

This Week in Asia / Politics

# South China Sea: Philippines alarmed by 200 Chinese vessels at Mischief Reef, Marcos urges dialogue

Sunday 4 February 2024, by [SCMP's Asia desk](#) (Date first published: 31 January 2024).

- **The Chinese warships and maritime militia boats spotted around Mischief Reef are near the Philippine-occupied Second Thomas Shoal**
- **Manila says Beijing's naval presence would not deter the Philippine military from supporting its personnel patrolling the South China Sea**

*Chinese structures and buildings at Mischief Reef in the South China Sea on March 20, 2022. Photo: AP*

The Philippine navy has expressed alarm over the growing presence of Chinese warships and maritime militia boats around Mischief Reef in the disputed [South China Sea](#), as President [Ferdinand Marcos Jr](#) vowed to protect the country's sovereignty and called for dialogue with Beijing.

Navy spokesman Roy Vincent Trinidad said about 200 vessels, including coastguard fleets, were swarming the outcrop some 37km away from Second Thomas Shoal, where Filipino troops are stationed on a rusty old warship.

[The Philippines](#) grounded the BRP Sierra Madre in 1999 to reinforce its claim to Second Thomas Shoal, which it calls Ayungin.

The Mischief Reef has been under [China](#)'s control since 1995 and hosts a military base.

Trinidad said every now and then, the Chinese vessels would be deployed to different parts of the resource-rich waterway.

"So a lot of these are under the [Chinese navy's] South Sea Fleet. It's their grey ships," he said on Tuesday, adding their presence was "consistent throughout the past years".

Trinidad also said the rising stream of militia vessels could pose a threat to Philippine troops.

"What we are really concerned about is their actions towards our own troops," he said.

He said Beijing's naval presence would not deter the Philippine military from supporting its personnel patrolling the hotly-contested sea, where it has in the past accused the Chinese coastguard of confronting Philippine ships including firing water cannons at them.

Trinidad's comments came as Marcos asserted that he would "remain firm in defending our sovereignty and jurisdiction against any provocations", the Philippine Daily Inquirer reported.

"But at the same time, we are also seeking to address these issues with China through peaceful dialogue and consultations as two equal sovereign states," Marcos told his Vietnamese counterpart Vo Van Thuong as he concluded a two-day state visit to Hanoi.

The Philippines and [Vietnam](#) also signed pacts to manage incidents in the South China Sea and start a communication link between their coastguards.

Marcos maintained he considered the United States and China as "key actors in maintaining peace and security, as well as economic growth and development of the region".

He added Manila would continue to deepen military ties with Washington amid accusations from Beijing that the Southeast Asian nation was letting foreign powers meddle in the South China Sea.

Beijing claims sovereignty over almost the entirety of the South China Sea - where the Philippines and several other nations have competing claims - and has rejected a 2016 international ruling that ruled in favour of Manila and found China's assertions have no legal basis.

Meanwhile, the Philippine military said April's annual Balikatan exercises with US troops will be "bigger", involving more drills in key bases across the country, including islands facing Taiwan.

More than 17,000 defence personnel took part in the joint war games last year.

**SCMP's Asia desk**

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