

The Sansha Garrison: China's Deliberate Escalation in the South China Sea

By Oriana Skylar Mastro

China is conducting a coordinated and deliberate campaign of coercive diplomacy in the South China Sea. For example, China recently decided to build a military garrison with little operational utility in the city of Sansha, with the apparent goal of consolidating control over disputed islands and increasing its regional influence. That decision fundamentally challenges two key aspects of the conventional wisdom in Washington about China's South China Sea strategy: that China's assertive behavior results from actions taken by the civilian and military agencies independently of the central government and that China has been moderating its policies toward the South China Sea since 2009.

In late June, the Chinese State Council upgraded Sansha, a community on Woody Island in the disputed Paracel Islands, to the status of a prefecture-level city. This gave Sansha's local government the authority to administer the Paracels, the Spratly Islands and Macclesfield Bank and their surrounding waters in the South China Sea.¹ On July 20, 2012, the Central Military Commission (CMC) approved plans to establish a military garrison in Sansha. The division-level command, under the Hainan provincial subcommand of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), will manage the city's national defense mobilization, military reserves and direct military operations.²

Both the Philippines and Vietnam have lashed out against this Chinese decision as a severe infringement of their sovereignty.³ Five days after the garrison announcement, Philippine President Benigno Aquino argued that his government had shown "forbearance and goodwill" in the ongoing standoff with China over Scarborough Shoal but that Manila would now have to show strong resolve.⁴

About this publication

The bulletin series provides timely analysis and information on security issues in the East and South China Seas. For further information, please contact info@cnas.org.

In Hanoi, rare public protests began in July after China upgraded Sansha's administrative level and solicited bids for drilling rights in adjacent waters.⁵ Although assertive Chinese actions – coupled with the fact that Beijing controls all of the Paracels, as well as 15 reefs and shoals within the Spratlys – have been a source of constant tension, Sansha has heightened regional concern to a new level.⁶

Despite these diplomatic reactions to China's attempts to strengthen its sovereignty claims, the Sansha garrison has minimal operational value barring a significant upgrade in naval and air infrastructure to enable sustained operations.⁷ Woody Island has had the bare minimum facilities needed to operate as a forward deployment base for

The Sansha garrison has minimal operational value barring a significant upgrade in naval and air infrastructure to enable sustained operations.

fighter aircraft since 1990,⁸ and its other infrastructure and facilities remain limited. Even though the garrison will technically house a division-level command and officer in charge,⁹ the PLA will most likely staff the headquarters with a small number of troops instead of a fully operational division.¹⁰ Moreover, any military action in the South China Sea will rely much more heavily on naval forces than on ground forces, and China already has such an overwhelming quantitative and qualitative advantage in naval forces that this

new command will not fundamentally change the balance of forces with Vietnam or the Philippines.¹¹

Nevertheless, the recent developments in Sansha are strategically significant because they challenge two common interpretations of China's overall behavior in the South China Sea. The first interpretation contends that China's assertive behavior results from an increasingly independent (if not rogue) PLA Navy that is seizing opportunities to protect its maritime interests and strengthen its role in the bureaucracy. This view also focuses on a Chinese internal coordination problem: Without explicit policy guidance from the highest levels of the government, semi-autonomous Chinese civilian agencies take actions that undermine the efforts of other parts of the bureaucracy to resolve disputes diplomatically. This often results in assertive activities that provoke harsh regional responses and undermine Chinese national interests. From this perspective, mitigating tensions in the South China Sea requires "a consistent policy from China executed uniformly throughout the different levels of government along with the authority to enforce it,"¹² rather than a change in Chinese strategy.

The Sansha upgrade and garrison show that China's increasingly assertive behavior in the South China Sea is coordinated and deliberate rather than the unintentional result of bureaucratic politics and poor coordination. The Chinese State Council, CMC and PLA were all involved in these decisions – suggesting top-down direction from the Politburo Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (whose top members hold appointments in both the CMC and the State Council). Moreover, the Chinese decided to upgrade Sansha's authority after Vietnam passed a national law of the sea that included the disputed Paracels and Spratlys in its definition of national waters.¹³ After this decision, subsequent moves were seamless; the State Council had to upgrade Sansha before the CMC could establish the garrison and a PLA senior colonel could command the post. In short, although it may be true that Chinese agencies do not always coordinate with each other, developments in Sansha show that direction clearly comes from above.

