

The Challenge of Chinese Revisionism: The Expanding Role of China's Non-Military Maritime Vessels

By Zachary M. Hosford and Ely Ratner

Recent actions by China's non-military law enforcement vessels pose one of the most immediate threats to peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. Although the high-end capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) preoccupy U.S. strategists and planners, Beijing is actively deploying ships from its maritime agencies to forcefully advance sovereignty claims in waters currently outside its administrative control. To this end, Chinese maritime law enforcement ships have been harassing legitimate foreign commercial and military vessels, occupying waters that surround disputed land features and making provocative incursions into the territorial waters of neighboring states. China's willingness to use these vessels in assertive ways presents a fundamental evolution in Beijing's efforts to redraw the geographic boundaries of East Asia. The United States, together with its allies and partners, will need a new strategic approach to meet this emerging challenge. At stake are U.S. national interests in the maintenance of peace and stability, respect for international law, freedom of navigation and unimpeded lawful commerce.¹

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Over the last decade, China has substantially modernized the capabilities of its numerous maritime agencies: the Border Control Department's China Maritime Police, the Maritime Safety Administration, the Fisheries Law Enforcement Command, the General Administration of Customs and the State Oceanic

Administration (particularly its China Maritime Surveillance, or CMS).² Sometimes referred to as the “five dragons,” these agencies have different resources, inventories and capabilities, but all are growing in size and power.³ At the same time, the maritime agencies are increasingly coordinating with each other, the PLA Navy (PLAN) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Yet, the growing size and capabilities of China’s maritime law enforcement agencies are only part of the story. After all, modern-

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ization is to be expected given China’s rapid economic growth and its commensurate dependence on maritime commerce. Furthermore, other states in the region are also building and reinforcing their coast guard capabilities, notably neighboring Japan.⁴ With maritime forces expanding throughout the region, how states employ these capabilities will have a considerable effect on regional stability.

Chinese strategists have traditionally seen non-military maritime vessels as a buffer between navies that helps avert crises by reducing the presence of naval forces and the likelihood of navy-on-navy accidents and inci-

dents.⁵ From this vantage point, coast guard-like forces are stabilizing insofar as they serve to prevent escalation, while also dampening regional concerns about the naval threat posed by a rising China. Western analysts have likewise noted that coast guards can contribute to regional security by participating in confidence building measures and facilitating cooperative maritime activities that address transnational issues including piracy, narcotics and trafficking in persons.⁶

Neither of these sanguine views, however, accurately depicts the dominant trends in East Asia today. Rather than contributing to regional peace and security, the actions of China’s maritime agencies are destabilizing and instead increase the likelihood of war in the region. Through a variety of means, China has been increasingly willing and able to use non-military vessels to advance its sovereignty claims in the East and South China Seas.⁷ In local crises on China’s periphery – with the likes of Vietnam, the Philippines, and Japan – maritime law enforcement vessels have played a leading role as the tip of the spear of Chinese coercion.⁸

Two simultaneous trends are particularly destabilizing. First, vessels from China's maritime agencies are challenging the administrative status quo of disputed rocks and islands. In instances where maritime rights and sovereignty claims are often derived from *de facto* administration and presence, Beijing is using non-military maritime vessels either to control disputed territories (so as to assert Chinese sovereignty) or to disrupt the administrative activities of other regional powers (which creates on-the-ground disputes where none previously existed).

The second disquieting trend is that, although lightly armed or unarmed, Chinese maritime vessels are often coupled with PLAN capabilities over the horizon. By using "non-military" vessels to engage in military coercion, China is increasing the likelihood of escalation as well as the speed with which it could occur. At the same time, the increased activity and assertiveness of Chinese maritime vessels are ultimately provoking military responses from regional powers to repel and deter Chinese incursions – which contradicts Chinese arguments that these forces serve to keep military forces at bay.⁹

Taken together, these trends are creating a regional security environment in which sovereignty disputes are intensifying and becoming more militarized. These dynamics were manifest during the row over Scarborough Reef in the South China Sea, where China mounted and sustained a substantial maritime law enforcement presence with PLAN ships nearby, even as the Philippines withdrew its own government vessels. Since consolidating its occupation of the waters surrounding the reef, China has been in no mood to compromise, which would include, for instance, removing its government ships and returning to the status quo ante.

