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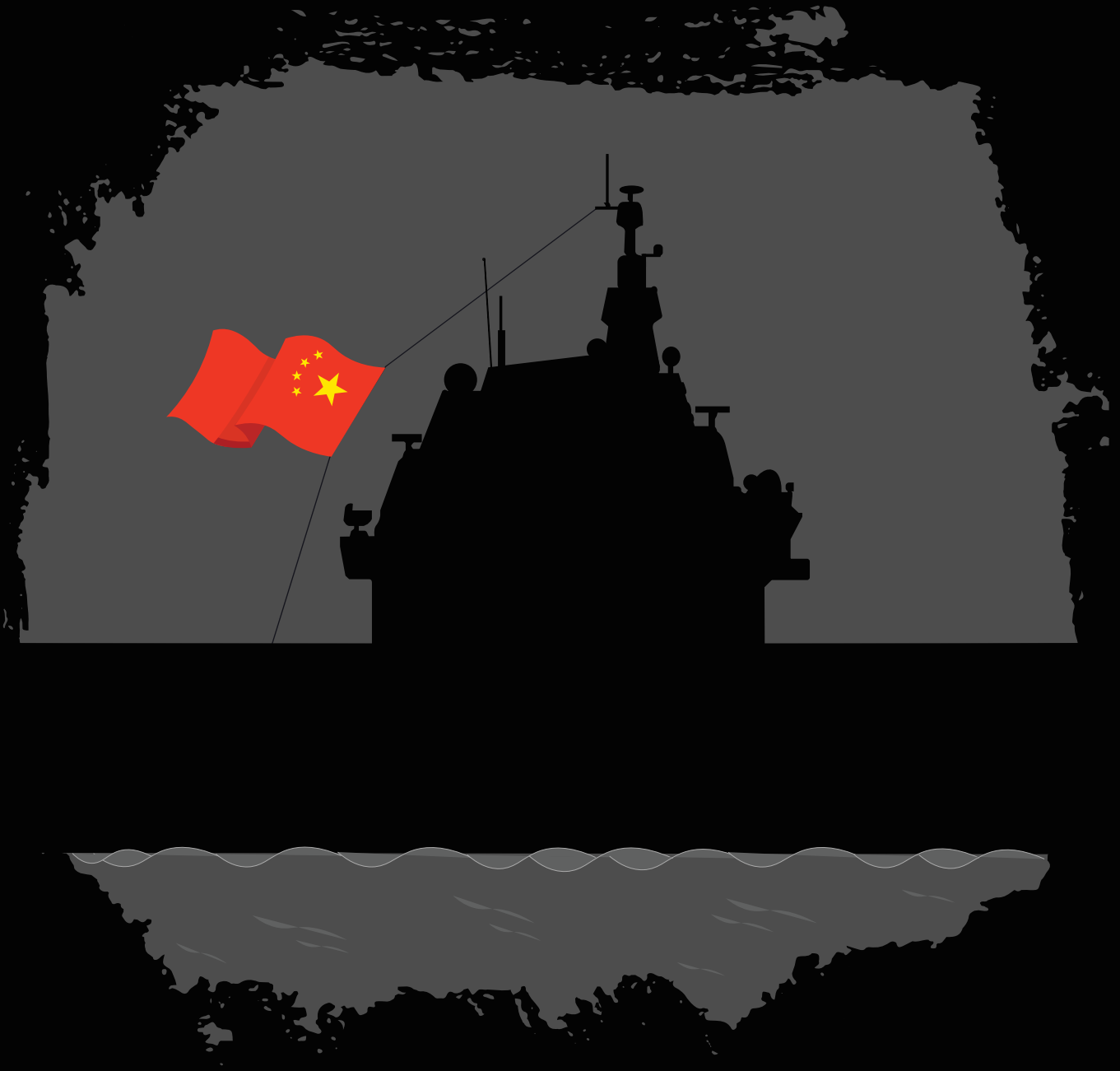
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Testing Boundaries:

The *Lan Hai* 201 Mission East of Taiwan

Ryan D. Martinson¹

Key Takeaways

- From 17-23 July, the People's Republic of China (PRC) deployed a 3,000-ton fisheries research ship, the *Lan Hai* 201, to waters east of Taiwan. China's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, which owns the vessel, declared that the cruise was intended to "comprehensively understand the state of fisheries resources in China's jurisdictional space."
- During its cruise, the *Lan Hai* 201 engaged in survey activities in the EEZs of Taiwan, Japan, and the Philippines, in clear violation of their sovereign rights to regulate fisheries resources under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.
- On 22 July, the *Lan Hai* 201 operated just 35 miles off the coast of the Philippines Itbayat Island, in the Batanes. These are the same islands whose sovereignty was questioned in a PRC academic workshop organized by Jinan University in late May.
- The operations of the *Lan Hai* 201 were therefore likely designed to suggest ambiguity about the status of the Batanes, punishing Manila for commencing maritime boundary negotiations with Japan in waters east of Taiwan.
- The *Lan Hai* 201 also operated near the Yaeyama Islands of Okinawa prefecture, in waters that clearly fall within Japan's EEZ. This segment of the cruise was likely intended for similar purposes: i.e., to raise questions about Japan's sovereignty over the Ryukyu Islands, resurrecting a tactic it used in 2013.

