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IMDEX ASIA 2015

Coast Guards in the South China Sea: Proxy Fighters?

By Richard A. Bitzinger

Synopsis

Para-naval forces, particularly Coast Guards, are increasingly active in the South China Sea when it comes to enforcing maritime rights. These so-called “white-hulled” fleets are more and more serving as proxies for naval forces, ratcheting down confrontations at sea. This may not last forever, however.

Commentary

IMDEX Asia, the international maritime expo in Singapore this week, is one of Asia’s most important showcases for regional naval capabilities. However, while considerable attention is paid to the buildup of navies in and around the South China Sea, a lesser-known but equally critical story has been the growth of regional para-naval forces – that is, Coast Guards and other civil maritime services. These so-called “white hulls” have been increasingly used to enforce maritime rights – particularly Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in these two seas – and patrols by such forces have been both more frequent and, in some cases, more aggressive.

In the case of Southeast Asia, local coast guards are being increasingly employed as proxies for regional navies when it comes to aggressive enforcement of sovereignty rights, particularly in the South China Sea. As such, coast guards are taking on a greater importance in regional security calculations. Chinese Coast Guard vessels have rammed Vietnamese and Philippine fishing boats, and have also tried to block Philippine vessels attempting to re-provision the BRP Sierra Madre, a grounded ship in the Second Thomas Shoal in the Spratly Islands.

China’s growing white-hulled fleet

China, not surprisingly, possesses the largest Coast Guard in the South China Sea. Until recently, it operated five civil maritime forces: China Marine Surveillance (CMS), the Border Patrol, the Fisheries Law Enforcement Command, Customs, and the Maritime Safety Administration (MSA). Many of these forces overlapped in their missions and competed with each other in terms of missions and for funding.

In 2013, the first four services were combined into a single China Coast Guard (CCG), under the

command of the State Oceanic Administration. The CCG operates over a hundred patrol boats, in particular, the 41-metre Type-218 offshore patrol vessels, each with armed with twin 14.5mm machine guns. In 2007, the PLA Navy transferred two 1700-ton Type 053H frigates to the CCG, making them the largest ships in the coast guard.

China's other paramilitary coastal defence force is the MSA, which is run under the authority of the Ministry of Transportation. The MSA comprises a patrol force of 1,300 vessels and watercraft of various types, including several large patrol boats and helicopters.

Southeast Asian Coast Guards

Several countries in the region, including Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, are following China's lead and adding new and better ships to their white-hulled maritime forces. Most nations in Southeast Asia have chosen in the past decade or so to expand their coast guards. For the most part, this is driven by the growing importance of regional waters (such as the South China Sea and the Malacca and Singapore Straits) to international security.

Preserving freedom of navigation and operations in regional sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) has become increasingly paramount. This includes combating piracy and other sea-based criminal activities, human-trafficking, and drug smuggling. The concern motivating many countries adjacent to these SLOCs is that, if they are unable to adequately patrol and protect them, then countries from outside might do it for them, resulting in a loss of sovereign control. EEZ enforcement is, of course, another key driver. Coast guards are generally used to enforce EEZ rights, particularly fisheries. As EEZ claims in the South China Sea have heated up in the past few years, coast guards have become increasingly important to countries boarding on it.

Despite growth over the past decade, there will be continued constraints on the continued expansion of regional para-naval services. In particular, coast guards must compete with navies for funding, and grey fleets still tend to win out in procurement battles. Consequently, most Southeast Asian coast guards will likely remain under-equipped, or forced to accept second-hand equipment discarded by their navies or other maritime services.

What's next?

China, in creating a unified Coast Guard force, will likely be more prone to use these vessels to further its claims in the South China Sea. Furthermore, China's aggressive artificial island-building projects will likely bolster its capacity to deploy Coast Guard vessels further out into the South China Sea.

Confrontations between coast guards have thus far been restrained, as these vessels are more lightly-armed than naval ships. Consequently, this has lowered the risk of catastrophic clashes in the South China Sea. But if clashes increase or the stakes are raised, they could escalate into more violent action involving navies. For example, using para-naval forces to sink commercial ships, resulting in a large loss of life, or employing coast guards to forcibly remove personnel from bases in the South China Sea or block oil and gas exploration from disputed areas and thus provoking armed resistance – all of these actions could increase the risk of conflict.

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