# Defending Sandy Cay

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On April 24, the world woke up to dispiritingly familiar news: China was up to its antics again, displaying fresh aggression and ratcheting up tension in the flashpoint South China Sea region by claiming to have taken control of the tiny sandbank of Sandy Cay, part of the Spratly group of islands which are, under international law, within the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of the Philippines.

Chinese state media said Beijing had “implemented maritime control and exercised sovereign jurisdiction” over the reef in mid-April and backed up that assertion with photos of Chinese coast guard officers standing allegedly on the reef, holding a Chinese flag. The stunt, clearly intended to reinforce China’s dominance and claim of ownership over nearly the entire waters of the South China Sea, including the West Philippine Sea, drew concerns from many countries. Beijing had “seized” Sandy Cay, went the narrative—a move that might raise protests for escalating friction in the region, but one that still played in China’s favor, casting it as the big boss and ultimate decider in this part of the world.

“Seizing” is an apt description for China’s action—because it has no more credible entitlement to Sandy Cay and the Spratlys than to the entire body of water supposedly encompassed by its “nine-dash-line” fiction.

## Landmark decision

A quick look at the map betrays Beijing’s indefensible position in this regard: Sandy Cay and the Spratlys are way distant from the nearest coast in mainland China but a mere 7.41 kilometers from Pag-asa Island, where a Filipino municipality has existed for decades as part of the province of Palawan.

More to the point, China’s absurd claim has no legal leg to stand on. The 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling declared that China’s insistence of ownership over the South China Sea, its occupation of islands and features in the waters which it then turned into military outposts, and its regular encroachments into the Philippines’ EEZ were unlawful. That same decision affirmed the Philippines’ indisputable sovereign rights over its EEZ (that the West Philippine Sea has been recognized on Google Maps is another validation of Philippine rights over the area). Promulgated under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to which China is a signatory, the ruling is recognized by the international community as a landmark decision that clarifies and establishes a rules-based framework for such disputes.

## Fait accompli

China’s latest unilateral act of imposing “sovereign jurisdiction” over a reef that is evidently within another country’s EEZ is a continuation of its deplorable practice of ignoring the arbitral ruling and bullying its neighbors into a what it hopes would be an eventual fait accompli—where the rest of the world meekly acquiesces to its ambition of vastly expanding its territory and resources by seizing and turning the South China Sea, a critical international waterway through which much of world’s goods pass, into its backyard pond.

The Philippines, for one, cannot give up one more inch of territory to its avaricious neighbor. The clarification from the National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea refuting China’s claim of having seized Sandy Cay offers some relief. An inspection of the reefs Pag-asa Cay 1, Cay 2, and Cay 3 and their surrounding waters by Philippine authorities following Beijing’s pictorial stunt in the area showed no signs of occupation or habitation. To underscore the Philippines’ continuing possession of the feature, Filipino soldiers held aloft a Philippine flag and had their pictures likewise taken at Sandy Cay, in a tit-for-tat gesture at Beijing. National Security Council assistant director general Jonathan Malaya said there was “no truth whatsoever” to the Chinese claim.

## Kowtowing to China

Beijing’s actions over the years, however, provide no assurance that it won’t be back to grab Sandy Cay for good, so the Philippine government must do all it can to prevent such an outcome from happening. According to retired rear admiral Rommel Jude Ong in a TV interview, the military already had an earlier plan to build a structure for soldiers on Sandy Cay, to ensure a permanent Philippine presence in the area. The plan, however, was scuttled “last minute” by the then Duterte administration—not surprising given the previous government’s default bent of kowtowing to China.

This latest provocation should jolt the Marcos government into revisiting the proposition to fortify the Philippines’ presence in Sandy Cay, and in other WPS features in danger of being snatched by China—an endeavor, by the way, certain to have overwhelming support from the Filipino public. Per a Social Weather Stations survey done in the lead-up to the May 2025 midterm elections, 75 percent of Filipinos favor candidates who believe that “the Philippines must assert its rights against China’s actions in the WPS.”

That’s hefty sentiment right there to push back vigorously for what is rightfully, incontestably ours.