

Report: China harasses Malaysian oil and gas vessels on daily basis

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Bernama

Over the past two years, Chinese vessels have been harassing civilian vessels in Malaysian oil and gas fields near Beting Patinggi Ali (Luconia Shoals), some 200km off the coast of Bintulu, Sarawak, according to Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI).

In an interview with Hong Kong's English newspaper South China Morning Post (SCMP), AMTI said Chinese boats, some of them armed, were present “on a daily basis” in an attempt to scare off civilians from operating gas field development activities in the region.

“They manoeuvre dangerously and intentionally create risks of collision to dissuade civilians from accepting such contracts,” Greg Polling, director of the initiative at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies told SCMP.

Polling said the Chinese coast guard was aiming to “control” the area, where

Petronas has several oil and gas fields, including the Kasawari gas field, discovered in 2011 and is thought to contain three trillion cubic feet (tcf) of recoverable gas resources.

Malaysiakini reported last year that Chinese vessels have maintained a near-constant presence in the Malaysia-claimed waters near Luconia Shoals.

The latest report from SCMP seems to have corroborated the assessment, albeit showing that the activities by China have only persisted thus far.

Petronas CEO Tengku Muhammad Taufik Tengku Aziz has previously said the Kasawari field is rich enough to ensure his company remains one of the world's top five exporters of liquified natural gas (LNG).

Polling added that if Malaysian vessels didn't back down, China would deploy one of its state-owned vessels to conduct illegal seabed surveys in Malaysian waters, usually accompanied by maritime militia boats and Chinese coast guard vessels.

Interestingly, neither Malaysia nor Indonesia, which has also seen its vessels harassed by China in the South China Sea, has tried to publicise such behaviour, unlike Vietnam and the Philippines, according to Polling.

However, he said, this is beginning to change.

“Malaysia has become more vocal in the last two to three years, though it still avoids talking about most cases of Chinese harassment since there is little it can do to stop it,” Polling said.

Case in point: the government has summoned China’s envoy in Kuala Lumpur twice this year to protest Beijing’s activities in the South China Sea.

Former foreign minister Hishammuddin Hussein launched a formal diplomatic protest in June after 16 Chinese military aircraft were "flying suspiciously" near Luconia Shoals, within the country’s Economic Exclusive Zone (EEZ).

The encounter was the closest ever to the Malaysian coastline, just 60 nautical miles (111km) off the coast of Sarawak.

While the South China Sea has seen many overlapping claims between countries around its coastline, China has, in recent years, also laid claim to previously undisputed waters, including the Luconia Shoals.

Under international law, a country’s sovereignty under the EEZ extends 200 nautical miles out to sea. Luconia Shoals is 84 nautical miles off the coast of

Sarawak.

However, China does not recognise this rule and instead goes by its own “nine-dash line”, which sees Beijing claiming most of the South China Sea.

This Kini Guide provides an in-depth explanation of the South China Sea dispute.

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