Chinese behavior in the East China Sea has followed a similar playbook. China has opportunistically used the pretext of Japanese domestic political machinations to challenge Japan's administrative control of the Senkaku Islands.¹⁰ Chinese maritime vessels have become increasingly assertive around the islands, buoyed by vitriolic anti-Japanese nationalism stirred up by Beijing.¹¹ With both Chinese and Japanese vessels operating in the waters surrounding the islands, some Chinese academics and think tank strategists (often delivering messages from Beijing) now audaciously argue that the two countries must find a new way to reflect the reality of co-administration. China's provocations are also compelling Japan to respond with ever-increasing strength, for example scrambling F-15 fighters to repel CMS surveillance aircraft flying over the islands.¹²

These events are troubling in no small part because China is trying to coerce U.S. treaty allies. Yet it is even more worrisome that there is

no clear end in sight. China is eagerly capitalizing on opportunities to advance its sovereignty claims, with Chinese officials reportedly describing a “Scarborough model” of coercion and occupation.¹³ China’s leaders have also coupled these actions with such uncompromising and nationalist rhetoric that it would require an act of improbable political courage for leaders in Beijing to publicly support dispute management mechanisms that were mutually-agreeable to other states in the region. The powerful domestic drivers of Chinese foreign policy – related to territorial integrity, regime legitimacy and economic growth – narrow the possibility or likelihood of Chinese flexibility on sovereignty issues.

China’s particular use of non-military maritime vessels is disrupting regional security in ways that compromise U.S. interests, challenge U.S. allies and could very well lead to conflict. Preventing Chinese revisionism in the first place is no small task, but it should be a key U.S. priority since peacefully reverting to pre-existing sovereignty arrangements after the fact will be extremely difficult, if not impossible.¹⁴

U.S. policymakers should therefore reinforce and renew regional stability in four ways. First, the United States should provide resources, training and hardware for regional powers to develop the capability to defend their own waters, making them less vulnerable to Chinese coercion and intimidation. Although the United States is already engaged in security cooperation throughout the region, it should enhance these efforts in the maritime domain. For example, the U.S. Navy and U.S. Coast Guard should explore opportunities for greater cooperation and coordination in working with allies and partners. In addition, U.S. resource constraints make it more attractive to work with capable allies in building the capacity of third parties. Rather than thinking about security cooperation primarily in bilateral contexts, U.S. officials should reach out to Australia, Japan, Singapore and even allies in Europe to identify specific areas for multilateral cooperation with less advanced militaries in the Asia Pacific. Finally, either the National Security Staff or the Office of the Secretary of Defense should provide Pacific Command with explicit guidance about the political and diplomatic goals of U.S. security cooperation to ensure that it reinforces broader U.S. government strategy.

In many cases, regional militaries and coast guards are already making significant investments in their own maritime capabilities, and the United States can complement these efforts in other areas such as maritime domain awareness. As regional capabilities improve, U.S. officials should underscore the importance of caution and restraint so as to avoid offering Beijing an excuse to escalate crises and further advance China’s claims.

Second, the United States should find new ways to engage China on maritime security and maritime law enforcement issues. U.S. Coast Guard cooperation with Chinese counterparts has been too limited in terms of both activities and interlocutors. Existing bilateral cooperation on preventing driftnet fishing and in venues such as the North Pacific Coast Guard Forum could be used as building blocks for deeper engagement. Doing so would not be a silver bullet, but it would provide additional channels for developing

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cooperation on maritime security, reinforcing best practices and international norms, and helping to build personal relationships that could be drawn upon during a crisis.

At the same time, U.S. officials from the White House, State Department and Defense Department should raise concerns with their Chinese counterparts about China's coercive use of maritime law enforcement vessels. Raising the profile of this key dimension of maritime security will ensure that it is addressed in regular diplomatic and military-to-military channels, rather than being relegated to less frequent and lower level bilateral coast guard and law enforcement engagements.

Opportunities to discuss this issue

include state visits and bilateral meetings on the sidelines of major international forums, as well as the major U.S.-China dialogues such as the Strategic and Economic Dialogue, the Strategic Security Dialogue, the Defense Consultative Talks and the Asia-Pacific Consultations. A good first step would be for the State Department to deliver a diplomatic demarche on this issue to the Chinese Embassy in Washington, dual-tracked by the U.S. Embassy in Beijing to China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This would signal the seriousness with which the United States takes the issue and prepare the groundwork for subsequent and more substantive bilateral discussions at future high-level engagements.