Analysis

Since early June, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has greatly expanded its maritime activities around Taiwan, using as its pretext, a joint statement issued by Japan and the Philippines in which the two parties declared their intention to negotiate a common maritime

¹ Ryan D. Martinson is a researcher at the China Maritime Studies Institute. The views and opinions expressed here are the authors' alone and do not reflect the assessments of the U.S. Navy, U.S. Department of Defense, or any other U.S. government entity. The author thanks Chris Sharman for comments/edits on earlier drafts of this article. Any errors/omissions are his alone.

boundary east of the island.² Aside from China's maritime law enforcement forces, which have established a "normalized" (常态化) presence in these waters, Beijing has deployed multiple marine scientific research ships to assert its claims to Taiwan's maritime entitlements and, by extension, the island itself.³

While PRC survey ships have commonly operated east of Taiwan for years, their numbers have greatly increased in the last two months.⁴ Most recently, from 17-23 July, China deployed a 3,000-ton fisheries research vessel, the *Lan Hai* 201 (蓝海 201), to the area.⁵ See Figure 1 below. The PRC Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs stated that the mission was intended to "comprehensively understand the state of fisheries resources in China's jurisdictional space."⁶ During its cruise, the ship operated within Taiwan's exclusive economic zones (EEZ). On 17 July, for example, it appeared just 40 nautical miles off Taiwan's east coast, exhibiting the speed and course changes indicative of survey activity. See Figure 2 below. Given the purpose and location of the cruise, this was a clear violation of Taiwan's sovereign rights to regulate fisheries resources in its EEZ.⁷



Figure 1. The *Lan Hai* 201⁸

² "Japan-Philippines Joint Statement on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: 'Weaving the Future Together: Peace, Prosperity, Possibilities,'" Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 28 May 2026, www.mofa.go.jp/files/101035755.pdf.

³ 中国海警位中国台湾岛以东海域开展常态化执法巡查 ["The CCG Conducts Normalized Law Enforcement Patrols in the Waters East of Taiwan"], 中国海警微信公众号 [CCG WeChat Account], 4 July 2026, <https://www.news.cn/tw/20260704/caeefa50a7f0433b95d5ea50f46b100c/c.html>

⁴ 海巡官員：中國假執法真擴權 製造東部海域管轄權假象 ["Coast Guard Official: China is Faking Law Enforcement to Expand its Power, Creating a False Impression of Jurisdiction Over the Eastern Ocean Areas"], 中央通訊社 [CNA], 20 July 2026, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aip/202607200127.aspx>.

⁵ IMO: 9860049; MMSI: 412371228

⁶ 农业农村部组织开展我国台湾岛以东管辖海域渔业资源调查 ["The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs Organizes a Survey of Fisheries Resources in Waters Under China's Jurisdiction East of Taiwan"], 农业农村部网站 [Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs], 23 July 2026, <https://app.xinhuanet.com/news/article.html?articleId=20260723338bab238a6b418a9c42c155b92520ea>.

⁷ United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Articles 56 and 62.

⁸ 我国最先进渔业科考船“蓝海 101”和“蓝海 201”通过竣工验收 ["China's Most Advanced Fisheries Research Ships, *Lan Hai* 101 and *Lan Hai* 201, Pass Final Inspection"], Chinese Society for Oceanology and Limnology, 28 September 2021, <https://csol.qdio.ac.cn/portal/article/index.html?id=2831&cid=13>.

