

# China's sea claims have no basis, says U.S.

We don't seek confrontation with China, but won't flinch when our interests are threatened: Pentagon

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Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin said on Tuesday that Beijing's expansive claims in the South China Sea have “no basis in international law”, taking aim at China's growing assertiveness in the hotly contested waters.

Mr. Austin's broadside came at the start of his first trip to Southeast Asia as U.S. Defence Secretary, as he seeks to rally allies in the region as a bulwark to China.

President Joe Biden's administration wants to reset relations with Asian countries and build alliances to face Beijing, after the turbulence and unpredictability of the Donald Trump era.

Speaking in Singapore, Mr. Austin criticised China's actions in the disputed sea, where Beijing has overlapping territorial claims with several Southeast Asian states.



**Territorial dispute:** A file photo of Chinese vessels anchored at Whitsun Reef in the South China Sea. ■AFP

“Beijing's claim to the vast majority of the South China Sea has no basis in international law,” he said in a speech hosted by the International Institute for Strategic Studies think tank.

“That assertion treads on the sovereignty of the states

in the region,” he said, adding that the U.S. would support countries in defending their rights.

China claims almost all of the resource-rich sea, through which trillions of dollars in shipping trade passes annually, with com-

peting claims from Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam. Beijing has been accused of deploying a range of military hardware, including anti-ship missiles and surface-to-air missiles there, and ignored a 2016 international tribunal decision that declared its historical claim over most of the waters to be without basis.

## Rising tensions

Tensions have escalated in recent months between Beijing and rival claimants.

Manila was angered after hundreds of Chinese boats were spotted inside the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone, while Malaysia scrambled fighter jets to intercept Chinese military aircraft that appeared off its coast.

Mr. Austin said on Tuesday the U.S. “will not flinch when our interests are threatened” – but he insisted

Washington does “not seek confrontation” with China.

“I am committed to pursuing a constructive, stable relationship with China, including stronger crisis communications with the People's Liberation Army.”

The U.S.-China relationship has deteriorated over a range of issues from cybersecurity and tech supremacy to human rights in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

Mr. Biden has largely kept the hawkish stance on China of Mr. Trump, describing the Asian power as the pre-eminent challenge to the United States, but has lowered the temperature and instead emphasised working with allies and working at home to compete better. After Singapore, Mr. Austin will visit Vietnam and the Philippines, and will seek to underline that the U.S. is a “stabilising force” in Southeast Asia, said a senior defence official.