The Sansha decision was also carefully coordinated to enhance Chinese claims to natural resources in the South China Sea. At the same time that China reported Sansha's upgraded administrative control, the Chinese state-owned oil giant, the China National Offshore Oil Corporation, announced that it would open nine oil fields in the vicinity for bidding. Two days before the garrison announcement, the largest fleet of Chinese fishing vessels to ever set sail left Hainan Island for Zhubi Reef, notably escorted by a navy patrol ship.¹⁴ Although this progression of events could be a coincidence, it seems more likely that the Chinese government demonstrated exemplary interagency coordination, civil-military control and harmonization of its political, economic and military goals with its recent moves in Sansha. Even though Chinese agencies may not clear every tactical move with the Standing Committee, central authorities may have previously authorized the types of activities.

The second common interpretation of China's behavior is that it has been moderating its policies toward the South China Sea in the past two years, after recognizing that its actions escalated tensions too much. Yet even though Chinese encounters with U.S. vessels have diminished since 2010, assertive activities against other regional actors have actually increased. In 2009, China attracted negative attention after its vessels harassed the USNS *Impeccable* in March and a Chinese submarine collided with a sonar cable of the USS *John McCain* three months later. These actions not only resulted in a renewed U.S. focus on the South China Sea but also instigated a regional backlash. In response, China ceased challenging the United States and refocused on compelling weaker regional actors to abandon their territorial claims. During the past 18 months, there have been 10 instances of assertive Chinese activities in the South China Sea. These activities – such as Chinese patrol boats attempting to ram a Philippine vessel, Chinese

vessels cutting or disabling the cables of Vietnamese survey ships and China detaining 21 Vietnamese fishermen for seven weeks – were targeted mainly against Vietnam and the Philippines.¹⁵ However, the number of incidents has recently declined, from one every six weeks in 2011 to just two since January 2012.¹⁶

Yet the Sansha upgrade and other recent developments suggest that this is just a temporary lull. In the past, Chinese coercive diplomacy in the South China Sea has included a coordinated media campaign to signal resolve, in addition to political and military moves.¹⁷ Chinese articles and editorials inspired by strong public statements made by senior leaders, as well as the elaborate ceremony marking the establishment of Sansha that was broadcast across the country, suggest that this is the case with recent moves as well. For example, an editorial in the *Global Times*, a Chinese newspaper known for promulgating a nationalistic party line, argues that China is a great power and consequently should demonstrate its intent not only with diplomatic protest but also with action.¹⁸ The author scoffs at the diplomatic protests issued by Vietnam and the Philippines, noting that both Manila and Hanoi must have failed to take into account Chinese public opinion when they thought that such actions would have any effect. In the case of Sansha, Chinese blogs and twitter-like websites such as Weibo are populated with statements wholeheartedly supporting the recent moves for patriotic or personal reasons, such as opportunities for investment in real estate development or travel to the area.¹⁹ As one individual tweeted, “if China had not established Sansha City at the time it did, domestic tensions would only have gotten worse.”²⁰ Although some commentators believe that China will be more flexible and moderate after its once-in-a-decade leadership transition is completed, the erupting nationalistic fervor will make it difficult for the new leadership to take a softer stance on territorial issues. With every countermove other countries make, the Chinese domestic public will expect its government to respond in kind, showing strength in the face of foreign pressure. Such an increasing demand for a strong response will constrain the new leadership’s options and push it toward an even harder stance.²¹

The establishment of the Sansha garrison shows that the Chinese leadership is deliberately escalating its coercive diplomacy directed at other claimants. Sansha will not significantly improve Chinese military capabilities in the South China Sea without substantial upgrades, but it is nevertheless a strong response to actions that China perceives to be infringements on its sovereignty – including fishing, oil exploration and other efforts to extract natural resources. This suggests that Chinese responses to such activities will likely be increasingly assertive, disruptive and provocative for the foreseeable future.

