

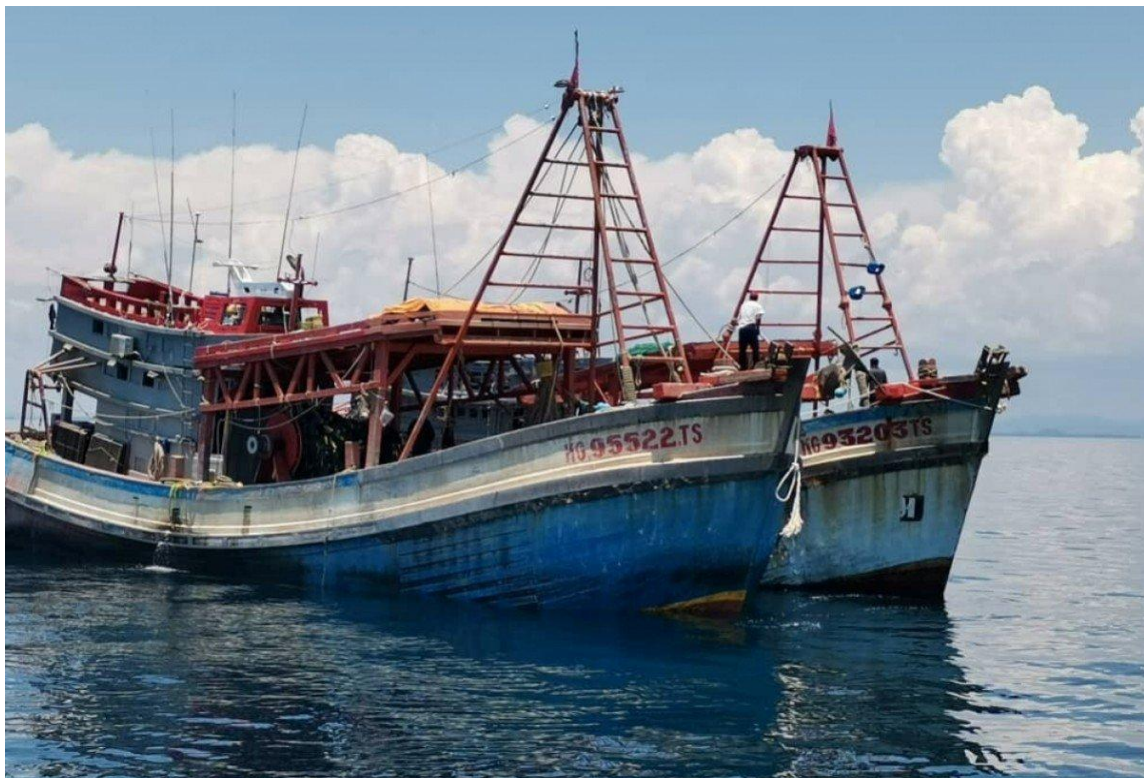
## **South China Sea clash raises Vietnam-Malaysia tensions after fisherman shot dead**

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- The incident took place on Sunday after Malaysia's coastguard attempted to inspect two Vietnamese boats deemed to be engaged in illegal fishing
- Analysts have raised concerns over the implications for relations within Asean – as well as the region's ties with China



Vietnamese fishing boats are seen detained in Malaysian territorial waters in Kelantan on Monday. Photo: Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency / Handout via Reuters

Malaysia and Vietnam must urgently work towards ridding their waters of illegal fishing, analysts said on Tuesday, as Hanoi pressed Kuala Lumpur for answers after a Vietnamese fisherman was shot dead by Malaysian maritime officials over the weekend.

Vietnam late on Monday said it had contacted Malaysia over the incident, which took place in Malaysian waters, and asked its officials in the country to investigate the death and protect the rights of other detained fishermen.

The incident occurred late on Sunday after Malaysia's coastguard attempted to inspect two boats in waters east of Kelantan deemed to be engaged in illegal fishing.

