

SOUTH CHINA SEA

Kamala Harris slams China on Philippine ship near disputed sea

Washington's No. 2 asserts America's interests in the South China Sea



U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris with officers on the bridge of Philippine coast guard vessel, the BRP Teresa Magbanua, on the island of Palawan, Philippines, on Nov. 22. © EPA/Jiji

CLIFF VENZON, Nikkei staff writer

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MANILA -- U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris wrapped up her three-day visit to the Philippines on Tuesday by flying to an island that faces the disputed South China Sea, where she met Filipino fisherfolk and toured one of the country's largest and most modern patrol vessels.

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Aboard the Japan-built 97m-class patrol vessel, named after teacher-turned-revolutionary leader Teresa Magbanua, America's first woman vice president urged local maritime law enforcers to stand up for freedom of navigation. She also asserted Washington's stake in the sea dispute, which is central to the U.S and China's intensifying geopolitical rivalry in the region.

"We must stand up for principles such as respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, unimpeded lawful commerce, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and the freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea, and throughout the Indo-Pacific," Harris told Philippine Coast Guard officers.

Prior to her tour of the coast guard ship, Harris spoke with Filipinas who dry fish for a living. She referred to them in her speech and pointed to the livelihoods that are at risk "when foreign vessels enter Philippine waters and illegally deplete the fishing stock, when they harass and intimidate local fishers, when they pollute the ocean, and destroy the marine ecosystem."

Harris announced \$7.5 million of additional funding for Philippine maritime law enforcers partly to boost their capacity to counter illegal and unregulated fishing.

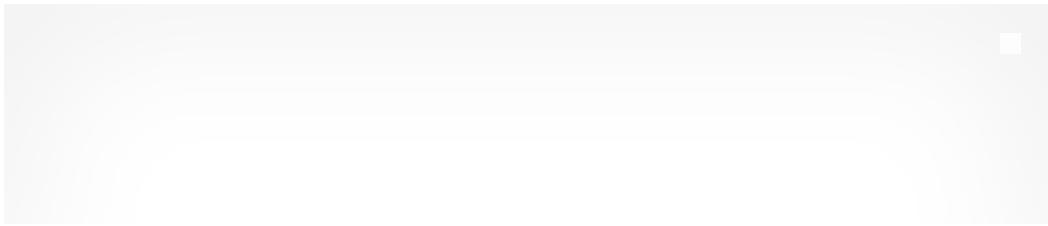
Security was key on the agenda for Harris, who arrived on Sunday after attending the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Bangkok. On Monday, Harris and Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. held a bilateral meeting where the vice president reiterated that the South China Sea is covered by the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty that obliges the allies to come to each other's defense in case of an armed attack.

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"An armed attack on the Philippines Armed Forces, public vessels, or aircraft in the South China Sea would invoke U.S. mutual defense commitments," Harris told Marcos. "And that is an unwavering commitment that we have to the Philippines.

Marcos reciprocated her assurances by saying: "I do not see a future for the Philippines that does not include the United States."



U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris waves upon arrival at Puerto Princesa International Airport in Palawan, Philippines, on Nov. 22. © Reuters

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The Philippine Navy reported that the Chinese coast guard "forcefully retrieved" Chinese rocket debris that landed near the Philippine-occupied Thitu Island in the Spratly archipelago. But the Chinese embassy in Manila said the rocket fairing was returned to the Chinese coast guard "after friendly consultation."

The incident is an example of encounters that occasionally raise tensions in the disputed waterway. The Philippines has filed hundreds of diplomatic protests in recent years over Chinese ships' "swarming" and radio warnings within Manila's exclusive economic zone as well as other acts that the Philippines has called "illegal" and "provocative."

"As an ally, the United States stands with the Philippines in the face of intimidation and coercion in the South China Sea," Harris said on Tuesday, without directly mentioning Beijing.

Beijing, citing historical maps, claims ownership of nearly the entire South China Sea, including areas that the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Taiwan and Vietnam say are part of their territories. China has reclaimed and militarized islands to bolster its claims.

Harris said the U.S. supports a 2016 ruling by a United Nations arbitral tribunal in The Hague, which rejected China's expansive maritime claims. The Philippines initiated the arbitration, which China rejected and did not participate in.

"The tribunal's decision is legally-binding, and must be respected," Harris said.

Beijing did not immediately react to Harris's remarks on Tuesday, although it has previously slammed Washington over perceived interference in the sea dispute. During the East Asia Summit in Cambodia in August, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said "the biggest risk to peace and stability in the South China Sea is precisely the inappropriate intervention and frequent interference by major countries outside the

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"The United States -- and the broader international community - have a profound stake in the future of this region. America's prosperity relies on the billions of dollars that flow through these waters every day," Harris said.

The vice president also said: "We will continue to rally our allies and partners against unlawful and irresponsible behavior. When the international rules-based order is threatened somewhere, it is threatened everywhere."

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