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SNAPSHOT

China's Island Builders

The People's War At Sea

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Recent satellite images show that [the Spratly islands \[1\]](#), a series of features in the South China Sea, are growing at a staggering pace. Tons of sand, rocks, coral cuttings, and concrete are transforming miniscule Chinese-occupied outcroppings into sizeable islands with harbors, large multi-story buildings, airstrips, and other government facilities. The parties behind the construction and defense of these islands remain a thinly veiled secret. As China builds up its presence in the South China Sea, it is also greatly increasing its ability to monitor, bully, and even project force against its neighbors. In Machiavelli's words, Beijing has decided that it is more important to be feared than loved—and that making progress before a new U.S. president pushes back is crucial to its regional aspirations.

FOLLOW THE TRAIL

Chinese strategy in the South China Sea may have many components, but it rests on the shoulders of one man: President Xi Jinping. Since assuming office in 2012, Xi has directed the nation's transformation into a **“Great Maritime Power” [2]** capable of securing its offshore rights and interests, including its unresolved maritime claims in the Yellow, East China, and South China Seas.

To meet this goal, Xi has built up China's already **powerful navy [3]**, which is led by Admiral Wu Shengli, a hard-charging, now the longest serving commander in modern Chinese history. While it has grown far more qualitatively than quantitatively since modernization accelerated in the mid-1990s, China already has more attack submarines than the United States, many of which are focused on a much smaller area. In September 2014, Wu reportedly took a **weeklong trip by naval ship [4]** to survey land reclamation projects on several disputed South China Sea islands, indicating that his interest in promoting Chinese activities expand beyond wartime preparedness to include peacetime

activities in the nation's adjacent waters. There, Wu also observed **joint operations drills held on Fiery Cross Reef [5]**, which were meant to enhance and showcase China's growing ability to field a variety of forces across the South China Sea.

There has been a history of tensions with outside actors in waters claimed by China. On March 5, 2009, a frigate monitored three civil maritime vessels and two government-controlled trawlers during closely coordinated harassment against the survey vessel U.S.N.S. *Impeccable* in international waters. China's navy has kept itself out of direct confrontation when other forces are available to do their dirty work. This dynamic allows China's navy to play "good cop," cultivating closer relations with, and learning from, its American counterpart. Smaller, harder-to-monitor paranaul "bad cops" are then free to advance China's claims in the East and South China Seas. Some of the lowest-end, least glamorous work is assigned to the most junior force in the sea: China's maritime militia.



The *Impeccable* incident was hardly the only one of its kind. Chinese maritime law enforcement (MLE) vessels have **repeatedly harassed Indonesian government ships [6]**, reportedly including **"point[ing] a large calibre machine gun at an Indonesian patrol boat."** [7] On March 26, 2013, China's most advanced fishery patrol ship, *Yuzheng* 310, confronted an Indonesian Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries vessel in the Exclusive Economic Zone off Natuna Island (claimed by Indonesia), **apparently jamming its communications with headquarters [8]** in order to coerce the Indonesian vessel to release Chinese fishermen detained for illegal fishing. Chinese MLE vessels have bullied Vietnamese and Philippine ships as well, attacking fishing ships in international waters.

Meanwhile, as China's navy trawls the sea, its civil maritime forces are also consolidating into the **nation's first unified Coast Guard [9]**. The already-large China Coast Guard's (CCG) fleet greatly outnumbers that of Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines combined, and is **projected to grow by 25 percent [10]** from 2012–15 as newer and larger ships replace smaller, older ones. The Chinese Coast Guard will soon receive from Chinese shipyards several 10,000-ton vessels that the country's neighboring navies could only dream of having.



