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Why China's New Map of Its Borders Has Stirred Regional Tensions

Teaser: China's release of its standard map has produced outrage and alarm in several countries, yet Beijing remains steadfast in continuing its historical approach toward its borders.

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[Article Body:]

In the waning days of August 2023, closely following a BRICS summit and mere days ahead of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and G20 meetings, Beijing [revealed its latest](#) seemingly innocuous “standard” map. Having been released regularly [since at least 2006](#), China’s standard maps are aimed to eliminate “problem maps” that do not affirm China’s territorial integrity. But the 2023 edition invited ripples of condemnation throughout China’s near abroad and beyond, as it repeated Beijing’s claims on divisive territorial disputes with its neighbors—including the Philippines, which has

seen its struggle with China over a small shoal in the South China Sea [escalate significantly over recent weeks](#).

The release of China's map, coupled with its aggressive border strategies, has created enormous uncertainty across the Indo-Pacific. In a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape, various actors are wrestling with how to effectively counter China's actions.

China's perception of maritime and international laws as [products of Western customs](#) has underpinned its level of adherence to them. "[Stealthy compliance](#)" allows China to ambiguously accept international law while interpreting it flexibly to advance its territorial claims. Beijing will also explicitly reject international law, exemplified by its dismissal of a tribunal in The Hague that challenged China's assertions in the South China Sea [in 2016](#). Regularly publishing maps helps assert China's claims to domestic and international audiences, without putting Beijing in a position where it has to enforce them simultaneously.

Beijing's strategy has effectively thwarted regional and Western responses and prevented the outbreak of major conflict. Inflaming territorial disputes serves as a bargaining chip in bilateral negotiations and lays the groundwork for potential future claims as China's strength is expected to increase. Channeling nationalist sentiment outward has also [bolstered the Chinese government's](#) domestic legitimacy and diverted attention from contentious issues like Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong.

However, the response to China's 2023 map reveals growing backlash to Beijing's approach to its border issues and questions over its long-term sustainability.

China has periodically unveiled its nine-dash line map [for decades](#), delineating its claims in the South China Sea. The [mystery shrouding whether these claims](#) pertain to water rights, land features, or both, has kept the region on edge. Regardless, they symbolize China's desire to reduce U.S. control over regional shipping lanes, secure rights over natural resources, and project power beyond its first island chain into the expansive Pacific.

China's latest map took a bold step by reintroducing a tenth dash east of Taiwan—a largely dormant claim [since 2013](#). The move not only reaffirmed China's ownership of Taiwan but also extended China's reach beyond Taiwan's recognized territorial waters, a direct challenge to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Reasserting this claim may point to growing confidence in Beijing of being able to impose its various claims in the region. China's map also continued to emphasize China's rights to the Senkaku Islands, disputed with Japan. Both Taipei and Tokyo [vehemently criticized](#)

[China for the map's release.](#)

China and ASEAN had meanwhile been negotiating a code of conduct for the South China Sea, [reaching an agreement in July](#) to accelerate the process. The release of the 2023 map just days before the ASEAN summit in Indonesia naturally triggered swift rejection from member states such as [Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam](#), which have longstanding wariness of Chinese maritime territorial ambitions.

China occupied the Paracel Islands, contested by Vietnam, [in 1974](#) and engaged in a brief skirmish with Vietnam over the Johnson South Reef [in 1988](#). The Philippines was meanwhile forced to concede Mischief Reef to China [in 1995](#) but later stranded a warship on the Second Thomas Shoal [in 1999](#) to enforce its claims there. Chinese forces steadily took control over the Spratly Islands (including by creating artificial islands) [over the last decade](#), while the [2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff](#) saw China gain effective control over a shoal against the Philippines. Malaysia has also seen increasing naval confrontations with China [in recent years](#).

[Under former Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte](#), Manila pursued a more hospitable approach to China and its territorial claims. But since 2022 under President Bongbong Marcos, the Philippines has taken a [renewed confrontational strategy in confronting China](#), including blocking Chinese attempts in recent weeks to deny resupply efforts to the Filipino warship [on the Second Thomas Shoal](#). Vietnam has also drawn [closer to the U.S. in recent years](#), largely in response to China, and the 2023 map may also convince Malaysia to do so as well.

However, not all ASEAN states are willing to coordinate with the U.S. and confront Beijing. Indonesian officials [downplayed the 2023 map's significance](#), and days later [inaugurated a China-backed](#) high-speed rail project. Similarly, Brunei raised limited objections to the map, reflecting its pledge with China made [in July 2023](#) for greater cooperation. Many other ASEAN member states maintain [substantial trade ties](#) with China, tempering their willingness to take a firm stance even amid the release of another provocative Chinese map.