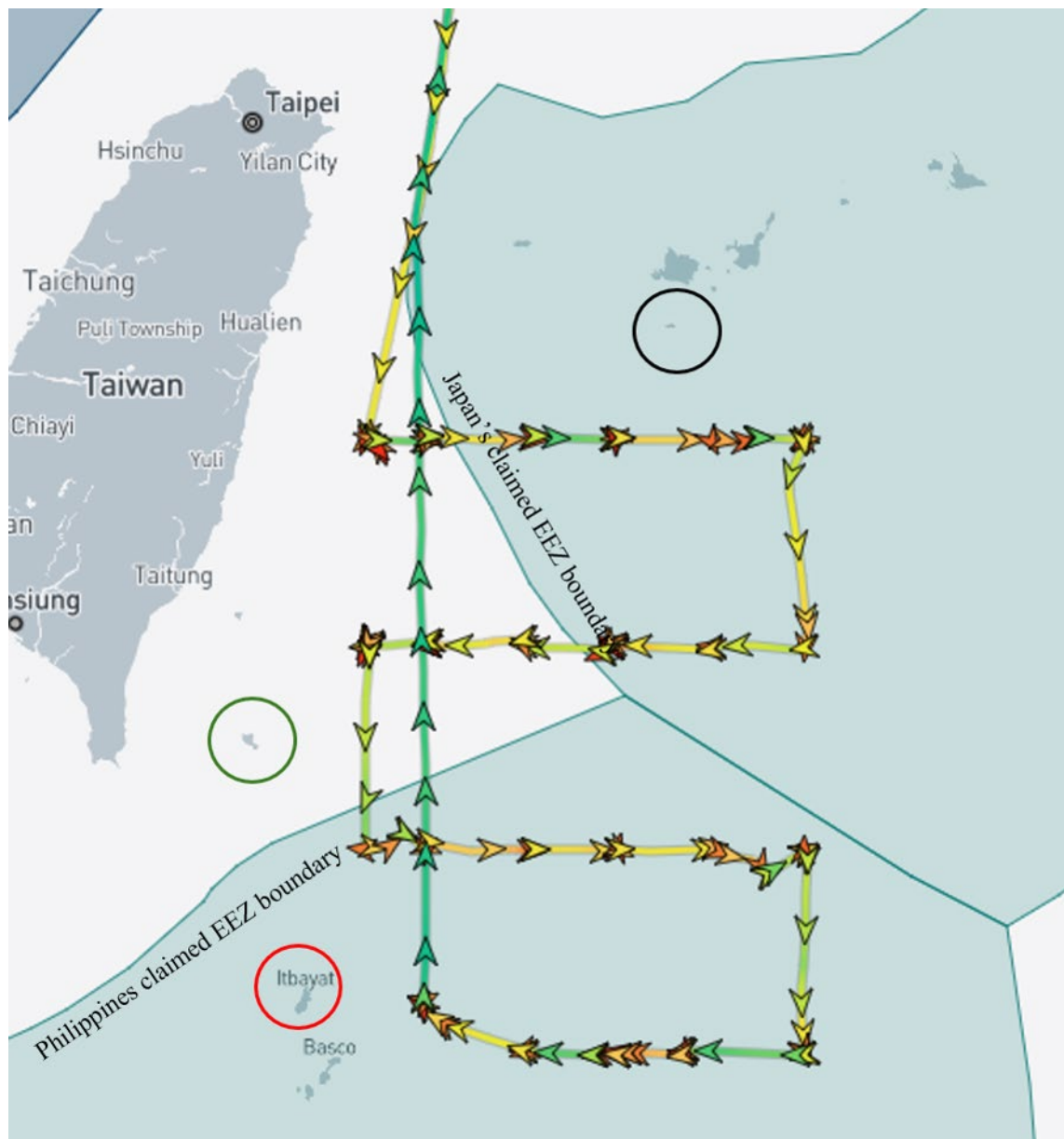


Figure 2. The Operations of the *Lan Hai* 201 (17-23 July 2026).⁹

However, the *Lan Hai* 201 also operated at more remote distances from Taiwan. On 22 July, for example, the ship approached to within just 35 nautical miles of the east coast of Itbayat, in the Philippines Batanes Islands (circled in red). Given that this location is 90 nautical miles southeast of Taiwan's Orchid Island (circled in green), there is no plausible justification for claiming these waters as "China's jurisdictional space."

This segment of the cruise is significant because the PRC has only recently raised questions about the status of the Batanes. In late May, an academic workshop held at China's Jinan University "unanimously concluded" (一致认为) that the islands rightfully belong to Taiwan,

⁹ www.marinetraffic.com

not the Philippines.¹⁰ This was not a formal policy statement, and authoritative PRC media outlets did not push the narrative.¹¹ Still, the unanimity of the conclusion—and the fact that unorthodox views on China’s territorial claims cannot be raised and debated without Party approval—made it very concerning. The activities of the *Lan Hai* 201 near the Batanes violated the Philippines’ sovereign rights to regulate fisheries resources in its EEZ.¹² When considered in light of the Jinan University workshop and the PRC Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs statement that the ship was operating in “China’s jurisdictional space,” the cruise of the *Lan Hai* 201 must be understood as an effort to amplify doubts about the status of the Philippines’ northernmost islands.



