

## International

# Philippines accuses Chinese vessels of firing water cannon at its boats

**MANILA:** The Philippines yesterday accused Chinese Coast Guard vessels of firing water cannon at boats delivering supplies to Filipino marines in the disputed South China Sea, and ordered Beijing to “back off”. Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin said he had expressed “outrage, condemnation and protest” to Beijing over the incident, which he said happened Tuesday as the Philippine boats were travelling to Second Thomas Shoal in the contested Spratly Islands.

“Fortunately, no one was hurt; but our boats had to abort their resupply mission,” Locsin said in a statement on Twitter, describing the three Chinese vessels’ actions as “illegal”. Locsin described the Philippine boats as “public”, suggesting they were civilian vessels, and said they were covered by a mutual defence pact with the United States. “China has no law enforcement rights in and around these areas,” he added. “They must take heed and back off.”

China’s foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said two Filipino supply boats entered waters near the shoal “without China’s consent” and its coast guard acted lawfully to “safeguard China’s sovereignty”. “Currently, the area around the Second Thomas Shoal is generally peaceful, and China and the Philippines are maintaining communication on this,” Zhao said, without confirming if water cannons had been used.

Tensions over the resource-rich seas spiked this year after hundreds of Chinese vessels were detected at Whitsun Reef, which is also in the Spratly archipelago. China claims almost all of

the sea, through which trillions of dollars in trade passes annually, with competing claims from Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam. The contested waters also have valuable fishing grounds and are believed to sit atop vast oil and gas deposits. Beijing has ignored a 2016 ruling by The Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration that its historical claim over most of the sea to be without basis.

### ‘We do not ask permission’

China controls several reefs in the South China Sea including Scarborough Shoal—which Beijing seized from Manila in 2012 — and is just 240 kilometres (150 miles) west of the main Philippine island of Luzon. It has asserted its stance by building up small shoals and reefs into military bases with airstrips and port facilities.

After China occupied Mischief Reef in the mid-1990s, the Philippines marooned a derelict navy vessel atop the nearby Second Thomas Shoal to assert Manila’s territorial claim. Members of the Philippine Marines are based there.

Locsin said the shoal was within the Philippines’ Exclusive Economic Zone, and warned China’s “failure to exercise self-restraint threatens the special relationship” between the two countries. “We do not ask permission to do what we need to do in our territory,” he said.

Outgoing President Rodrigo Duterte has sought to pivot away from the United States, the Philippines’ former colonial master, towards China since taking power in 2016 and has ap-



**AT SEA, PHILIPPINES:** File photo shows a China Coast Guard ship (top) and a Philippine supply boat engaging in a stand off as the Philippine boat attempts to reach the Second Thomas Shoal, a remote South China Sea a reef claimed by both countries. —AFP

peared reluctant to confront Beijing.

But facing growing domestic pressure to take a harder line, Duterte has insisted Philippine sovereignty over the waters is not negotiable. Cabinet Secretary Karlo Nograles said Thursday: “We will continue to assert our sovereignty... over our territory.”

In July, Duterte walked back on a decision to

axe a key military deal—the Visiting Forces Agreement—with the United States during a visit by Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin. In a joint statement issued this week, the two countries reaffirmed “our treaty commitments” that include “obligations to respond to an armed attack in the Pacific Area on either the United States or the Philippines.” —AFP

## Taiwan opens Lithuania representative office using its own name

**TAIPEI:** Taipei announced yesterday it had formally opened a representative office in Lithuania under the name of Taiwan, a significant diplomatic departure that China had previously condemned. “The Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania officially commences its operation in Vilnius on November 18, 2021,” the foreign ministry said, breaking with the island’s tradition of calling such de facto embassies Taipei Economic and Cultural Offices.

Lithuania in July agreed to let Taiwan open a representative office using that title. The move prompted a pressure campaign by China, which seeks to isolate the self-governing democratic island on the international stage.

Beijing withdrew its ambassador to Lithuania and demanded Vilnius do the same, which it eventually did. China also halted freight trains to Lithuania and stopped issuing food export permits. Only 15 countries officially recognise Taipei over Beijing, which claims the self-ruled democratic island as part of its territory and has vowed to one day retake it-by force if needed.

But Taiwan maintains de facto embassies with many nations via its representative offices and several countries have similar arrangements in Taipei. Beijing tries to keep Taipei isolated on the world stage and balks at any official use of the word “Taiwan” lest it lend the island a sense of international legitimacy. — AFP

## Taiwan deploys first advanced F-16V fighter squadron

**CHIAYI CITY, Taiwan:** Taiwan held a ceremony yesterday to commission the first squadron of its most advanced F-16 fighter, a US-made jet that will strengthen the island’s defences against threats by China. President Tsai Ing-wen oversaw the ceremony at an air base in the southern city of Chiayi alongside Sandra Oudkirk, Washington’s de facto ambassador to Taiwan.

“This represents the steadfast promise of the Taiwan-US partnership,” Tsai said. “I trust that in holding fast to democratic values, there will definitely be more countries with similar values who will stand with us on this front.”

The F-16V is an upgraded and much more sophisticated version of Taiwan’s other ageing F-16 fighters which date back to the 1990s. The island also has French-made Mirage jets and its own indigenous warplane. A fourth-generation multi-role fighter, the F-16V boasts more advanced radar systems as well as more sophisticated weaponry, navigation and electronic warfare systems.

It is however less advanced than fifth-generation fighters like China’s J-20, Russia’s Su-57 as well as the US-made F-22 and F-35 warplanes. Taiwan is in the middle of upgrading 141 older F-16s to make them the V version and has also ordered 66 new F-16Vs.

The deployment of the first squadron comes at a time of

soaring tensions between Beijing and Washington over Taiwan’s fate. The self-ruled democracy of 23 million is claimed by Beijing which has vowed to one day take the island, by force if needs.

The ceremony prompted a fiery response from Beijing at a press briefing, with an official saying “China opposes any official contact between the US and Taiwan”. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian urged the United States not to send “wrong signals to separatist forces”, adding that those supporting Taiwan’s independence “have spared no effort to split the motherland and collude with foreign forces”.

“Their actions are akin to throwing an egg against a rock,” he said. Chinese sabre-rattling has reached new heights under President Xi Jinping with Beijing sending record numbers of warplanes routinely crossing into Taiwan’s air defence zone and state media regularly publicising invasion drills.

In the last decade, China has built up its military to the point where Taiwanese and US military officials have publicly voiced fears it could soon pull off an invasion. Washington diplomatically recognises Beijing over Taiwan.

But it opposes any attempt to change Taiwan’s status by force and is bound by an act of Congress to help the island maintain its own defences. The F-16V deal was approved by the administration of Donald Trump as he feuded with China on a host of issues but his successor Joe Biden has maintained similar support for Taipei.

Maintaining Taiwan’s defences has become a rare bipartisan issue in Washington. China has lambasted military sales to Taiwan and imposed sanctions on US arms giants such as Boeing, Raytheon and Lockheed Martin in response. — AFP