Surprise! What Caused China’s Recent and Massive Land Reclamation in the South China Sea?

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Abstract

This research article identifies causal factors for China’s initiation of large-scale land reclamation and infrastructure construction on its occupied Spratly Island reefs in the South China Sea in 2014. The purpose of this research was to identify likely causes and determine whether there was evidence from official Chinese government sources that were publicly available before China began the land reclamation. The internal causal variables identified were: 1) linkages between China’s maritime claims and Communist Party legitimacy; 2) economic reliance on the South China Sea by domestic actors; 3) Xi Jinping’s consolidation of power and focus on maritime sovereignty; and 4) the strategic security significance of the South China Sea. External causal variables were: 1) U.S. military activities and the 2011 U.S. Rebalance to Asia policy; and 2) prior land reclamation by Vietnam and Taiwan, among others, in the South China Sea.

Introduction and Background

This article presents preliminary research findings identifying potential causal factors for China’s sudden initiation in early 2014 of large-scale land reclamation and infrastructure construction on its occupied Spratly Island reefs in the South China Sea. By January 2014, apparently without previous indications or announcement, China began...
conducting near-simultaneous, extensive, and seemingly well-planned and organized infrastructure construction projects on five of its seven occupied reefs and shoals in the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. From 1988 to 2013, before its 2014 initiation of land reclamation on its Spratly Island reef outposts, China had reclaimed a total of roughly five acres of land on the seven reefs and built a half-dozen semi-permanent building and structures on raised platforms made from concrete, metal, and wood. By the end of 2014, China had reclaimed about 500 acres of land at five of its occupied reefs.¹ A mere six months later, by July 2015, China had reclaimed a total of about 3,200 acres (or nearly 13 million square meters of land) on seven Spratly outposts,² as identified in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Chinese Land Reclamation on Spratly Island Reefs³

²Author’s calculations based on reported data from Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative website, which lists 12,822,000 square meters of reclaimed land, or 3,168 acres. See http://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/.
China’s land reclamation efforts on its occupied features in the Spratly Islands are new and unprecedented not only for the speed of infrastructure development, but for their size, scale, and scope. This activity has created a significant change in the amount of land China now occupies compared to rival claimants on Spratly Island features in the South China Sea. China’s infrastructure construction on these new land forms includes at least two 9,000 foot airfields, one on Fiery Cross (Yongshu) Reef as depicted in Figure 2, another on Subi (Zhubi) Reef as depicted in Figure 3, and probably a third airfield of 6,000 feet being constructed on Mischief (Meiji) Reef.

Figure 2. Airfield at Fiery Cross Reef

![Image of Fiery Cross Reef with new construction areas highlighted.]

Figure 3. Airfield at Subi Reef

![Image of Subi Reef with bulldozers preparing surface for extension of runway subgrading and current southern extent of runway subgrading labeled.]

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4See http://www.janes.com/article/54814/china-completes-runway-on-fiery-cross-reef
These three locations, as well as four additional new Chinese land forms on reefs in the Spratly Islands at Cuarteron (Huayang), Hughes (Dongmen), Johnson South (Chigua), and Gaven (Nanxun and Xinan) Reefs, also have multiple helicopter landing pads and port facilities, large multistory buildings, construction and maintenance facilities, radar and communication nodes, housing, and power-generation plants\(^7\)\(^8\) (as depicted on Johnson Reef in Figure 4). As a result, Beijing will soon have an increasing range of potential options across the political, economic, security, informational, and military domains for enforcing China’s maritime sovereignty claims, as well as other future defensive or offensive purposes in the region.\(^9\)