Figure 3. Group Photo from the Jinan University Workshop on the Topic of Sovereignty Over the Batanes.¹³

Two other facts are worth considering. First, this was not the first time that PRC research ships have conducted surveys close to the Batanes, in waters that unquestionably fall within the

¹⁰ 我院举办日菲“划界”背景下巴丹岛主权问题学术研讨会 [“Our Institute Hosts Academic Seminar on the Sovereignty of Batan Island Against the Backdrop of Japan-Philippines ‘Maritime Delimitation’”], 暨南大学国际关系学院 [Jinan University School of International Studies], 7 July 2026, <https://web.archive.org/web/20260723210937/https://sis-aocs.jnu.edu.cn/2026/0707/c3017a859016/page.htm>. For unknown reasons, the workshop synopsis mistakenly translated the Batanes as 巴丹群岛 instead of the standard PRC translation: 巴坦群岛。

¹¹ The *Global Times* covered the workshop in both English and Chinese. Fan Wei, “Action Required to Safeguard China’s Sovereignty of the Batanes Islands: Chines Scholars,” *Global Times*, 9 July 2026, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202607/1365585.shtml>; 樊巍 [Fan Wei], 国内学者研讨声索巴丹群岛主权 [“Chines Scholars Discuss Claims to Sovereignty Over the Batan Islands”], 环球时报 [Global Times], 9 July 2026, <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/4SJyYkliF8k>;

¹² UNCLOS, Article 62.

¹³ “Our Institute Hosts Academic Seminar on the Sovereignty of Batan Island Against the Backdrop of Japan-Philippines ‘Maritime Delimitation.’”

Philippines EEZ. In November 2025, well before the current imbroglio, the PRC acoustic survey ship *Shi Yan 1* carried out survey activities ~80 nautical miles east of Itbayat.¹⁴ This, then, begs the question: what PRC policy position justified these activities? It is possible, of course, that the two surveys simply had different purposes. The PRC may have deployed the *Shi Yan 1* to quietly study the acoustic characteristics of an operationally important ocean area, hoping that Manila would not notice, while the cruise of the *Lan Hai 201* was a political act intended to punish Manila for the joint statement with Japan.¹⁵ It is also possible that Beijing was reconsidering the status of the Batanes even before the Japan-Philippines joint statement, and the cruise of the *Shi Yan 1* reflected an emerging policy position, i.e., that China can and should advance a claim to these strategically valuable islands.

Second, during this recent deployment, the *Lan Hai 201* also operated well within Japan's EEZ, in waters south of the Yaeyama Islands. On 18 July, the ship approached as close as 40 nautical miles to Hateruma (circled in black) and, based on publicly available ship tracking data, it clearly exhibited the speed and position changes indicative of survey activities.¹⁶ See Figure 2 above. While it is common for PRC civilian survey ships to operate without permission in Japan's EEZ, this usually occurs in disputed space in the East China Sea. The operations of the *Lan Hai 201* south of Hateruma likely had a more malignant purpose. In 2013, as tensions flared with Tokyo over the status of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Beijing allowed Chinese academics to raise questions about the status of Japan's Ryukyu Islands, just as it did with the Batanes. Thus, the cruise of the *Lan Hai 201* may have been an effort to resurrect that earlier episode to further antagonize its neighbor to the east.¹⁷

To summarize, the operations of the *Lan Hai 201* are not significant because they violated the coastal state rights of Taiwan, Japan, and the Philippines. After all, the week-long survey of an unarmed research vessel is a relatively minor offense. Rather, they deserve scrutiny because they were clearly intended to raise questions about the sovereignty of the territory that generates those rights, which is a far more serious provocation.

¹⁴ IMO: 9405758. MMSI: 413542000

¹⁵ Under UNCLOS, the two ships were conducting distinct types of operations, although both fall within coastal state jurisdiction. Owned and operated by the Chinese Academy of Science, a civilian research organization, the *Shi Yan 1* was presumed to be conducting "marine scientific research," while the *Lan Hai 201* was conducting a fisheries survey.

¹⁶ The PRC deployed two China Coast Guard cutters (2305 and 1401) to escort the *Lan Hai 201* as it operated close to Hateruma on 18 July, when it was reportedly approached by a Japan Coast Guard patrol ship. 日本巡视船试图逼近在台东海域作业的我科考船，2艘在附近执法巡查的中国海警船将其拦截 ["A Japanese Patrol Vessel Attempted to Approach a Chinese Research Ship in Waters East of Taiwan, But Was Intercepted by Two China Coast Guard Vessels Conducting Law Enforcement Patrols."], 环球时报 [*Global Times*], 25 July 2026, <https://m.huanqiu.com/article/4SWfjSgWije>

¹⁷ "Chinese Academics in Call to Review Japanese Sovereignty Over Okinawa," *The Guardian*, 14 May 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/14/china-japan-okinawa-sovereignty-ryukyu> 张海鹏 [Zhang Haipeng] and 李国强 [Li Guoqiang], 钓鱼岛归中国 琉球也到可再议的时候 ["The Diaoyu Islands Belong to China; It Is Time to Reconsider the Ryukyu Islands"] 人民日报 [*People's Daily*], 8 May 2013, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/0508/c1001-21400715.html>,