

China's Secret Navy in the South China Sea



News Analysis

Few regions are more strategically important to [China](#) than the [South China Sea](#) (SCS). Beijing has increasingly treated the SCS as a "Chinese lake," subject to its "indisputable sovereignty."

Beijing's competing territorial claims within other countries bordering on the SCS have led China to be militarily engaged and active in this area for many years. This has often led to tensions, if not outright clashes.

The issue of Chinese hegemony in the South China Sea has been less and less about economics—oil and gas reserves or fishing rights—and

more about control and sovereignty.

The South China Sea is, quite simply, a key defensive zone for Beijing. Accordingly, China has particularly increased its military presence in the region through expanded patrols by the PLA Navy (PLAN). In addition, there has been a dramatic military expansion on the Hainan and Woody islands in the western SCS.

Woody Island has witnessed the construction of a 2,700-meter runway that can accommodate most Chinese fighter jets, an improved harbor, and the deployment of long-range HQ-9B surface-to-air missiles (SAMs).

Beijing has also been engaged in a massive effort to assemble—and subsequently [militarize](#)—a constellation of artificial islands in the Spratlys, in the eastern part of the SCS. This building program included the construction of runways on Fiery Cross, Subi, and Mischief reefs, harbors and barracks, and, finally, the emplacement of radar stations, anti-aircraft guns, HQ-9B SAMs, and YJ-12B supersonic anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs) to the islands.



An airstrip made by China is seen beside structures and buildings at the man-made island on Mischief Reef in the Spratlys group of islands in the South China Sea on March 20, 2022. (Aaron Favila/AP Photo)

Beyond an overt military presence in the SCS, China has lately expanded its paranaival activities. These include more traditional undertakings, such as increased patrols by the Chinese Coast Guard, and the use of an irregular but still Beijing-controlled “maritime militia” —the so-called “little blue men.”

Coast guards are usually noncontroversial in maritime matters. They are primarily concerned with protecting freedom of navigation and operations in regional sea lines of communication (SLOC). This includes combating piracy and other sea-based criminal activities, human trafficking, and drug smuggling.

Coast guards are also used to enforce exclusive economic zones

(EEZs). EEZs are regional maritime territories, extending out from shore no more than 200 nautical miles, within which a country has exclusive rights to exploit for economic gain; this includes fishing but also oil and gas deposits.

EEZs in the SCS are particularly contentious since many countries' claims overlap. Therefore, regional coast guards have found an increased function in enforcing EEZ rights.

The advantage of using coast guards in sovereignty enforcement operations is that they are lightly armed (usually just a small cannon or machine guns). This lowers the risk of catastrophic clashes in the SCS. But if such clashes increase or the stakes are raised, they could escalate into more violent action involving navies.

For example, using paranaul forces to sink commercial ships, resulting in a large loss of life, or employing coast guards to forcibly remove personnel from bases in the SCS or block oil and gas exploration from disputed areas and, thus, provoking armed resistance—all of these actions could increase the risk of conflict.

It should surprise no one that the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) is the largest in the SCS and one of the most active. Until recently, China operated five civil maritime forces: China Marine Surveillance (CMS), the Border Patrol, the Fisheries Law Enforcement Command, Customs, and the Maritime Safety Administration (MSA). Many of these forces overlapped in their missions and competed with each other. In 2013, the first four services were combined into a single China Coast Guard (CCG) under the command of the State Oceanic Administration.

The CCG operates over a hundred patrol boats, particularly the 41-

meter Type-218 offshore patrol vessels, armed with twin 14.5mm machine guns. In 2007, the PLAN transferred two 1700-ton Type 053H (Jianghu-I) frigates to the CCG, making them the largest ships in the coast guard.

In 2016, China launched two 12,000-ton “monster cutters” for the CCG, the largest paranaval vessel in existence. At least one of these ships has been more or less permanently deployed to the SCS.



A Vietnamese coast guard ship shows a Chinese coast guard vessel (R) sailing near China's oil drilling rig in disputed waters in the South China Sea on May 14, 2014. (Hoang Dinh Nam/AFP via Getty Images)

Unsurprisingly, the CCG has been one of the most aggressive paranaval fleets in the SCS. [According](#) to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the CCG has been involved in a sizable majority of clashes in the SCS, including bullying, harassing, and even

ramming of other countries' coast guard and fishing vessels. In November 2021, the CCG [used water cannon](#) on two Filipino supply boats operating within the Philippines' EEZ.

But the CCG's actions are nothing compared to those of China's "militarized fisherman," the so-called "little blue men" who go out in the SCS and purposely clash with ships from other nations, both commercial and naval. These are not simply private fishermen engaged in "patriotic activities." On the contrary, these vessels are, in actuality, a [maritime militia](#) subsidized by Beijing and effectively a part-time military organization.

These boats are sent out to collect intelligence, show the flag, and promote sovereignty claims. Moreover, they are not above creating minor clashes with other ships. They provide Chinese naval and paramilitary forces, particularly the Chinese Coast Guard, with a pretext (protecting Chinese "civilians") to intervene and thereby bolster China's military presence in the SCS.

While this maritime militia has been around for years, they have lately become a much more active and aggressive force, and one that has a growing strategic purpose, what has been dubbed the "3Ds" of China's SCS strategy: *declare* (Chinese claims), *deny* (other countries' claims), and *defend* (those claims).

The use of paranaul and irregular maritime forces permits the Chinese to operate in overpowering numbers within the SCS. A RAND Corporation [report](#) calls this a "classic 'gray zone' operations ... designed to 'win without fighting' by overwhelming the adversary with swarms of fishing vessels," further bolstering Chinese claims of "indisputable sovereignty" in the region.

China has created a powerful paramilitary tool by combining its reinvigorated coast guard with its increased use of a vast and aggressive maritime militia.

[According](#) to Jay Batongbacal, director of the Institute for Maritime Affairs at the University of the Philippines, the ultimate goal is to "establish de facto control and dominance over the entire South China Sea."



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