



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on April 8, 2019

Philippines' President Duterte Tells China to "Lay Off" Thitu Island

Speaking at a rally in the city of Puerto Princesa on April 4, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte threatened to send his troops on a "suicide mission" if the Chinese do not "lay off" Thitu Island in the South China Sea.



Thitu Island, which the Filipinos call Pag-Asa Island, is the second largest of the 18 Spratly Islands and the largest of the Philippine-administered islands. In addition to the Philippines, other islands in the group are occupied by Taiwan, Vietnam, and Malaysia.

"I'm trying to tell China, Pag-Asa is ours," Duterte said. "So let us be friends but do not touch Pag-Asa Island and the rest. Otherwise, things would be different."

"This is not a warning; this is just a word of advice to my friends," Duterte was quoted by Bloomberg.

"I will not plead or beg, but I'm just telling you [to] lay off the Pag-asa because I have soldiers there," he said, according to CNN Philippines.

The Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs said in a statement April 4 that the presence of Chinese vessels was "illegal" and a "clear violation of Philippine sovereignty."

"It has been observed that Chinese vessels have been present in large numbers and for sustained and recurring periods — what is commonly referred to as 'swarming' tactics — raising questions about their intent as well as concerns over their role in support of coercive objectives," CNN quoted the Philippine statement.

When asked about the dispute over Thitu Island on April 3, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang pointed to a meeting between Philippine and Chinese representatives to discuss a procedure to avoid South China Sea conflicts.

"I believe that the consensus reached by the two sides through discussion in this meeting is the best answer to your question," he was quoted by CNN.

Thitu Island has been occupied by the Philippines since 1970, which formally established the Municipality of Kalayaan on the island on June 11, 1978 through a presidential decree.

The Philippine Navy has a naval station on the island, Naval Station *Emilio Liwanag*.

In January 2014, the Chinese media reported the intentions of China to claim the island as its own. In August 2017, China sent a contingent of naval vessels to the immediate vicinity of the island, including two frigates, one coast guard vessel, and two large fishing vessels.

Thitu Island is the only island among all the Philippine-occupied Spratly islands that is currently



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inhabited by Filipino civilians. The civilian population is about 300, which includes children. It is also the only Philippine-occupied island in the Spratlys to have a significant number of structures, including military barracks, a municipal hall, health center, school, water-filtration plant, engineering building, marina, and a communication tower.

In an article in May 2015, we cited an editorial in the *Global Times*, a newspaper owned by the Chinese Communist Party's *People's Daily*, which said that "U.S.-China war is inevitable in the South China Sea ... if the United States' bottom line is that China has to halt its activities" in the Spratly Islands.

Photo: AP Images

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