There appears to have been no obvious or specific prior indications that Beijing would decide to initiate a bold change in the loose status quo between the Spratlys’ competing claimants. The goal of this research was to determine if this was actually the case by identifying the most likely internal and external causal variables with evidence that was available before China began Spratly Island land reclamation in early 2014. Evidence


and judgment used to support the findings were derived from both official Chinese sources and recent research from scholars and experts on the topic. The internal causal variables identified and examined are: 1) the linkage between China’s maritime claims in the South China Sea and Chinese Communist Party legitimacy; 2) China’s actual and perpetuated economic reliance on the maritime environment; 3) Xi Jinping’s consolidation of power and his focus on maritime sovereignty; and 4) the strategic security significance of the South China Sea. External causal variables are: 1) U.S. military activities associated with the 2011 U.S. Rebalance to Asia policy; and 2) land reclamation and associated activities by Vietnam and Taiwan, among others, in the South China Sea. Ascertaining the likely internal and external variables and drivers leading to Beijing’s decision to choose this particular period to develop large new land forms in the Spratly Islands, hundreds of miles from China’s mainland, may provide insight into factors influencing this and other aspects of the Chinese leadership’s decisionmaking.

Except where relevant, this article avoids covering additional aspects of South China Sea sovereignty issues and actions by the competing claimants because the issues are covered extensively in a plethora of current literature published by multiple sources. Also not covered is China’s extensive land reclamation on Woody (Yongxing) Island and Duncan (Chenhang) Island in the Paracel (Xisha) Islands in the South China Sea. These islands are just south of Hainan Island, as indicated in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Map of Woody Island and Duncan Island in the Paracel Islands

[Map of Woody Island and Duncan Island in the Paracel Islands]

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Although China has been conducting land reclamation and infrastructure upgrades in the Paracels since 2012, reclamation has been ongoing on Woody Island since 1990 when China began building a 1,200 foot runway. Subsequently, China has expanded the runway numerous times to roughly 8,000 feet, with four large aircraft hangars adjacent to it (as in Figure 6).

Figure 6. Woody Island Airfield and Hangar Upgrades in the Paracel Islands

Also during this period, three small harbors with port facilities and breakwaters have been added (as depicted in Figure 7).

Figure 7. Woody Island Harbor in the Paracel Islands, 2013

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China’s recent land reclamation and harbor construction on Duncan Island is depicted in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Duncan Island Land Reclamation in the Paracel Islands, 2015\textsuperscript{15}

Since this activity has continued for more than 25 years and is well-documented in numerous sources, this article focuses on China’s new construction on reefs in the Spratly Islands, which coincidentally is very similar to what China had constructed in the Paracel Islands.

Internal Drivers

Previous Official Chinese References Prior to Land Reclamation in 2014

Four official Chinese government documents released by Beijing between 1998 and 2012 contain direct and indirect references portending China’s

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Ibid.}
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initiation of massive land reclamation in the South China Sea’s Spratly Islands in 2014. First, in 1998 Beijing formally announced its right to create artificial islands in its Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Exclusive Economic Zone and the Continental Shelf. Article 8 of the law states, “The People’s Republic of China shall have the exclusive right to construct and to authorize and regulate the construction, operation and use of artificial islands, installations and structures in its exclusive economic zone and on its continental shelf.” Articles 3, 4, and 8 of the law refer to “artificial islands, installations and structures” in six places. Beijing’s official announcement of its right to construct, operate, and use “artificial islands” in 1998 was specified to be within China’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and continental shelf. Although China claims the Spratly Islands as its sovereign territory, China has not adequately defined its EEZ or whether it claims the Spratly Island features it is reclaiming land on have the same legal rights, protections, and stipulations as provided for EEZs under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea 1982. Despite this and several other ambiguous aspects to its claims in the South China Sea, in hindsight China’s 1998 reference to artificial islands in the Exclusive Economic Zone and the Continental Shelf Law could also be construed as a potential indicator.

