

AUSTRALIA REJECTS CHINA'S SEA CLAIMS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Contested dots: A Vietnamese-claimed island in South China Sea's Spratly island group, as seen from a Philippine Air Force C-130 transport plane, in April 2017. AP Francis Malasig

Australia has rejected Beijing's territorial and maritime claims in the South China Sea in a formal declaration to the UN, aligning itself more closely with Washington in the escalating row.

In a statement filed on Thursday, Australia said there was "no legal basis" to several disputed Chinese claims in the sea, including those related to the construction of artificial islands on small shoals and reefs.

"Australia rejects China's claim to 'historic rights' or 'maritime rights and interests' as established in the 'long course of historical practice' in the South China Sea," the declaration read.

"There is no legal basis for China to draw straight baselines connecting the outermost points of maritime features or 'island groups' in the South China Sea, including around the 'Four Sha' or 'continental' or 'outlying' archipelagos."

Pompeo's declaration

The declaration comes after U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared Beijing's pursuit of territory and resources in the South China Sea as illegal, explicitly backing the territorial claims of Southeast Asian countries against China's.

Beijing claims almost all of the South China Sea based on a so-called nine-dash line, a vague delineation from maps dating back to the 1940s.

The latest escalation comes ahead of annual talks between Australia and the U.S., with Ministers travelling to Washington for the first time since Australian borders were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The meetings come at a "critical time" and it is essential they are held face-to-face, Foreign Minister Marise Payne and Defence Minister Linda Reynolds said in a statement on Saturday.

U.S. relations with China have markedly deteriorated in recent months, especially over trade disputes, the COVID-19 pandemic and Beijing's crackdown on dissent in Hong Kong.

Criticism on Hong Kong

Ms. Payne and Ms. Reynolds also penned an article in *The Australian* newspaper on Saturday, labelling national security legislation imposed on Hong Kong last month as "sweeping and vague".

"We face a public health crisis, economic upheaval and resurgent authoritarian regimes using coercion in a bid to gain power and influence at the expense of our freedoms and sovereignty," they wrote.

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