ENDNOTES

1. "Sansha: Newest City in China," China Network Television, July 17, 2012, <http://english.cntv.cn/program/newsupdate/20120717/109081.shtml>; and Alexa Olesen, "China's newest city is on tiny island, has big aim," Associated Press, July 24, 2012, http://ap.stripes.com/dynamic/stories/A/AS_SOUTH_CHINA_SEA?SITE=DSCSA&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT&CTIME=2012-07-24-09-38-54.
2. "China to deploy military garrison in South China Sea," Xinhua News, July 20, 2012, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-07/20/c_123448783.htm. Vietnam claims that it has actively ruled over both the Spratly and Paracel Islands since the 17th century and that therefore they are Vietnamese sovereign territory. China also claims both, and the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan claim parts of the Spratlys.
3. Olesen, "China's newest city is on tiny island, has big aim."
4. "Vietnam, Philippines slam China garrison plan," Australian News Network, July 25, 2012, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-07-24/an-philippines-vs-china-sprtlys/4152262>.
5. Tran Thi Minh Ha, "Vietnam, Philippines slam China's Sea garrison plan," Agence France-Presse, July 24, 2012.
6. "Stirring Up the South China Sea (I)," Asia Report No. 223 (International Crisis Group, April 23, 2012), 2. China's previous announcement that it will begin to develop tourism in the Paracels added fuel to the fire. See Calum MacLeod, "China asserts its territorial claims in South China Sea," *USA Today*, April 26, 2012, <http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/story/2012-04-26/south-china-sea-philippines/54566350/1>.
7. The Chinese press is reporting, however, that the garrison will further strengthen China's military control over the South China Sea and create an opening in the U.S. ring of encirclement. See "Sansha lingdao banzi chengli yujian Hainan junshi jidi [Sansha's leadership ranks establish the desired Hainan military base]," *Caixun*, July 24, 2012, <http://international.caixun.com/content/20120724/CX0207r3.html>.
8. The 8,200-foot runway of the Woody Island airport can handle the landings of any third-generation aircraft, and the four large fuel tanks and radar navigation station could be used by J-811, J-10A and Sukhoi Su 30MKK aircraft as a forward deployment base for refueling during combat missions. The airport also boasts four newly built aircraft hangars, which can each house two fighter aircraft. See Andrei Chang, "Analysis: China's air-sea buildup," United Press International, September 26, 2008, http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Analysis_Chinas_air-sea_buildup_999.html.
9. Division-level military garrisons do not command main combat units such as infantry, armored divisions or brigades, let alone PLA Navy or PLA Air Force units. For more detail, see Dennis J. Blasko and M. Taylor Fravel, "Much Ado About the Sansha Garrison," *The Diplomat*, August 23, 2012.
10. The PLA's Sansha Garrison Command will be under the dual leadership of the Hainan provincial subcommand and the city's civilian leaders, and most of the troops associated with the command are likely to remain in Hainan. On July 27, 2012, China appointed Senior Colonel Cai Xihong as the garrison's commander and Senior Colonel Liao Chaoyi as its political commissar. "China appoints officers to South China Sea garrison," Agence France-Presse, July 27, 2012.
11. Vietnam and the Philippines are painfully inferior maritime actors. The Philippines possesses only one frigate and no undersea capability, whereas Vietnam has two Soviet-era submarines but no surface capability. Neither country is a match for China with its 13 destroyers, 65 frigates, 9 nuclear and 62 conventional submarines, and an aircraft carrier that is moving closer to operational capability. See International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2011* (London: Routledge, 2011). For a complete chart of the regional balance of naval power, see "Key Asian Indicators: A Book of Charts" (Asian Studies Center, The Heritage Foundation, July 2012), 19.
12. "Stirring Up the South China Sea (I)," i.
13. Marianne Brown, "Tension Mounts Between Vietnam, China," *Voice of America*, June 28, 2012, <http://www.voanews.com/content/fresh-tensions-build-up-between-vietnam-china/1275420.html>. Vietnam has come to blows with China over both claims in the past; in 1974, the PLA forced Vietnam off Woody Island, and in 1988, clashes over the Spratlys cost Vietnam the lives of approximately 70 sailors. See "Q&A: South China Sea Dispute," BBC News, July 12, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-13748349>.
14. This reef in the Spratly Islands is also claimed by Taiwan, the Philippines and Vietnam.