Second, over a decade later on December 26, 2009, Beijing issued, through Presidential Decree No. 22, China’s Island Protection Law, which went into effect on March 1, 2010. The law states that there should be an “island protection planning system,” and called for the establishment of a “national island protection plan.” Portions of the Island Protection

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16This paper uses the term “official” which can also be considered “authoritative,” and is best described by Michael D. Swaine: “Several types of PRC sources are considered authoritative in the sense of explicitly ‘speaking for the regime.’ They generally include MFA and MND statements and briefings and remarks by senior civilian and military officials appearing in the leading Chinese Communist Party Central Committee (or CCP CC) and military (People’s Liberation Army or PLA) newspapers: People’s Daily (人民日报) and Liberation Army Daily (解放军报). Authoritative statements include, in descending order of authority, PRC government and CCP statements, MFA statements, MFA spokesperson statements, and MFA daily press briefings.” See Footnote 4, p. 18 in Michael D. Swaine, “Chinese Views Regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Dispute,” China Leadership Monitor, no. 41, June 6, 2013. http://www.hoover.org/research/chinese-views-regarding-senkakudiaoyu-islands-dispute.


Law state, “The state shall apply special protection to the islands where the territorial sea base points are located, islands for the purpose of national defense, islands within the marine natural reserves and other islands for special purposes or with special conservation value.”

Third, in 2011 China’s State Council published China’s 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-2015) for comprehensive overall socio-economic development, in which Chapter 14: Promote the Development of Marine Economy, Section 2: Strengthening Integrated Marine Management stated: “…promote the protection and utilization of sea islands, and support the development of remote seas islands…Strengthen sea area and island management,…strengthen reclamation management.”

Fourth, in 2012, China’s State Council promulgated a major planning and policy implementation document entitled Island Protection and Exploration for the Period 2012-2020 and Vision to 2030.

In April 2012, China’s State Oceanic Administration issued a nearly identical official document referred to as the PRC National Island Protection Plan 2011-2020. The 2012 Island Protection Plan is likely an important and detailed official source indicating that China’s State Council had authorized relevant Chinese government agencies to begin or finalize preparation of implementation plans for the near-term construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea.

In addition to these four documents, China’s 12th Five-Year Plan for National Marine Development is worth considering. Although it was not publicly available in Chinese or English before September 2014, China most likely would have completed and authorized the distribution of it within the Chinese government between 2011 and 2012. The National Marine Development Plan provides implementation guidance on maritime-related economic development, administration, and security for all relevant Chinese central and local government agencies.

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Plan follows the guidance and directly supports “The Guideline of National Marine Development” that was approved and implemented by the State Council in 2008. On September 2, 2014, China’s State Council posted the National Marine Development Plan on its website under the heading “National Marine Project Development in the 12th Five-Year Program.” Remarkably, this official guidance for implementation did not become publicly available until nine months after China began land reclamation in the Spratly Islands.

The Marine Development Plan provides implementation guidance to accelerate comprehensive economic development of natural resources, protection of sovereignty, administration and management, diplomacy, science and technology, environmental protection, and education related to China’s maritime claims. A review of the Marine Development Plan’s chapter titles indicates China’s intent to conduct land reclamation and major construction projects in China’s maritime regions, as well as the need to increase island protection. For example, “Chapter Four: Sea Area Intensive Use” has a section entitled “Intensifying Administration of Sea Area Use for Reclamation and Major Construction Projects,” while “Chapter Five: Protecting and Developing Islands” has a section entitled “Strengthening the Management of Special Purpose Islands.”

A review of these five official sources, four of which were publicly available before China’s initiation of land reclamation in the Spratly Islands, reveals that there have been numerous direct and indirect references portending China’s 2014 initiation of land reclamation in the South China Sea from official Chinese documents that were publicly available between 1998 and 2013. The earliest clues from official sources include the Exclusive Economic Zone and the Continental Shelf Law (1998), in which China first announced its right to the “construction, operation and use of artificial islands, installations and structures in its exclusive economic zone and on its continental shelf;” the Island Protection Law (2009), which stipulated that China would “apply special protection to the islands where the territorial sea base points are located, islands for the purpose of national defense;” and China’s release in 2011 of the 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-2015), which

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
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stated China’s intent to: “...promote the protection and utilization of sea islands, and support the development of remote seas islands...Strengthen sea area and island management,...strengthen reclamation management.”

