

China

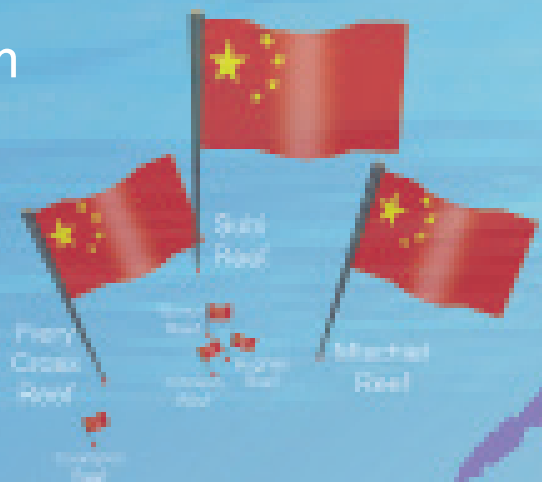
Vietnam

South
China
Sea

Brunei

Malaysia

Indonesia





MISCHIEF

in the

SOUTH CHINA SEA

Philippines

By Wilson Brissett, Senior Editor

China is still claiming and militarizing the vital international waterway.

Over the last two years, China's activities in the South China Sea have attracted world-wide attention and suspicion. The communist state illegally claims a vast portion of the South China Sea as its territorial waters, and efforts to create land on the high seas have become increasingly militaristic.

In 2014, China accelerated a land reclamation program focused on the Paracel Islands, Spratly Islands, and Scarborough Shoal.

The program involves removing sediment from the bottom of the sea and piling it on coral reefs to create new landmasses. These newly built islands—Mischief Reef, Subi Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, Cuarteron Reef—are some of their names—have since become construction sites for both civil and military infrastructure projects.

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CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative/DigitalGlobe image

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Google Earth image

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China Ministry of National Defense photo by Lui Rui, Xinhua



In February, Adm. Harry B. Harris Jr., head of US Pacific Command, told the Senate Armed Services Committee, “In a little over two years, China has constructed more than 3,000 acres of artificial land” in the South China Sea.

Satellite imagery shows these new geographical features are now home to airstrips long enough to land military bomber and fighter aircraft, build light-houses, substantial support buildings, and military-grade radar facilities. Aerial photos also show the Chinese have dredged large areas to create harbors that can service naval ships.

Harris called the program “a strategic frontline in [China’s] quest to dominate East Asia” and warned, “These events threaten the region’s peace and prosperity.”

MANY DISPUTES

Jason Thomson, writing in *The Christian Science Monitor*, believes China has already established a “strategic triangle” for influence in the South China Sea. *Foreign Affairs*’ Mira Rapp-Hooper sees China’s strategic goal as that of creating “an anti-access, area-denial (A2/AD) capability that aims to keep foreign powers from entering or operating in the waters close to its shores in the event of a major conflict.”

The South China Sea expansion has created a series of territorial disputes with China’s neighbors Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia. While Harris noted some of these disagreements date as far back as 1974, the escalated pace of China’s construction efforts has opened fresh controversy.

The Philippines recently brought a case against China before an international tribunal at The Hague, which ruled on July 12 that China’s claims



/1/ A satellite image of Subi Reef taken on July 27, 2012; the green-hued areas were actually under water. Several Chinese ships are in the lagoon. China occupied the reef in 1988 as part of its push to expand its footprint in the South China Sea. /2/ A recent photo of Subi Reef. Note the construction of a large runway and support facilities. /3/ A satellite image/illustration of Mischief Reef shows possible parking areas for Chinese aircraft. The current facilities can accommodate any aircraft in China’s fleet. /4/ Dredging ships work on enlarging Mischief Reef. /5/ A Chinese H-6K bomber patrols the reefs and islands in the South China Sea. Such patrols will become a “regular” practice, according to Chinese officials.