The 19 Vietnamese crew members aboard the two boats "acted aggressively" and threw "diesel bombs" when they were ordered to surrender, Malaysia's coastguard said in a statement. A warning shot was also fired but ignored, according to Kelantan Coastguard Director Muhd Nur Syam Asmawie Yaacob.

Coastguard chief Mohamad Zubil Mat Som told Agence France-Presse that his men had "no choice but to open fire in self defence", adding that they did so "to protect their lives and to protect our national sovereignty".

Analysts have raised concerns over the incident's implications for relations within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations – as well as the region's ties with China, which has itself been accused of fishing in Vietnam's waters.

Collin Koh, a research fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, said that "Vietnam does need to keep a tighter rein on its fishing community".

"There had been earlier warning signs leading up to this latest, most serious incident," he said.



A photo made available by the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency shows one of the two detained Vietnamese fishing boats, right, in Malaysian territorial waters. Photo: EPA

“Just last September there was a stand-off between Malaysian and Vietnamese fishing patrols off Terengganu. One should also recall that [Hanoi] is still trying to get the European Union to remove its yellow card for illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing for precisely such reasons.”

Neighbouring Thailand has also been affected, Koh said, with a spate of recent reports of Thai maritime forces apprehending Vietnamese fishing boats.

The South China Sea is rife with illegal fishing, and Vietnam and China – with their more developed fishing industries – are thought to be the key players.

Vietnam has been on the receiving end of enforcement against illegal fishing by China, with a Vietnamese shipping boat sinking in April after colliding with a Chinese coastguard vessel.



A photo made available by the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency shows a 'diesel bomb' made from a plastic bag on one of the detained Vietnamese fishing vessels. Photo: Handout via Reuters

Another point of contention has been Beijing's summer fishing ban in waters it claims above the 12th parallel – including areas near the Scarborough Shoal, the Paracel Islands, and the Gulf of Tonkin – which Vietnamese and Filipino fishermen say is not within China's maritime jurisdiction.

Beijing says the ban, which began on May 1 and ended on Sunday, is necessary to maintain fish and seafood stocks.

China claims the vast majority of the South China Sea, saying it has historic rights to the land features and waters in the area. But a number of Southeast Asian countries including Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Brunei say Beijing's assertions contravene the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Incidents such as the one on Sunday, which could have a negative effect on Malaysia-Vietnam relations, serve as a distraction when there are “bigger fish to fry” with regards to the South China Sea dispute, according to Koh.

The incident, say analysts, also serves as a reminder that multiple Southeast Asian claimant states have outstanding issues to settle.

“It might be more helpful for such intra-Asean problems to be first properly addressed in order to foster cooperation on the South China Sea front in future,” Koh said.

“Without that, it'll just contribute to the continued state of affairs within Asean – a bloc that's fraught with its own intramural differences, thus rendering it more open to salami slicing by Beijing.”

Rampant illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing was one of the reasons why Malaysia had been slow to move forward in terms of managing regional maritime security, said Hoo Chiew Ping of the Strategic Studies and International Relations Programme at the National University of Malaysia. “It's very important for Southeast Asian countries to resolve the fishing ground disputes bilaterally or multilaterally if the area is disputed by more than one party. Vietnam and Malaysia could adopt a more conciliatory approach by negotiating with each other bilaterally to resolve the problem of fishing issues,” she said.

Thomas Daniel, a senior analyst at Malaysia's Institute of Strategic and International Studies, said that Vietnamese vessels were being “pushed south by Chinese fishing fleets

and enforcement vessels” as well as by a lack of fish stocks in their traditional fishing grounds.

“There’s been speculation that we’re seeing more Vietnamese fishing ships here, and even afar as Indonesia and Papua New Guinea,” he said.

Meanwhile, the Malaysian coastguard said in a statement that it will not compromise in the face of the “extreme actions” of foreign fishermen, reporting that it had detained 43 foreign fishing boats and arrested 487 Vietnamese since June 24, when Malaysia’s government called for a clampdown.

In a separate but integrated operation launched in April last year, the coastguard reported that 135 foreign fishing boats had been apprehended and 1,411 foreign crew detained.

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