15. "Key Asian Indicators: A Book of Charts,"

16. For more on related incidents, see Clive Schofield et al., "From Disputed Waters to Seas of Opportunity: Overcoming Barriers to Maritime Cooperation in East and Southeast Asia," NBR Special Report No. 30 (The National Bureau of Asian Research, July 2011); and "Stirring Up the South China Sea (I)," 6. It is important to note that Vietnam and the Philippines also take actions that China perceives as provocative. For a list of such activities, see M. Taylor Fravel, "Maritime Security in the South China Sea and Competition over Maritime Rights," in Patrick M. Cronin, ed., "Cooperation from Strength: The United States, China and the South China Sea" (Center for a New American Security, January 2012), 43.

16. The first activity that involved Chinese vessels in 2012 did not occur until March, when China detained the 21 Vietnamese fishermen. Most recently, in April 2012, Chinese fishing at Scarborough Shoal, 124 nautical miles from the Filipino island of Luzon, sparked an ongoing standoff between Chinese surveillance ships and Philippine patrol vessels. For all such activities since 2009, see "Key Asian Indicators: A Book of Charts," 16.

17. See Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Signaling and Military Provocation in Chinese National Security Strategy: A Closer Look at the *Impeccable* Incident," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 34 no. 2 (2011), 219-244.

18. "Sansha bu shi zuo gei feiyue kande huajiazi [Sansha City isn't just a formality to show the Philippines, Vietnam]," *Global Times*, July 25, 2012, http://ed-china.stnn.cc/diplomacy/201207/t20120725_1767831.html. Thanks to Karen Mo for pointing out this example. Though not an official state-run newspaper, *Global Times* is often used as a platform for the government. PLA Major General Luo Yuan, for example, commented on its

website that the Chinese leadership decided to establish a military garrison in Sansha to "deter" neighboring countries "coveting the national sovereignty of China" in the South China Sea. Luo Yuan, "Commentary: Sansha Garrison Command is Established to Deter Countries Coveting for National Sovereignty of China," *Global Times*, July 25, 2012, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2012-07/25/content_4968695_2.htm.

19. One blogger goes as far as to say that the Chinese government is not doing enough to protect Chinese sovereignty over these islands: "The establishment of Sansha city, won't it show a readiness to compromise, a lack of practicality, increase the insatiability of the robbers? Do we dare [to go a step further] to firmly and thoroughly eliminate all the invaders, drive out the strong bandits?" Li Yunyong, "Sanshashi chengli wo ye danyou [I am also very worried about the establishment of Sansha City]," *Huasheng Luntan*, July 25, 2012, <http://bbs.voc.com.cn/topic-4386056-1-1.html>.

20. Zuimi Siyue, "Zhongguo she sanshashi, shi'a, zai bu gao guonei maodun jiu hui gengjia jihua." July 25, 2012, 10:36 p.m. Weibo (Chinese version of twitter).

21. Even though China is an autocratic country, repressing or constraining public opinion is still risky and costly. Given this, the government would not stir up nationalism if the leadership were planning down in the near future. For more on nationalist protest and its implications, see Jessica Chen Weiss, "Autocratic Signaling, Mass Audiences and Nationalist Protest in China," *International Organization*, 67 no. 1 (forthcoming, January 2013), http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1975163.

About the Center for a New American Security



The mission of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) is to develop strong, pragmatic and principled national security and defense policies. Building on the expertise and experience of its staff and advisors, CNAS engages policymakers, experts and the public with innovative, fact-based research, ideas and analysis to shape and elevate the national security debate. A key part of our mission is to inform and prepare the national security leaders of today and tomorrow.

CNAS is located in Washington, and was established in February 2007 by co-founders Kurt M. Campbell and Michèle A. Flournoy. CNAS is a 501(c)3 tax-exempt nonprofit organization. Its research is independent and non-partisan. CNAS does not take institutional positions on policy issues. The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not represent the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. government.

© 2012 Center for a New American Security. All rights reserved.

Center for a New American Security
1301 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Suite 403
Washington, DC 20004

TEL 202.457.9400
FAX 202.457.9401
EMAIL info@cnas.org
www.cnas.org