Third, the president, the secretary of state and the secretary of defense should raise concerns about the behavior of non-military maritime vessels in their prepared remarks at leading regional forums, including the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the Shangri-La Dialogue. The United States should also continue to support multilateral maritime cooperation and activities through regional meetings and institutions, including the Experts

Working Groups of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus. In doing so, the United States should continue pursuing a balanced, principles-based policy that holds all countries to the same standard, even if that means criticizing the behavior of allies and partners.

Finally, U.S. strategists will have to consider new concepts of deterrence to enhance the credibility of U.S. commitments in the region. Extended deterrence is difficult enough, given the challenges of geography and asymmetric stakes, and China's use of non-military vessels amplifies these quandaries for the United States by (falsely) appearing to stay below the military threshold while complicating traditional notions of retaliation. The United States will therefore need to expand its concept of deterrence beyond the threat of countering overt aggression with aggression. In response, a more effective deterrence strategy would not only threaten to respond to aggression in kind, but more profoundly to shape the region – with allies, partners, rules and institutions – such that tactical Chinese victories that garner incremental sovereignty gains are net losers for Beijing in the form of increased isolation and counterbalancing. Reconceptualizing deterrence in East Asia is a key task ahead for scholars and policy-makers alike.

The United States, in concert with the vast majority of major powers in the region and the international community, should not sit idly by if China continues its revisionist efforts to expand Chinese territory at the expense of regional stability. China's non-military maritime vessels are at the forefront of these efforts, and the United States needs to develop a more coherent and comprehensive strategy to stem the tide of Chinese coercion and incrementalism.

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ENDNOTES

1. See U.S. Department of State, "South China Sea," Press Statement, August 3, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/08/196022.htm>.
2. For a comprehensive assessment of the roles and capabilities of these agencies, see Lyle Goldstein, "Five Dragons Stirring Up the Sea: Challenge and Opportunity in China's Improving Maritime Enforcement Capabilities" (Naval War College, China Maritime Studies Institute, April 2010), http://www.usnwc.edu/Research--Gaming/China-Maritime-Studies-Institute/Publications/documents/CMSI_No5_web1.pdf.
3. Since 2000, the CMS has added 13 ships to its fleet, including 11 decommissioned warships transferred from the PLA Navy (PLAN), two of which are 3,000-plus ton Type 051 (Luda I-class) guided-missile destroyers that will be deployed to the East and South China Seas. The State Oceanic Administration counts more than 400 ships in its inventory, and according to China's current five-year plan, the agency by 2015 aims to add 36 new marine surveillance ships with displacements of more than 600 tons. The Fisheries Law Enforcement Command (FLEC) is also undergoing fleet modernization as the PLAN recently transferred the Yuzheng 206, a 5,800-ton ship, to the agency, making it China's largest fisheries patrol ship. According to the Ministry of Agriculture (the FLEC's parent agency), China had well over 2,000 fishery patrol ships by the end of 2010, more than 500 of which were built in the past five years. In late December 2012, the Maritime Safety Administration (MSA) launched the 300-foot Haixun 21, the first open ocean patrol ship with a helipad to be put into service in the South China Sea. See J. Michael Cole, "China's Maritime Surveillance Fleet Adds Muscle," *The Diplomat*, January 3, 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/flashpoints-blog/2013/01/03/chinas-maritime-surveillance-fleet-adds-muscle/>; Wang Qian, "Patrol ship starts maiden voyage to Diaoyus," *China Daily*, December 12, 2012, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-12/12/content_16007950.htm; "China sends first oceangoing patrol vessel to South China Sea," *People's Daily Online*, December 28, 2012, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90882/8073353.html>; and Lyle Goldstein, "Non-Military Escalation: China Cultivates New Hef in Civil Maritime Forces," *China Brief* 12 no. 23 (Jamestown Foundation, November 30, 2012), http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5btnews%5d=40183&cHash=496752b2c95deda85c38c4676e822b3f.
4. Japan is extending the service lives of older Japan Coast Guard (JCG) ships, and in October 2012, former Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda increased the modernization budget of the JCG by 17 billion yen. Picking up where Noda left off, newly-elected Prime Minister Shinzo Abe further boosted the JCG by requesting funds for six additional patrol ships and proposed the commissioning of retired Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force ships into the JCG. See Yoko Masuda, "The Race to Beef Up Japan's Coast Guard," Japan Real Time blog on wsj.com, October 27, 2012, <http://blogs.wsj.com/japanrealtime/2012/10/27/the-race-to-beef-up-japans-coast-guard/>. Note that the latter of these initiatives collapsed after substantial legal hurdles affecting the potential transfer arose. Sheila A. Smith, "Mixed Signals on Japan's Defense," *Asia Unbound* blog on cfr.com, January 11, 2013, <http://blogs.cfr.org/asia/2013/01/11/mixed-signals-on-japans-defense/>; and "Coast guard looking for few old ships, retirees to beef up isle patrols," *The Japan Times*, January 3, 2013, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20130103a1.html>.
5. Goldstein, "Five Dragons Stirring Up the Sea."
6. Sam Bateman, "Coast Guards: New Forces for Regional Order and Security" (East-West Center, January 2003).
7. Taylor Fravel, "Maritime Security in the South China Sea and the Competition Over Maritime Rights," in Patrick Cronin, et. al., "Cooperation from Strength: The United States, China, and the South China Sea" (Center for a New American Security, January 2012), 33-50.
8. James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara have referred to this as "small-stick diplomacy," where China uses its maritime enforcement vessels to signal that certain territory is not, in fact, contested, but rather inherently Chinese, and therefore more appropriately patrolled by these ships than by PLA Navy vessels. The Chinese government makes neighboring states aware, however, that naval ships await over the horizon if the maritime vessels are challenged. See James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "Small-Stick Diplomacy in the South China Sea," *Nationalinterest.org*, April 23, 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/small-stick-diplomacy-the-south-china-sea-6831?page=2>; and James R. Holmes, "A Competitive Turn: How Increased Chinese Maritime Actions Complicate U.S. Partnerships," *East and South China Seas Bulletin* 7 (Center for a New American Security, December 14, 2012).

