

The Era of Coast Guards in the Asia-Pacific Is Upon Us

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How do coastal states assert sovereignty over disputed maritime areas? In the Asia-Pacific, as in many other parts of the world, the answer to this question until recently has been to send the navy. Navies offer a strong signal of state power and control, aimed at alerting rival claimants that the territory under dispute is a matter of national security and a matter that states are willing to go to war over.

My research, published recently in *Naval War College Review* (PDF), suggests that coast guards, not navies, are the new asset of choice for many states in East and Southeast Asia to assert sovereignty over disputed waters. This shift is driven in part by a perception among regional policymakers that coast guards offer a less militaristic face of state power in disputed maritime areas, as well as by a presumption that coast guards demonstrate that the dispute in question is under domestic civilian jurisdiction, subject to domestic laws and regulations.

On its face, having coast guards patrol large bodies of disputed territory, like in the South China Sea, might be cause for optimism, as coast guards can be viewed as less escalatory and possess limited war-fighting capabilities. They have the capacity to serve as a source for intrastate cooperation by conducting, for example, joint search-and-rescue operations. But the way coast guards are employed in the South China Sea as blunt instruments to assert state power gives more cause for concern than optimism. Aggressive tactics and increasingly formidable armaments on many newer coast guard cutters have blurred the lines between platforms and missions traditionally associated with “law enforcement” and those of “national defense” during peacetime.

At the center of regional coast guard growth is China, which in 2013 consolidated four of its five maritime law enforcement agencies under the State Oceanic Administration, further unifying the forces and doctrine of a new China Coast Guard (CCG). The reform represents the bureaucratic manifestation of a larger commitment by China to build the largest and most formidable coast guard force in the world in terms of total overall tonnage, which I calculate at around 190,000 tons.

China's aggressive tactics and rapid enlargement of forces have fundamentally reshaped outlooks of regional states. By employing what

China regards as non-military assets to demonstrate administrative control over disputed territory, China has attempted to “civilianize” its expansion of sovereignty protection to strengthen its legal claims over other claimants. As a result, other countries in the region have sought to bolster their own coast guard fleets and increasingly feel compelled to turn to coast guards to counterbalance China and assert administrative control in disputed waters.

Many states in the region, particularly Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia, however, lack the funds to match China's coast guard fleet. Many still rely on navies to patrol and police their exclusive economic zones, or fall back on navies during times of heightened disputes with China. Whether it is appropriate for states to respond to China's coast guard expansion by bolstering their own coast guard fleets is a matter of ongoing debate among policymakers in the region.

China is not the only country expanding its coast guard. All the other coast guards in the study — Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines — are in the process of multi-year fleet expansion initiatives and have added roughly 35,000, 15,000, and 10,000 tons, respectively, to their fleets over the last five years. Japan, for example, is in the process of procuring an additional 25 vessels, in large part to address increasing concern over Chinese actions near the Senkaku Islands. Of these 25 vessels, 10 medium-endurance cutters (1,000–3,000 tons) are to be deployed to Ishigaki Island, the closest outpost with vessels responsible for patrolling the Senkakus. The accretion of ships near the Senkakus is part of a broader campaign by Japan to strengthen its presence in the disputed area, to include the permanent stationing of a 600-member coast guard unit.

Several shifts in CCG capabilities and operations in the South China Sea resulting from these reforms are apparent. First, China is employing larger, more heavily-armed, and more capable offshore patrol vessels for longer periods of time in disputed waters in the South China Sea. China has begun commissioning CCG cutters based on the type 054 “Jiangkai” II frigate hull frame, armed with 76mm auto-cannons. Compared to other coast guard vessels of this size (~3,500 tons), these new Type 818 CCG cutters represent the most potently-armed cutters in the region. Recent photos from Chinese sources indicate the CCG is equipping even smaller-sized CCG cutters (~2,500 tons) with 76mm auto-cannons.

Second, CCG patrols in the South China Sea now operate more widely, more regularly, and apparently also more assertively. In the past, CCG vessels encountering “illegal” activities of foreign vessels within the nine-dash line would take less confrontational measures, such as querying other vessels over their deployment purpose, verbally asserting Chinese

sovereignty through radio communications, and sometimes attempting to expel foreign vessels with floodlights and water cannons.

Following the reforms, patrol vessels have adopted more aggressive tactics, such as shouldering, ramming, and endangering freedom of navigation of other countries' fishing and law enforcement vessels. The arbitral tribunal ruling under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea in July 2016 found that China's coast guard had breached several articles governing safety and navigation at sea.

Finally, the CCG is coordinating intelligence, command, and control to a greater degree with Chinese fishing, maritime militia, and People's Liberation Army Navy vessels. Recent joint exercises between the CCG and China's military services highlight efforts at honing interoperability.

To be sure, the reform is still in its early stages and the process of consolidating agencies, cultures, and training has proven more difficult than anticipated. Nevertheless, the CCG has made great strides and will become more effective with time.

What does this mean for regional security and U.S. policy in the region? Policymakers should adapt to the reality that the new face of state power in the East and South China Sea will increasingly be represented by coast guards, not navies. Coast guards will not only be deployed in increasing numbers, but also in close proximity with rival coast guards and other civilian actors. This scenario introduces a new set of escalation dynamics that countries in the region are only beginning to grapple with. Such dynamics will first require a much more efficient, real-time command and control architecture between naval, government, and civilian actors, on land and on the water. Second, a more robust and routinized joint exercise program should be pursued to enhance interoperability between coast guard and naval commanders. Finally, war-gamers must begin to develop games that deal exclusively with grey-zone escalation scenarios involving non-military actors such as coast guards, maritime militia, and fishing vessels. The results of these games could assist military strategists in great need of concept of operations that account for non-military actors and assets, which will in turn feed into operational imperatives such as thresholds for use of force and non-kinetic options at sea.

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