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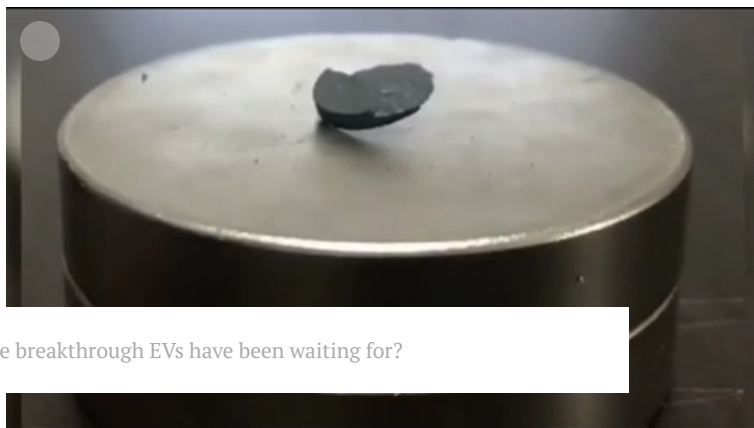
US given OK to enforce maritime law around Palau as Washington vies with China for Pacific influence

AP The Associated Press
David Rising

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BANGKOK (AP) — **The United States has signed a new agreement with Palau, which gives American ships the authorization to unilaterally enforce maritime regulations in the tiny Pacific island nation's exclusive economic zone,** the U.S. Coast Guard said Tuesday.



Is this the breakthrough EVs have been waiting for?

The agreement comes as both the U.S. and China are seeking to expand their influence in the Pacific, and follows pleas from Palau's president for Washington's help to deter Beijing's "unwanted activities"

in its coastal waters.

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In the agreement, concluded a week ago, U.S. Coast Guard ships can enforce regulations inside Palau's exclusive economic zone on behalf of the nation without a Palauan officer present, the Coast Guard said in a statement.

"This agreement helps Palau monitor our exclusive economic zone, protect against illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, and deter uninvited vessels from conducting questionable maneuvers within our waters," Palau's president, Surangel S. Whipps Jr., was quoted as saying in the release.

"It's these types of partnerships that help us work toward our common goal of peace and prosperity in the region."

The statement made no mention of China, but in June, Whipps told reporters in Tokyo that three Chinese boats had made "uninvited" entries into his country's waters since he took office in 2021, and stressed at the time the need for further U.S. backing to enhance deterrence against China's assertive moves in the region.

"The United States is responsible for our security and we would also inform them that we need them to engage and help us in deterring any unwanted activities," Whipps said.

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Tensions have been growing in the Asia-Pacific region as China presses its widespread maritime claims and the U.S. and its allies push back.

At about the same time the agreement with Palau was signed last week, two Philippine boats, with a U.S. Navy surveillance aircraft overhead, breached a Chinese coast guard blockade in the disputed South China Sea to deliver supplies to Filipino forces guarding a contested shoal.

It was the latest flare-up from long-standing territorial disputes in the busy sea that involve China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei.

In June, Whipps accused China of conducting surveying activities in Palau waters, and suggested his country may be being punished by Beijing over its stance on Taiwan.

Palau is one of the few countries that recognizes Taiwan and maintains diplomatic relations with the island, which split from mainland China during a civil war in 1949 and set up a rival government to the victorious Communists in Beijing.

Elsewhere in the Pacific, the government of the Solomon Islands was persuaded to switch its diplomatic recognition of Taiwan to China in 2019. Since then, the Solomons signed a secretive security pact with China that has given rise to concerns it could give Beijing a military foothold in the South Pacific.

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The U.S. has countered with diplomatic moves of its own, including opening an embassy in the Solomon Islands.

The agreement with Palau is similar to one concluded with the Federated States of Micronesia at the end of 2022, following which the U.S. Coast Guard has conducted boardings for the Pacific nation.

The U.S. also signed a bilateral defense agreement in May with Papua New Guinea, which will allow the U.S. Coast Guard to conduct boardings alongside its local counterparts in Papua New Guinea's exclusive economic zone for the first time later this year.

The U.S. Coast Guard said the agreements show "the United States' ongoing investment in protecting shared resources and an interest in maritime safety and security."

"This unity of effort with Pacific island countries, including the collaboration with Palau, amplifies our collective ability to protect resources and maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific for all nations who observe the rule of law," the Coast Guard said.



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