The Sansha Maritime Militia. (China Defense Forum)

Finally, drawing on the [world's largest fishing fleet](#) [11], China is also strengthening its maritime militia, a dual-hatted force of specially registered fishing vessels with fisherman–soldier crews. Portions of these coastal militias are organized by local military and government officials along the nation's many ports, providing China with small tactical units designed to execute specific missions in support of the country's more professional military and maritime interests. China has had maritime militias dating back to the 1950s, but they have increased in importance as Xi has sought a more active presence in the South China Sea. The use of maritime militias is an unusual approach with few foreign parallels, and U.S. policymakers need to take note. All together, China's navy, local law enforcement, Coast Guard, and maritime militias are making the country a great maritime power, indeed.

OPENING THE GATES

Sitting at China's "Great Southern Gate," Hainan Province administers all of the nation's land and sea claims in the South China Sea. A former backwater, the province is now at the frontline of China's maritime interests and its officials are rising in stature. Within the past year, former State Oceanic Administration Director Liu Cigui, for example, [has become Deputy Provincial Party Secretary](#) [12] and Hainan's new governor. Former Hainan Governor, [Party Chief Luo Baoming](#) [13], plays a major role in the development of China's maritime militia as First Director of Hainan's National Defense Mobilization Committee. Following Xi's guidance, Liu and Luo have pushed for greater levels of civil–military integration, strengthened the province's maritime militia, increased maritime consciousness, and built dual-use infrastructure in the South China Sea. In 2013, Hainan allocated \$4.5 million to the cause (split evenly between the province and counties).

Concurrently, in 2012, Beijing established Sansha City, a South China Sea prefectural seat on Woody Island, as a [micro-capital](#) [14] for the region. A prefecture of Hainan Province, Sansha City is the nation's largest by area while also its smallest by population. Of Hainan's three prefectural cities, it is the one charged with administering the entirety of the South China Sea's features. It boasts an expanded port and airplane runway, aircraft hangars, communications facilities, coastal defense positions, and a military garrison. Chinese enterprises seeking political credit scramble to invest in the island's physical and intellectual infrastructure, which already boasts a [variety of](#)

installations [15], including power generation systems, desalination plants, schools, and the National Library of China's first branch outside Beijing.

Government investment in Sansha City is even greater. Sansha's Mayor Xiao Jie recently stated that the city's first 28 infrastructure projects **totaled 24 billion renminbi** [16] (\$3.81 billion), with much more investment still to come. The city's namesake, **7,800-ton supply ship *Sansha-1*** [17], was the first ship registered by Sansha City's Maritime Safety Administration and services Chinese outposts throughout the South China Sea. And, in 2013, a new maritime militia company was established in Sansha City to join naval and civil law enforcement forces in administering surrounding waters.

Meanwhile, ongoing efforts to establish a permanent population in the area represent an attempt to bolster legal claims on many of the disputed islands and reefs; these days, the island has **approximately 1,443 permanent residents** [18], and a migrant population of over 2,000. China is preparing for more outposts under Sansha City's jurisdiction, too. The **cutter suction dredger *Tianjing*** [19], Asia's largest, has pumped sand onto five Spratly reefs in 2014 to create and expand regional islands. The dredger *Tianqi* is **engaged in similar activities** [20] throughout the Paracels. Since early 2015, multiple People's Armed Forces Departments have been **established on Woody Island** [21], two islands in the Paracels, and one in an unspecified location in the Spratlys. These departments were built specifically to strengthen militia work on the islands.



A Guangxi Maritime Militia detachment. (China Defense Forum)

MARITIME MILITIA MOBILIZATION

On April 8, 2013, Xi visited a fishing village on Hainan's southern coast, where he inspected the **Tanmen Village Maritime Militia Company** [22], commending and encouraging its work. Xi's choice of venue was no accident: Established in 1985, the Tanmen Company has received more than **20 awards** [23] from both the People's Liberation Army PLA Headquarters and provincial governments for setting an example for other companies to emulate. Tanmen employs over 8,500 people and 300 fishing vessels devoted to developing the Spratlys. The company's guerrilla ideology designates the South China Sea as its "fields" and its employees' fishing vessels as

their “homes,” and militia members both monitor and report on local conditions, while training to execute other operations as needed. The group vocally defends Chinese territorial claims, even after operatives were reportedly **beaten and detained in Philippine jails** [24] and one of their ships was sunk by a Philippine Navy vessel. The company is also active in the political mobilization of the nearby fishing communities, encouraging others to invest in the construction of newer, higher-quality fishing vessels. These efforts have expanded Chinese patriot fishermen fleets multifold in recent years.