Four of these five official references linking land reclamation, island protection, and developing and constructing remote islands to China’s maritime rights, national security, and territorial sea base points were important indicators available before the commencement of land reclamation in early 2014.

China’s Maritime Economy: Both Real and Perpetuated

China’s pressing economic development needs are also likely key causal factors influencing China’s land reclamation in the South China Sea. China’s future use of the artificial islands for state and private-sector economic uses will enable it to commercially exploit the South China Sea’s natural resources, thus contributing to China’s economic development and sustaining employment for several million Chinese citizens. China’s new land reclamation also absorbs some of the excess capacity of Chinese agencies, companies, and workers engaged in infrastructure construction because many of these entities have been idle or underutilized due to the ongoing global recession. In 2011, China released its 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-2015) for socio-economic development, which included Chapter 14: Promote the Development of Marine Economy. This chapter contained two sections, the first, Section 1: Optimizing the Marine Industry Structure, called for the development and implementation of a comprehensive marine development strategy to:

...exploit and utilize marine resources rationally, develop marine oil and gas, marine transport, marine fishing and coastal travel industries greatly, and expand marine biopharmaceutical, integrated seawater utilization, marine engineering equipment manufacturing and other rising industries. Strengthen the R&D of basic, proactive and critical marine technologies, improve marine technology level, and improve marine development and utilization capabilities.

27 PRC State Council, 12th Five-Year Plan, 17.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
China’s national and provincial party and government institutions rely on and promote the marine environment as a key source of economic growth and employment for Chinese companies and citizens. China’s national and provincial industrial enterprises involved in infrastructure include concrete, steel, and materials production; fabrication, construction, and finishing; transport and shipping; electricity and telecommunications; fossil fuel and green energy generation; food, water, and sanitation; and road, runway, and port construction. Each year Chinese government entities such as the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, Ministry of Transportation, Ministry of Land and Resources, the State Oceanic Administration, China National Petroleum Corporation, and the China National Offshore Oil Corporation are involved in the planning, organizing, and sponsoring of large-scale expositions to advance several aspects of maritime-related economic development by linking domestic and foreign companies. Examples include the China Marine Economy Exhibition, the China Maritime-International Offshore Engineering Technology & Equipment Exhibition, the All-China Maritime Conference and Exhibition, the China International Marine Exhibition, the Oceanology International China: Marine Technology and Ocean Science Exhibition and Conference, and the China International Offshore Oil & Gas Exhibition.

China’s State Oceanic Administration and its subordinate organizations, such as the Chinese Society of Oceanography, The National Ocean Technology Center, and China Ocean Mineral Resources R&D Association, are key proponents, as well as being Chinese state administrative managing entities involved in economic development of the maritime environment. Over the past five years, the State Oceanic Administration has published an annual report entitled “China’s Maritime Development,” which details a wealth of data and information on the state of the Chinese maritime sector.

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34 See http://www.maritimeshows.com/china/.
statistics attributable to several categories of economic sectors related to the maritime environment. The 2015 report highlights that China’s GDP growth attributable to the maritime domain accounted for 9.4 percent of total GDP in 2014. Further, the report states that China’s maritime-related economic output in 2014 totaled $962.4 billion, a 7.7-percent increase over 2013.\footnote{See http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-06/23/c_134349386.htm.}

In support of China’s overall national socio-economic development and its 12th Five-Year Plan (2012-2016), China’s State Council issued an accompanying 12th Five-Year National Oceanic Economic Development Plan listing several industries and sectors that benefit economically from the maritime domain.\footnote{Xinhua (Qingdao) International Ocean Information Center and State Financial Information Center Index Research Institute, 2013 Xinhua Ocean Development Index Report, November 2013, 15, http://upload.xinhua08.com/2013/1106/1383705135387.pdf.} In 2013 President Xi made an official speech emphasizing a number of technological and industrial economic sectors as important to developing the maritime economy. Xi stressed the “importance of developing the marine economy, protecting the marine environment and strengthening marine science and technology research.” He added: “A developed marine economy is an important part of building maritime power.”\footnote{Wang Qian and Zhang Yunbi, “Xi Vows to Protect Maritime Interests,” \textit{China Daily}, August 1, 2013, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/maritime-economy.htm.}