1



CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative/DigitalGlobe image

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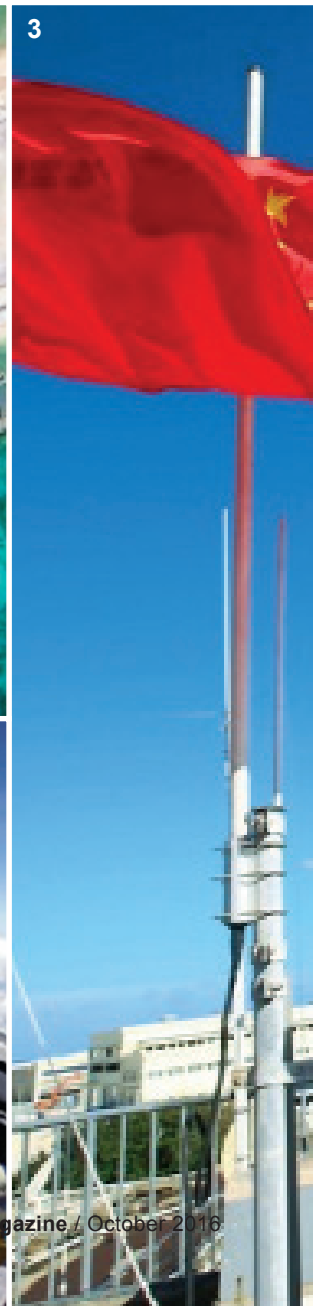


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CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative/DigitalGlobe image

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China Ministry of Defense photo



CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative/DigitalGlobe image

over much of the South China Sea have no historical or legal validity.

This ruling was unequivocal, but enforcing its outcomes will be difficult. The court's power rests on broad acceptance of the current international system, but "China's actions undermine the international rules-based order," according to Harris.

Indeed, *The Wall Street Journal* reports that Beijing has been unrepentant since the tribunal's judgment, with the Chinese military announcing on Aug. 7 that it had flown H-6K bombers and Su-30 fighter jets over the Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal. The newspaper quoted a Chinese air force spokesman as stating that the patrol was "to enhance combat capabilities to deal with various security threats." This development affirms the Defense

Department's assessment, in its 2016 "Annual Report to Congress" on China, that the nation has used low-intensity coercion to enhance its presence and control in disputed areas of the East and South China Sea."

The mere existence of the artificial islands and their associated infrastructure makes it difficult to roll back China's claims in the region.

Concern about the reef building is not just about military presence and intimidation. Beijing's expansion into the South China Sea is also an attempt to extend the nation's economic interests at other nations' expense, by creating claims to the fishing grounds, oil, and other natural resources in the sea in general and around the reefs and shoals in particular.

PACOM's Harris said a proper response to the situation "requires national resolve and a willingness to apply all elements of national power." As an example, he pointed to 2016 freedom of navigation operations in which US Navy ships sailed close to disputed Chinese reefs to demonstrate international freedom of the seas. He also announced the availability of \$425 million in DOD funding to support Secretary of Defense Ashton B. Carter's Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative, which seeks to strengthen military-to-military relationships in the region.

After the latest freedom of navigation operation in May, however, the Chinese air force scrambled fighter jets, complicating the way forward for US strategy on the South China Sea.

China's government and air forces have behaved recklessly in the region in the recent past, and unless Beijing accepts international law in the South China Sea it is entirely possible that armed conflict could break out because of these artificial islands in international waters. ★



Sina.com.cn photo

/1/ A satellite image of Fiery Cross Reef in 2006. A small vessel or structure can be spotted in a lower inlet. /2/ Fiery Cross Reef in 2015. Construction is ongoing, and China is building a runway at least 10,000 feet long—long enough to accommodate any Chinese aircraft. /3/ A screenshot from the Chinese website sina.com shows Chinese naval personnel on Fiery Cross Reef during a military training exercise in January. /4/ A J-11 fighter pilot fires an air-to-air missile at a simulated target during live-fire training in the South China Sea in July. /5/ A satellite photo of Chinese construction, including large, permanent structures, on Gaven Reef, an artificial island, in February.