

## South China Sea: Vietnam building up its maritime militia, magazine says

- *Activities in waters near Hainan, Paracel and Spratly islands have 'threatened China's maritime law enforcement and national defence security', Naval and Merchant Ships says*
- *Matter must be 'taken seriously and dealt with in a timely manner', it says*

Liu Zhen in Beijing

Vietnam is building up its maritime militia in the South China Sea in an apparent challenge to Chinese efforts to dominate the disputed waterway, according to a Chinese military magazine.

Beijing claims almost all of the South China Sea as its sovereign territory, but Hanoi is one of several rival claimants. Like China, the Southeast Asian country has a long tradition of using its maritime militia to defend its claims.

“Vietnam’s maritime militia force and their activities in waters near Hainan, the Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands have threatened China’s maritime law enforcement and national defence security,” Naval and Merchant Ships magazine said in an article published last week.

The matter must be “taken seriously and dealt with in a timely manner”, it said.

Vietnam passed a law in 2009 that authorises its maritime militia to conduct sea patrols and surveillance, and confront and expel intruding foreign vessels in defence of Vietnamese-controlled islands and reefs.

While the European Union has estimated that about 8,000 fishing boats and 46,000 fishermen are part of Vietnam’s maritime militia, the magazine said the latter figure could be over 70,000. When not catching fish, these trained militiamen took part in a range of missions, sometimes in cooperation with the Vietnamese navy, it said.

The missions included covert spying on Chinese military facilities and ships, and sometimes deliberately clashing with Chinese coastguard vessels to attract Western media attention, the magazine said.

This was intended to put the ideas of “humanitarian incidents” and “Chinese coercion” into the minds of the international public, it said.

“The guerilla warfare tactics could offset Chinese law enforcement ships’ advantages in terms of vessel size and technologies ... [and] if they get captured, the economic cost is limited but diplomatic and political gain could be huge, so they have little fear,” it said.

Philippine coastguard sends strong warning to Chinese vessels during South China Sea patrol  
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However, some of the tactics were learned from the Chinese, given the two communist countries' complex historical ties and their shared legacy of guerilla warfare and the concept of a "people's war".

Both Beijing and Hanoi have a long history of maritime militia and proficiency in mobilising fishermen and their boats in activities to assert claims in the South China Sea.

Last month, the Philippines accused China of sending more than 200 maritime militia vessels to the disputed Whitsun Reef.

"For China especially, the maritime militia was the precursor to the modern PLA Navy," said Collin Koh, a research fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University.

Similarly, Vietnam's maritime militia besieged China's HYSY-981 oil rig in 2014 and had been openly aggressive towards the maritime security forces of other countries, he said.

In 2019, Chinese and Vietnamese maritime militias, working in support of their respective coastguards, clashed near the oil rich Vanguard Bank.

However, Chen Xiangmiao, an associate researcher at the National Institute for South China Sea Studies, said that in recent years Beijing had reduced the involvement of civilians in its maritime disputes, in favour of enhancing its coastguard and other official law enforcement forces.

If fishermen got involved in military activities, they were classed under international law as military personnel and the issue became much more complicated, he said.

"So we are applying controls to fishermen entering the disputed waters of the South China Sea to avoid risk. The coastguard is the most commonly accepted way to establish administration of the waters," he said.

The magazine article said China should strengthen its legislation on foreign vessels, pressure the Vietnamese government to exercise restraint through diplomatic channels, and increase its coastguard capabilities to deter the militia.