cay taken on March 21 2024. Sandy Cay has strategic value because its categorisation as a rock could allow the nation controlling it to claim a territorial sea around it © Philippine Coast Guard/AFP/Getty Images

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China's move to proclaim sovereignty over a disputed reef in the South China Sea has triggered a new stand-off with the Philippines, raising tensions between the two rival claimants on the eve of US-Philippine military drills nearby.

The Philippines sent navy, coastguard and maritime police officers to Sandy Cay and two neighbouring sandbanks in the Spratly Islands on Sunday to “uphold the country's sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction” and displayed the national flag there, according to a [statement](#) published on X.

The move came a day after China said it had “implemented maritime control and exercised sovereign jurisdiction” over the reef by [showing its own flag](#) there — the first such official declaration of sovereignty on or near a land feature in the disputed waters in at least a decade.

The row over Sandy Cay comes as Philippine and American troops are due to begin [coastal defence and island seizure drills](#) on the Philippine territory closest to the Spratlys on Monday.

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Although just a sand bank measuring little more than 200 sq m, Sandy Cay has strategic value because its categorisation as a rock could allow the nation controlling it to claim a territorial sea around it. That 12-nautical-mile radius would overlap with Thitu Island, the [Philippines](#)' most important military foothold in the area.



The White House said on Saturday that the reports of [China](#) seizing Sandy Cay were “deeply concerning if true”. James Hewitt, National Security Council spokesperson, said: “Actions like these threaten regional stability and violate international law.”

China claims the South China Sea almost in its entirety, but the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in 2016 [ruled](#) this was inconsistent with international law. The Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei all claim part of the strategically located sea and some islands and reefs in it.

But Beijing has clashed most frequently with the Philippines since Manila resumed asserting its maritime rights after President Ferdinand Marcos Jr took office in June 2022.

Beijing outmuscles all rival claimants because it has the [world's largest coastguard](#) and maritime militia and has built military bases with missiles, radars and air force

assets on a number of artificial islands in the area.

Sandy Cay is one of four reefs where Manila has suspected China of planning land reclamation works followed by further militarisation.

The China Coast Guard said on Sunday that its law enforcement officers had landed on Sandy Cay on Sunday to investigate and “handle” what it called “illegal” acts of the Philippine officials.

Neither side reported a direct engagement. Footage published by the Philippine Coast Guard showed no Chinese presence on the reef. But according to the Philippine Coast Guard statement and ship tracking data reviewed by the Financial Times, a Chinese coastguard ship and several Chinese maritime militia vessels continue to loiter around it.

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