

Asia maritime tensions**China steps up claims over sea east of Taiwan**

Beijing argues Japan-Philippines talks on maritime boundaries violate international law as it ramps up pressure on Taipei



A Chinese coastguard ship during a military drill off the coast of China's Fujian province near the Taiwan-controlled Matsu Islands © Thomas Peter/Reuters

Joe Leahy in Beijing

Published 4 HOURS AGO | Updated 06:46

China has stepped up efforts to assert claims over the waters east of Taiwan, arguing that talks between Japan and the Philippines to delimit their maritime boundaries in the area without involving Beijing are illegal.

A legal opinion issued this week by the China Institute for Marine Affairs said that a bilateral agreement between Japan and the Philippines in May to begin negotiations was “undertaken without consultation with China” and “violates international law”.

The Japanese and the Philippine maritime claims include overlapping exclusive economic zones (EEZs) east of Taiwan. Beijing claims Taiwan as its territory and has threatened to take it by force.

“Japan and the Philippines should immediately cease their pursuit of bilateral delimitation and actively engage in negotiations with China,” said the institute, which is administered by China’s Ministry of Natural Resources.

The statement followed increased activity by China’s coastguard this month, as well as radio warnings this week to Japanese research vessels to cease operations near the Tokyo-administered Senkaku Islands, which lie north-east of Taiwan and are claimed by Beijing.

China’s military has also stepped up drills around Taiwan, including in its eastern waters, raising concerns about rehearsals for a potential blockade as well as disruption to important shipping lanes.

Taiwan has insisted that China has “no right to comment” on issues affecting its territory and waters, and has commended Japan and the Philippines for “working to resolve maritime differences through peaceful dialogue and based on respect for international law”.

The seas around Taiwan host numerous EEZs

Exclusive economic zones claimed by Japan, Philippines, China and Taiwan

☐ Japan
 ☐ Philippines
 ☐ China
 ☐ Taiwan
 ☐ China's 10-dash line*



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Source: [AMTI](#), [CSIS](#), Tianditu, FT research • *China's claims to the South China Sea are disputed by the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia and Brunei and were rejected by a 2016 international arbitration tribunal

Manila and Tokyo said the talks were aimed at enhancing legal certainty in the region and would be conducted “in accordance with international law”.

But Beijing paints the talks as a provocation. Last month, it launched a “special maritime traffic enforcement operation”, sending its coastguard ships into the area east of Taiwan — the first time they have been deployed in this manner in those seas.

The talks between Japan and the Philippines were intended to put pressure on China, which has staked extensive claims throughout the East and South China seas, said William Yang, senior analyst for north-east Asia at the Crisis Group.

In 2024, Manila and Tokyo signed a reciprocal access agreement that allows their militaries to train and conduct exercises in each other's countries, a move also designed to boost deterrence against China.

But Yang added that China was using the EEZ talks "as an opening to further expand its "law enforcement operations" and to strengthen [its] claims over Taiwan".

Japan's foreign ministry and the Philippines' presidential office did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

In a rare joint statement, the UK, Germany and France expressed alarm over the Chinese coastguard activities east of Taiwan. The US also issued a statement through its local representative office, but it was relatively restrained compared with previous administrations, said Yang.

China said the patrol inspected 198 vessels passing through the area and "rectified violations" with three ships. It also conducted other activities, such as carrying out a hydrographic survey and patrolling near undersea cables.

It said the patrols were "entirely justified and necessary, and constitute legitimate actions to safeguard national sovereignty".

Beijing's increasingly assertive stance comes after US President Donald Trump raised the possibility of using arms sales to Taipei as a bargaining chip in negotiations with Beijing, sparking concerns over the US security guarantee for Taiwan's self-defence.

The Trump administration last year announced a record \$11.1bn arms sale to Taiwan, but a further \$14bn package is still awaiting approval.

Trump also agreed with Chinese President Xi Jinping at a summit in Beijing in May that the two superpowers should pursue a policy of "strategic stability".

“The mixed signals that China sees from Washington’s side are creating a window of opportunity for them to expand their claims,” Yang said.

Additional reporting by Leo Lewis in Tokyo and A Anantha Lakshmi in Jakarta. Cartography by Haohsiang Ko in Hong Kong

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