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9. A similar dynamic is playing out in the aerial domain as well, with unarmed reconnaissance aircraft from the State Oceanic Administration's China Marine Surveillance (CMS) branch making multiple incursions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, recently backed by PLA Air Force J-10 fighter aircraft.

10. In September 2012, the Japanese government purchased three of the Senkaku Islands from a private Japanese citizen to prevent the conservative nationalist governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, from doing so himself. The purchase was made to prevent Ishihara from taking unilateral actions, such as building structures on the islands, that would have escalated tensions with China. Nonetheless, Beijing took this opportunity to elevate the issue and seek to alter the status quo. See Jane Perlez, "China Accuses Japan of Stealing After Purchase of Group of Disputed Islands," *The New York Times*, September 11, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/12/world/asia/china-accuses-japan-of-stealing-disputed-islands.html?_r=0.

11. Frank Ching, "China anti-Japanese propaganda fuels Japan nationalism," *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, January 22, 2013, http://www.ejinsight.com/template/eng/guest/jsp/detail.jsp?dnews_id=711&title_id=56663&list_type=&cate_code=ec.

12. "Japan scrambles F-15 fighter jets after Chinese aircraft spotted near Senkakus," *The Japan Times*, January 6, 2013, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20130106a5.html>. The scrambling of Japan Air Self-Defense Force F-15s prompted China to respond by launching J-10 fighter jets of its own. "China scrambles fighters to tail Japanese planes as island tensions rise,"

The Washington Post, January 11, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/china-scrambles-fighters-to-tail-japanese-planes-as-island-tensions-rise/2013/01/11/edce4eea-5bf7-11e2-b8b2-0d18a64c8dfa_story.html.

13. See Trefor Moss, "China's Not-So-Hard-Power Strategy," *The Diplomat*, June 28, 2012, <http://thediplomat.com/2012/06/28/chinas-not-so-hard-power-strategy/>.

14. The literature on decisionmaking underscores this phenomenon. See Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica*, 47 no. 2 (March 1979), 263-291, http://www.princeton.edu/~kahneman/docs/Publications/prospect_theory.pdf

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