Shen Dingli, a prominent Chinese academic, has appeared in and published articles in public forums recently to justify China’s Spratly Island land reclamation by linking it to China’s goals for developing its maritime economy and EEZ. Shen argues that China’s EEZ is insufficient compared to China’s large population and that it needs to expand its EEZ into South China Sea because it depends on it for fishing, oil extraction, and other natural resources.\footnote{Sui Noi Goh, “South China Sea Reclamation an Economic Move” \textit{Straits Times}, May 30, 2015, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/south-china-sea-reclamation-an-economic-move-chinese-scholar.}

In 2013 China’s Shandong Provincial government, together with the Qingdao municipal government and China’s state-run media and propaganda institution, Xinhua, created the Xinhua (Qingdao) International Ocean Information Center to publish a marine-related economic report with data...
provided by the Chinese government’s State Ocean Administration Development Research Center, a major institution directly reporting to China’s State Council. This government-sponsored annual report publicizes and outlines the economic significance of marine-related industries by various sectors in its China Marine Economic Development Index. Major sectors highlighted include fishing, shipping, offshore oil and gas, mineral and chemical resource extraction, bio pharmaceutical, marine engineering and infrastructure development (e.g. land reclamation), science and technology innovation, and marine tourism industries (as depicted below in Figure 9).

The economic importance and job creation opportunities resulting from China’s land reclamation in the Spratlys is illustrated by the stated purposes

Figure 9. China’s 2013 Marine Economic Development Index

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46 2013 Xinhua Ocean Development Index Report, 22.
and functions that China intends for these new facilities. For example, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), China’s highest-level state organization responsible for economic reform and modernization, recently announced the civilian functions and activities that China intends for its new artificial islands in the South China Sea.⁴⁷ Equating these activities with the requisite numbers and types of persons that would be needed to be employed directly on the islands (and those indirectly on the mainland) suggests that tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of Chinese citizens, as well as affiliated state and private companies, will benefit financially.

Announced NDRC civilian facilities construction plans include communication, navigation, environment observation, disaster prevention and mitigation, transportation, delivery support, production and daily life support facilities. These new facilities include: lighthouses; radio navigation assistance facilities (including a ship automatic identification system base); maritime security communication facilities (including a ground-to-air communication base); maritime medical and emergency rescue facilities equipped with navigation support, and oil spill emergency handling; docking, replenishing, and repair services for commercial, law enforcement, and military ships; maritime and meteorological observation stations for tsunami alert, earthquake monitoring, and maritime environment monitoring; maritime scientific research and ecological protection facilities; fossil fuel and green energy generation facilities; food and entertainment services; and sanitation treatment facilities.⁴⁸

China has also used hundreds of vessels in its land reclamation and construction of infrastructure on the reclaimed land. These include vessels for transporting raw bulk materials and finished machinery equipment or semi-finished or prefabricated materials. The vessels range in size and sophistication from small barges and medium-size bulk freighters to military amphibious transport dock landing ships and commercial roll-on/roll-off vessels.⁴⁹ China’s relatively recent acquisition of new industrial technology and land reclamation proficiency, particularly in dredging, has been a catalyst aiding

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⁴⁸Ibid.
⁴⁹Author’s conclusions based on visual analysis and review of publicly available Digital Globe satellite imagery from multiple Internet websites from June 2014 to October 2015.
China’s land reclamation in the South China Sea. A review of publicly available imagery released by dozens of news outlets, journals, governments, and think tanks around the world during the past 20 months reveals that hundreds of water-borne machines and craft associated with dredging have been and continue to be involved in China’s land reclamation in the South China Sea. For example, the Tianjin Dredging Company, a subsidiary of the national-level China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), and one of China’s largest national state-owned infrastructure construction companies, has reportedly been operating several modern and sophisticated cutter suction dredgers. These include the 2,400-ton Tian Jing Hao, which at 416 feet in length was the largest dredger in Asia and third-largest in the world when it was built in 2010.\textsuperscript{50, 51, 52, 53, 54} The company also operates other dredging equipment in the Spratlys, including trailing-suction dredgers, grab and bucket dredgers, and split hopper barges associated with land reclamation.\textsuperscript{55} CCCC reported revenues of $4.5 billion in 2014 that represented a 15 percent decrease from 2013, but reported that new dredging contracts increased by 7.6 percent in 2015.\textsuperscript{56}

