



Beware militarisation in the South China Sea

2 MONTHS AGO

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The world must be more vigilant as rival claimants flex muscles in disputed areas.



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The recent visit by Taiwan's ocean affairs minister to Itu Aba — also known as Taiping Island — may appear, at first glance, to be a routine inspection tied to humanitarian rescue and medical evacuation drills.

Yet, beneath this ostensibly benign exercise lies a deeper and far more consequential reality: the South China Sea is steadily, almost imperceptibly, undergoing militarisation at multiple levels and by multiple actors.

Itu Aba is not just any outpost. It is the largest naturally occurring feature in the Spratly Islands and is claimed not only by Taiwan, but also by China, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

Its strategic value is immense. With an airstrip, fresh water sources, and the capacity to support sustained human presence, Itu Aba represents a critical node in the broader contest for maritime influence.

The problem is not the exercise per se.

States have every right to conduct humanitarian and disaster relief drills, especially in a region prone to typhoons, maritime accidents, and ecological risks.

The concern, however, is how such activities — when layered with armed interception scenarios, coast guard deployments, and overlapping sovereignty claims — gradually blur the line between civilian preparedness and military signalling.

This is the essence of “creeping militarisation”. It does not arrive with a dramatic declaration of war or a sudden clash of arms.

Instead, it unfolds through incremental actions: a longer runway here, a more sophisticated radar system there, an armed coast guard patrol justified as law enforcement, or a humanitarian drill that quietly rehearses interdiction tactics.

The timing of these developments only heightens the stakes.

As the United States and the Philippines conduct their largest-ever joint exercises — widely understood to be part of the Balikatan series — China has responded in kind.

The dispatch of an amphibious warship into the South China Sea, coupled with the movement of an aircraft carrier through the Taiwan Strait, signals that Beijing is neither passive nor indifferent to these shifting dynamics.

Here, the regional security dilemma becomes starkly evident. Each side insists that its actions are defensive, necessary, and proportionate.

Yet, when viewed collectively, these moves create a feedback loop of suspicion and countermeasures.

Taiwan conducts drills on Itu Aba. The United States and the Philippines expand their exercises. China increases its naval presence.

Each step reinforces the other, producing an escalatory spiral without a clear off-ramp.

Complicating matters further is the unresolved question of Taiwan's status. For Beijing, Taiwan is an inseparable part of China.

For Taipei, it is a self-governing entity with its own  political identity and strategic imperatives.

So when Taiwan conducts humanitarian and disaster relief exercises on Itu Aba, the implications extend beyond the South China Sea into the broader cross-strait relationship.

What might appear as a localised drill is, in reality, embedded within one of the most sensitive geopolitical fault lines in the world.

The South China Sea, long described as a maritime crossroads of global commerce, is now also a theatre of layered contestation – legal, strategic, and technological.

It is not merely about territorial sovereignty. It is about sea lane security, resource control, and the projection of power.

Nearly one-third of global shipping passes through these waters. Any sustained instability here would reverberate far beyond Southeast Asia.

Yet, the most troubling aspect is the normalisation of these tensions. What would have been considered provocative a decade ago is now increasingly routine.

Armed coast guard vessels are deployed under the guise of law enforcement. Military assets are justified as defensive necessities. Even humanitarian drills are designed with dual-use capabilities.

This normalisation is dangerous. It lowers the psychological threshold for escalation.

It conditions policymakers and public alike to accept a heightened state of militarisation as the new normal. And once such a mindset takes root, reversing it becomes exceedingly difficult.

The international community cannot afford complacency. Vigilance must not only be rhetorical but also institutional.

Confidence-building measures, transparency mechanisms, and crisis communication channels must be strengthened.

The long-delayed Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, often discussed but never fully realised, must be treated with renewed urgency.

Whether this is achieved through the quiescent diplomacy of Malaysia or the likes, it must be done to prevent the maritime basin on Indo-Asia-Pacific from degenerating into sheer chaos.

At the same time, regional actors must resist the temptation to instrumentalise humanitarian or civilian activities for strategic signalling.

Doing so risks eroding trust and undermining the very norms that have, thus far, prevented open conflict.

Ultimately, the South China Sea is not yet a battlefield. But it is no longer merely a zone of peaceful navigation either.

It exists in an uneasy middle ground – one defined by strategic ambiguity, incremental militarisation, and rising geopolitical competition.

If the world fails to recognise the significance of these subtle shifts, it may one day awaken to a crisis that no longer unfolds gradually, but suddenly and irreversibly.

The views expressed are those of the writer and do not necessarily reflect those of FMT.

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