

TROUBLED WATERS: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON THE CHINA-PHILIPPINES TENSIONS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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September 30, 2023 12:10 am | Updated 12:10 am IST

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The [move by the Philippines to remove a 300-metre floating barrier](#) installed by China near the disputed Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea and Beijing's warning to Manila asking it "not to stir up trouble" underscore how delicate the situation is in one of the world's busiest waters. Tensions were high between China, which claims much of the South China Sea, including areas away from its coast, and a more assertive Philippines in recent months. Manila has repeatedly accused Beijing of blocking its shipping vessels in and around the Scarborough Shoal, a triangular reef encircling a resource-rich lagoon that China seized from the Philippines in 2012. When the Philippines realised that China's forces were setting up a barrier blocking Filipino fishermen from getting closer to the reef — it was fully accessible until 2012 — President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. ordered its removal at the risk of inflaming tensions with Beijing. The Philippines sent Coast Guard crew in a boat to the Shoal, who dived and cut the rope that anchored the buoy line. Malaysia and Indonesia, which also have disputes with China, have sent vessels to the disputed waters for survey at various times this year. Manila's action underscores the trend of smaller countries in the region trying to be more assertive in their maritime claims as China tightens its hold over the South China Sea.

Under Rodrigo Duterte, the former President, the Philippines tried to play down its tensions with China, even though Manila got a favourable ruling from an international tribunal in 2016 over Beijing's claims in the South China Sea. However, Mr. Marcos Jr., who assumed office in June last year, has taken a different approach. His administration has named and shamed China's high-handedness even as it has strengthened defence and strategic ties with Washington, its former colonial master. In February, the countries announced a defence cooperation agreement, which provides the U.S. access to nine Philippine bases, from the previous five. In April, the Philippines hosted its largest joint military exercises with the U.S. Enhanced cooperation with the U.S., with assurances from Washington that the mutual defence treaty "extends to Philippine public vessels, aircraft, armed forces and the Coast Guard", seems to have emboldened Manila in its disputes with Beijing. But such actions carry risks, which could lead to tensions spiralling out of control. The U.S. and its Pacific allies might get dragged into a conflict between China and the Philippines, potentially turning the South China Sea into a battle theatre, which is in nobody's interest. Both China and the Philippines should be mindful of the risks that their actions pose to the world and be ready to engage in talks and establish guardrails, ensuring stability in their volatile relationship.

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