China's coast guard, navy (now the [world's largest](#)), and [militarized fishing fleets](#) also deter countries from escalating disputes in the South China Sea. However, resisting China's territorial claims is complicated because many countries are also embroiled in disagreements with one another. Taiwan, for instance, [claims Japan's Senkaku Islands](#), while Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei, Indonesia, and the Philippines [have their own disputes](#). By inflaming its own border disputes, China often exacerbates other existing conflicts, and

other countries may opt to avoid involvement because they fear it could lead to more tension with their other neighbors.

China's land border disputes were also thrust into the spotlight with the unveiling of its 2023 map. Longstanding border issues with ASEAN member [Myanmar persist](#), but Myanmar's internal strife and [economic reliance on China](#) have rendered moot any serious opposition to Chinese border policies.

Instead, China's most serious border dispute is with India, involving a poorly defined 2,100-mile international [border that was never demarcated](#). China and India both claim sovereignty over Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh. In 2020, the two countries had their [first deadly skirmish](#) in 45 years, with another violent clash [in 2022](#). Beijing and New Delhi have also [authorized infrastructure projects](#) in the disputed regions to solidify their claims and ease logistical issues. India [lodged an official diplomatic protest](#) against China for its 2023 map, extinguishing any hopes for a potential thaw in India-China relations that had been suggested after the BRICS summit in South Africa in August.

India has also supported Bhutan in its territorial disputes with China. [Bhutan requested and received Indian assistance](#) in 2017 to repel Chinese troops and construction workers that had entered Bhutan, while China made new territorial claims in Bhutan [in 2020](#). But in a surprising turn of events in April 2023, [Bhutan appeared to partially acquiesce to China and explore concessions](#) by agreeing to a [joint technical team](#) with China to address their territorial issues.

India's attempt to rally regional opposition against China has also been complicated by Nepal, which has territorial disputes with both China and [India](#). Nepal's [protest against China's 2023 map](#) also criticized the inclusion of several territories as part of India which it claims as its own. Beijing has [consistently accused India](#) of encroaching on Nepalese territory to undermine New Delhi's territorial claims and take away attention from its own dispute with Nepal.

China's 2023 map further stirred controversy by reviving a settled dispute with Russia. Although both countries resolved longstanding border disputes in the 1990s and 2000s, China's latest edition claimed [a small island](#) that was divided between the two countries in 2005. [Russian officials dismissed the map's claims](#), stating the issue had already been resolved.

Marking the island as such may have been a retaliatory gesture by China in response to a Russian map from 2022 showing [Aksai Lachin and Arunachal Pradesh in India](#). It also likely appealed to nationalist elements within China critical of Russia's territorial gains

from [unequal treaties](#) during the 19th and 20th centuries. But China's assertiveness also serves as a signal to Russia as its [dependence on China has grown since its invasion of Ukraine](#). The Kremlin's tepid response reflected its increasing unwillingness to confront Beijing.

Barely three weeks after the release of China's map, China and Syria, an important Russian ally, announced the formation of a [strategic partnership](#). Together with [competing Chinese and Russian interests](#) in Central Asia, the 2023 map marks another subtle but notable test for the Sino-Russian [no-limits partnership](#) announced in February 2022.

China's assertions are also bolstered by the United States' historical wavering on international law. The U.S. was [accused of breaking international law](#) by the International Court of Justice by mining Nicaraguan harbors and supporting rebels in the country in the 1980s. Furthermore, the U.S. has [yet to ratify the UNCLOS](#), a significant maritime framework. Washington's [inability to mediate](#) the 2012 dispute between the Philippines and China encouraged Beijing to test the United States' willingness to defend the region. As the U.S. seeks to rally countries into conducting [freedom of navigation exercises](#) in the region, China will increasingly aim to disrupt them and establish squatter's rights.

Concordantly, Beijing will continue to block attempts to "[internationalize](#)" its territorial disputes, opting for multilateral or bilateral talks where it can leverage its strengths. Keeping these disputes ongoing (or reigniting them) puts pressure on its neighbors and fuels nationalist sentiment in China, with claims likely to escalate if Beijing perceives its position as stronger.

However, China's increasingly [aggressive foreign policy under President Xi Jinping](#) runs the risk of turning the country into a regional antagonist. Central Asian states, which also [solved their territorial disputes with China](#), are also likely increasingly nervous. [The riots in China](#) against Japanese businesses during heightened tension over the Senkaku Islands in 2012 serve as a stark reminder of how exploiting nationalist sentiment can spiral out of control and damage China's reputation as an attractive place for investment. For the U.S., successfully rallying the region becomes much easier when it can highlight China's self-interested actions.

China's enigmatic and assertive border strategies have far-reaching implications for regional and global stability. While its tactics have yielded short-term benefits, they carry the risk of escalating disputes into conflicts and generating significant international backlash. The current geopolitical landscape remains dynamic, with major powers and smaller countries grappling to find an effective response to Chinese calculations.

