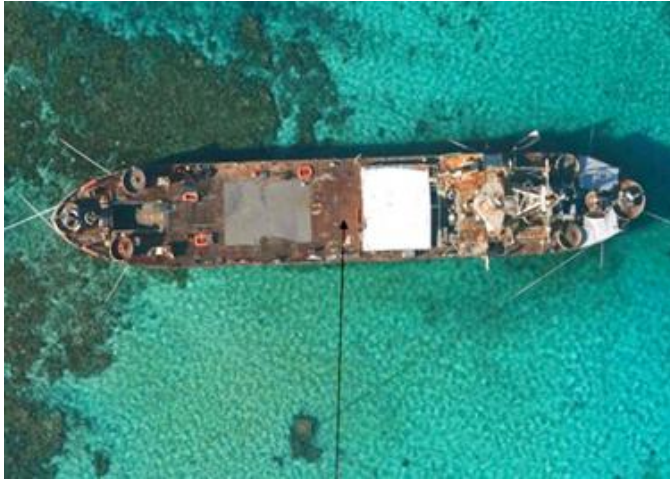


Philippines vows to defend against China

Written by Taipei Times
Friday, 24 May 2013 08:39 -



An undated handout photograph released by the Philippine military Western Command (WESCOM) yesterday shows an aerial view of BRP Sierra Madre, a 100m amphibious vessel built for the US in 1944 and acquired by the Philippine Navy in 1976, grounded at Second Thomas Shoal in the Spratly Islands.

PHOTO: AFP

The Philippines vowed yesterday to fight China “to the last man standing,” as a Chinese warship patrolled around a remote reef occupied by a handful of Philippine Marines in disputed waters.

In the latest flare-up over competing claims to parts of the South China Sea, the Philippines this week denounced the “provocative and illegal presence” of the warship and a fleet of Chinese fishing vessels near the Second Thomas Shoal.

After China brushed off the protest and insisted it owned the tiny reef and islets, which are home to rich fishing grounds, the Philippines yesterday ramped up the rhetoric against its much more powerful rival.

“To the last soldier standing, we will fight for what is ours,” Philippine Secretary of Defense Voltaire Gazmin told reporters when asked if the Philippines would bow to Chinese intimidation and pull its forces from the shoal.

However, Gazmin said the Philippines was not intending to send any military reinforcements to the area, and that there had been no confrontations between the two sides at the shoal since the Chinese vessels arrived early this month.

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Second Thomas Shoal is one of nine Philippine-occupied islands or islets in the Spratly Islands (Nansha Islands, 南沙群岛), which Taiwan also claims.

It lies about 200km northwest of the Philippine island of Palawan, the nearest major landmass, and more than 1,000km from China's Hainan Island.

The shoal is guarded by a handful of Philippine Marines, believed to number fewer than 10, aboard a World War II-era ship that was deliberately grounded there in the late 1990s to serve as a base.

China says it has sovereign rights over nearly all of the South China Sea, even waters far away from its main landmass and approaching the coasts of Southeast Asian countries.

Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei also claim parts of the sea, and the area has for decades been regarded as a potential trigger for major military conflict in the region.

All claimants, except Brunei, have troops stationed on various islands and atolls in the Spratlys — the biggest archipelago in the sea — to assert their claims.

Regional tensions have escalated in recent years as China has taken more aggressive steps to assert its claims to the sea, which is believed to sit atop vast reserves of oil and gas worth billions of US dollars.

China has established a new city to oversee the area and deployed navy vessels on wide-ranging patrols of the sea, with its ships reaching as far as 80km from Malaysia.

China last year also took control of the Scarborough Shoal, known as Huangyan Island (黄岩岛) in China and Taiwan, which both claim it. Another bountiful fishing area far closer to the

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Philippine landmass than China's, after a stand-off between vessels from both nations ended with the Philippines retreating.

Second Thomas Shoal is 40km east of Mischief Reef (Meiji Reef, 美济礁), a Philippine-claimed outcrop China has occupied since 1995.

Second Thomas Shoal and Mischief Reef are within the Philippines' internationally recognized exclusive economic zone.

"They should not be there. They do not have the right to be there," Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs spokesman Raul Hernandez said via text message yesterday when asked about the Chinese presence at Second Thomas Shoal. "No one should doubt the resolve of the Filipino people to defend what is ours in that area."

Philippine President Benigno Aquino III on Tuesday announced a planned US\$1.8 billion military upgrade to defend the country's maritime territory against "bullies."

However, China's announced defense budget of US\$115 billion this year is nearly 100 times that of the Philippines.

Source: [Taipei Times - 2013/05/24](#)