

*RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.*

## China's Artificial Islands in South China Sea: Extended Forward Presence

By Olli Pekka Suorsa

### SYNOPSIS

*China has expended significant resources in erecting seven artificial islands in the Spratlys, in the South China Sea. The real worth of these artificial islands may be in extending its coast guard and other paramilitary forces' presence in the South China Sea.*

### COMMENTARY

MUCH HAS been written about China's artificial islands in the Spratlys, South China Sea. A lot of the debate has focused on the outposts' potential military value. The actual military potential in any near-peer military confrontation would prove more of a hindrance than an asset for Beijing. The United States military still holds more options to degrade or stop Chinese military operations from those outposts in a conflict.

The real value those outposts bring to Beijing, however, is not in their potential wartime uses but in the value they offer right now, during peacetime. China has placed significant air and surface surveillance and intelligence gathering capabilities on all of its seven holdings in the Spratlys. The surveillance capability provided by these systems allow China to effectively monitor all air and sea traffic — civilian and military — entering or departing the South China Sea. This ability supports both Chinese civilian and military functions in the South China Sea.

### Sustained Presence

Even more critically, China's Spratly outposts — in particular the three largest islets: the Fiery Cross Reef, Mischief Reef and Subi Reef — have seen frequent refuel and resupply visits from China Coast Guard (CCG) and sheltered other paramilitary forces vessels like the People's Armed Forces' Maritime Militia (PAFMM).

The ability to refuel and resupply in the artificial island outposts in the Spratlys has greatly expanded both CCG and PAFFM reach and helped sustain prolonged presence in the disputed waters.

The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) has mapped the movements of Chinese CCG and fishing trawlers broadcasting AIS (Automatic Identification System) signal. [The gathered AIS data](#), tracking Chinese vessels, shows several CCG ships operating in the South China Sea making frequent supply-runs to and operating from the three largest artificial islands.

The AMTI recorded several ships, likely based at Hainan, sustaining weeks- and months-long presence in the disputed waters, facilitated by intermittent resupply visits to the artificial islands in the Spratlys.

### **Harassment of Other Claimants' Operations**

During the most recent period of heightened tensions, from May 2019 until January 2020, CCG ships harassed Malaysian and Vietnamese oil/gas exploration and survey activities, and extended operations to Philippines and Indonesian EEZs. In May, a CCG ship harassed Shell chartered drilling rig *Sapura Esperanza*, near the Luconia Shoal (Block SK 308), over the period of two weeks. Chinese ships have maintained frequent presence around the Luconia Breakers since 2013.

Following a brief resupply visit in Hainan, the ship moved on to Vietnamese EEZ on 16 June 2019, causing tense standoff between Vietnamese and Chinese vessels lasting from mid-June till early July. This was the most intense standoff between the two claimants since the 2014 HYSY981 oil rig incident that unleashed anti-China protests in Vietnam.

Another vessel, a Chinese survey ship, HD-8, crossed into Vietnamese EEZ a few weeks later, on 3 July 2019, to collect seismic data near Vanguard Bank (Block 06-01), supported by three CCG vessels. Any Vietnam Coast Guard attempts to intercept the survey ship were met with CCG ships shooing the Vietnamese away. Significantly, the HD-8 was recorded to refuel and resupply at the Fiery Cross Reef at least once before returning to its survey station in Vietnam's EEZ.

After finishing their missions there, several CCG ships, having called port at the artificial islands, entered Indonesia's EEZ, at the North Natuna Sea, in January 2020. Upon departing Indonesia's waters, the vessels returned to the Fiery Cross Reef for resupply.

Elsewhere, Mischief Reef has supported CCG activity toward the Scarborough Shoal, a maritime feature China took control over after a brief spat with the Philippines in 2012. The third of the 'big three'— the Subi Reef — has received CCG vessels and maritime militia boats on their operations near the Philippines' Thitu Island, which lies just over 12 nautical miles from the Subi Reef outpost.

### **China's Extended Forward Presence**

Previously, CCG ships would have had to make supply-runs to Hainan, some 550 nautical miles north from the Spratlys. The sheer distance limited ships' operational range and on-station time significantly. The new 'forward bases' in the Spratlys have thus greatly benefitted the CCG in extending endurance and reach.

Conducting refuel and resupply runs to the Fiery Cross Reef, Mischief Reef and Subi Reef has facilitated the CCG longer loitering times and help vessels reach further into disputed waters. The CCG presence is also typically lauded by AIS broadcasting as if they want to be seen. The CCG vessels are often seen patrolling near contested maritime features, especially near features where China does not have any infrastructure of its own.

The near constant presence therefore is used to demonstrate Chinese 'sovereign rights' over those waters. Simultaneously, CCG and fishing trawlers engage in constant intimidation of other claimants' fishermen, conducting illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing, stealing catch or engaging in violence. The CCG ships have asserted exclusive rights for hydrocarbon research well within other disputants' EEZs, harassing others' similar activities.

Taken together, these assertive actions have served to assert Beijing's claims in the South China Sea, based on "historic rights" and "sovereign rights", and to deny others from doing the same. The CCG's presence ensures that those rights are respected by others.

The military value of China's Spratly outposts to Beijing in any near-peer conflict is often overblown. Instead, the real value of those outposts lie in extending China's "eyes" and "ears" deep into the South China Sea, creating a superior situational awareness in the region. They also facilitate the CCG and other maritime paramilitary forces, such as the PAFFM, near constant presence in Chinese claimed waters in the South China Sea.

The persistent presence and frequent patrols by CCG around several key maritime features in the South China Sea help Beijing assert its claimed 'rights' and 'sovereignty', bullying littoral states to accede to China's *de facto* control of the waters within the so-called nine-dash line.

---

*Olli Pekka Suorsa, PhD, is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.*

---