

Chinese Warplane Confrontation in Malaysian Airspace Raises Regional Concerns

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OE Watch Commentary

On 31 May, a group of 16 Chinese military aircraft flew through the South China Sea (SCS) and close enough to or into Malaysian airspace that it caused Malaysia to scramble its own jets to track the Chinese aircraft. According to a 5 June Indonesian language article in *kompas.com*, which claims editorial independence but has historically been pro-Indonesian military, reported that Malaysian leaders, including its foreign minister Hishammuddin Hussein, condemned the Chinese aircraft's incursions and considered them a disruption to diplomatic efforts to resolve the two countries' overlapping claims in the SCS. According to the article, Malaysia viewed the Chinese military actions as a severe violation of Malaysian sovereignty.

Notwithstanding the Malaysian protestations, the article noted Malaysia's relations with China will be maintained. At the same time, the article indicated China has maximalist claims in the SCS such that China considers virtually the entire sea is its territory and has accordingly built military bases on a number of SCS islands. Vietnam, Philippines, Taiwan, and Brunei, as well as Malaysia were mentioned in the article as having overlapping claims with China. While the article provides no reason for why China may have engaged in the military action in or near Malaysian airspace, it noted that China had previously sent a survey ship to negotiate with Malaysia about oil exploration in waters near Malaysian Borneo, which is the same area where the air intercept occurred.

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A Republic Of China Air Force F-16 fighter jet shadows a PLA Air Force Bomber that had approached the island of Taiwan.

Source: Military News Agency, ROC, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:An_ROC_Airforce_F-16_fighter_jet_shadows_a_PLA_Airforce_Bomber_that_had_approached_the_island_of_Taiwan.webp, Attribution: CC x 2.0

A separate 5 June Malaysian language article in *malaysiakini.com*, which prides itself on independence and challenging the authorities, especially on issues of corruption, also discussed the confrontation between the Chinese and Malaysian military aircraft. The article noted that China justifies its actions by asserting its aircraft were simply on a training mission and that no country was a target. Further, China's Foreign Minister stated the aircraft were acting in accord with international law and did not enter into Malaysian airspace. The article highlighted that although this aerial confrontation between Malaysia and China was new, there were 89 incidents between 2016 and 2019 where Chinese Coast Guard or Chinese People's Liberation Navy ships encroached on Malaysian territory. According to the article, the purpose of such incursions was to demonstrate Chinese sovereignty over the SCS, including near the borders of Malaysian Borneo.

Source: “Malaysia Kerahkan Jet Tempur untuk Cegat 16 Pesawat Militer China di Lepas Pantai Kalimantan (Malaysia Deployed Fighter Jets to Intercept 16 Chinese Military Aircraft Off the Coast of Kalimantan),” *kompas.com* (independent but historically pro military Indonesian language news source), 5 June 2021. <https://www.kompas.com/tren/read/2021/06/05/210000965/malaysia-kerahkan-jet-tempur-untuk-cegat-16-pesawat-militer-china-di-lepas?page=all>

Malaysian Foreign Minister Hishammuddin Hussein condemned the Chinese military action and considered it a violation of territorial claims in the South China Sea. Both China and Malaysia are known to claim each other's territorial waters. Although Malaysia and China have respective claims over the South China Sea, relations between China and Malaysia have still been maintained despite the incident.

Apart from Malaysia, the countries that also have claims in the South China Sea are Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, and Taiwan. Last year, a Chinese survey ship was involved in lengthy negotiations with a Malaysian oil exploration vessel off the coast of Borneo.

Source: “AS kecam pesawat tentera China terbang di ruang udara Malaysia (The US condemned Chinese military planes flying in Malaysian airspace),” *malaysiakini.com* (independent Malaysian news source), 5 June 2021. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/577677>

Following the incident of Chinese military planes flying suspiciously in Malaysian airspace on May 31, a spokesman for the Chinese Embassy said the planes were undergoing training and no country was targeted. The spokesman added that China and Malaysia are friendly neighbors, and China is ready to continue bilateral friendly talks with Malaysia to jointly maintain regional peace and stability.

Last year, the Auditor-General's Report (KAN) revealed that ships of the China Coast Guard (CCG) and the Chinese Peoples Liberation Navy (PLN) were encroached on Malaysian waters 89 times between 2016 and 2019. According to the report, the presence of the CCG and PLN is to demonstrate China's claims to the South China Sea, particularly in the Beting Patinggi Ali area, which is about 84 nautical miles off the coast of Miri, Sarawak and about 1,600km from mainland China.