Tanmen's latest assignment is supporting island building in the South China Sea—familiar territory for a company that has been long charged with supplying building materials for construction in the region. Since the 1980s, Tanmen has delivered concrete, stone, rebar, water, and food to all seven Chinese-occupied Spratly reefs. Since the 1990s, members have delivered **2.65 million tons of materials** [24] to PLA stations in the Spratlys, often camping on the islands while assisting with construction. Working in greater numbers and capable of reaching shallower waters, trawlers operated cheaply by Tanmen and other militias sometimes prove more efficient than larger, more professional resupply vessels. Smaller craft can simultaneously resupply multiple stations instead of fuel-thirsty helicopters or scarce dedicated supply ships. Fishing vessels also draw much less attention politically than navy or coast guard vessels.

The nation's foremost military newspaper emphasizes these fishermen's flexibility and legitimacy, **writing** [25] “putting on camouflage they qualify as soldiers, taking off the camouflage they become law abiding fishermen.” Maritime militia units are charged with making both peacetime and wartime contributions to **Maritime Rights Protection** [26] under the rubric of **People's War at Sea** [27]. After Xi's visit, for instance, an exercise titled **Maritime Mobilization – 1312** [28] involving many militia units from other counties was held in Tanmen's home county, Qionghai. Other exercises have involved a **2014 joint exercise** [29] to protect drilling platforms, escort supply ships, and repel sudden incursions by foreign vessels. The Tanmen Company has been praised for its reconnaissance work, providing valuable intelligence for the military. The company also assists civil law enforcement vessels by conducting search and rescue missions; state media recently lauded its heroic rescue of other ships stranded in typhoon conditions.

Such maritime militia activities are growing along China's southern coast; with cities and counties in Guangdong, Fujian, and Guangxi Provinces all experimenting with and strengthening paramilitaries under close supervision of local party, government, and military officials. Chinese state-run fishing company official He Jianbin has openly spoken of **arming fishermen** [30] and using them for political or military purposes in the South China Sea, claiming that Vietnam's maritime militia severely threaten China's fishing fleet, since the Vietnamese fleet is armed and Chinese fishermen are not. He called for the arming of Hainan's vast fishing fleet and the formation of maritime militias, stating that 5,000 fishing vessels would allow 100,000 armed fishermen to become a force greater than that of any other South China Sea competitor. Although this inflammatory language doesn't represent current official policy, more nuanced statements in military documents nevertheless indicate support for additional measures.

ROILING WATERS

China's leadership has turned its focus toward the Spratly islands. Alongside the building materials that have been delivered and installed, airstrips, radar, and other defenses may soon follow. Chinese goals likely involve increased control over features within the South China Sea, as well as increased surveillance capabilities in the region's waters and airspace—all to win without fighting against neighbors. At this rate, the majority of South China Sea airspace

will likely come under the aegis of a Chinese Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) before the Obama administration leaves office—a likely goal given Beijing's apparent judgment that the next U.S. president is likely to be firmer in opposing Chinese assertiveness. From Xi's bold directives to the Tanmen Company's low-profile implementation, China will have a busy agenda over contested waters and the island features that are beginning to rise from their depths. China is rapidly building new turf in the region—small islands that grow larger by the month. All this makes the assessment of former top **CIA China analyst Christopher Johnson [31]** of particular concern: “They believe Obama is fundamentally weak and disinterested.” In the South China Sea, there is reason to worry that Beijing is busy making hay while the sun is hot.

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