There are significant financial benefits for several Chinese state and private sector companies engaged in ship construction, outfitting, supply of peripheral equipment and maintenance services for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy and Chinese Coast Guard related to China’s South China Sea land reclamation and maritime sovereignty enforcement. For example, one recent source estimated that China has spent $1.74 billion annually from 2011 to 2015 on construction and operations of the China Coast Guard, which currently has 205 vessels (a significant number of which were built recently).\textsuperscript{57} One indicator of this activity emerged in 2012 with the

\textsuperscript{51}See https://www.dredgepoint.org/dredging-database/equipment/tian-jing-hao.
\textsuperscript{54}Clover, “South China Sea Foreign Flotation.” This self-propelled dredger, designed by Vosta of Germany, was built by China Merchants Heavy Industries Co. in Shenzhen at a cost of $130 million; it can extract nearly 6,000 cubic yards of sand and rock per hour.
\textsuperscript{56}Ibid.
release of China’s 12th Five-Year Plan for National Marine Development Chapter Nine: Marine Public Services, Section 5 Strengthening the Service for Marine Transportation Safety, which stated:

Intensify marine shipping supervision, administration, and services, optimize the layout of the vessel traffic control system,… and extend the channel of safety patrols to the exclusive economic zone and other sea areas under China’s jurisdiction. Purchase helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft, build patrol ships, beacon ships, and survey ships, and push forward the construction of shipping support bases.\(^{58}\)

China may have already spent an estimated $11.3 billion on construction on Fiery Cross Reef alone, thus significantly increasing the budgets for Chinese national and provincial state agencies,\(^{59}\) as well as Chinese state and private sector companies and employees participating in land reclamation. It is likely that China has also spent additional billions of dollars for construction on the other six Spratly features.\(^{60}\) China’s future use of reclaimed land facilities for naval, air, maritime law enforcement, and intelligence and surveillance of the South China Sea will assist Beijing’s desire to ensure sovereignty in the region thus allowing for further maritime-related economic exploitation for China’s national and provincial state-owned and private businesses. Finally, evidence emerged in 2011 that identified another contributing factor driving China’s rapid pace of land reclamation in the South China Sea. The 2011-2015 Five-Year Plan said it should be completed by the end of 2015. The plan stated:

The “12th Five-Year Plan” period is a critical time to speed up, expand, and enhance the adjustment of China’s marine industry. Actively adapt to the changes in domestic and international situations, keep a foothold on the foundation for development, seize opportunities for future development, innovate development ideas,…\(^{61}\)


Xi Jinping’s Consolidation of Power and Focus on Maritime Sovereignty

China’s initiation of land reclamation in the Spratly Islands in January 2014 occurred about nine months after Xi Jinping assumed the last of the three highest-level leadership positions in the Chinese party-state system—that being the title of President of the Chinese State following his “election” during the 12th National People’s Congress in March 2013. Five months earlier, in November 2012, Xi had been named the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and Chairman of the CPC Central Military Commission. Since 2007 Xi had been steadily assuming key and increasingly higher-level leadership positions throughout the CPC. As early as December 2012, Western media sources reported that Xi had also assumed leadership of the relatively new Leading Small Group for the Protection of Maritime Interests. This Group is administratively part of the Maritime Rights Office, also created in 2012. The Maritime Rights Office falls within the purview of the CPC’s National Security Leading Group and the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group, both of which Xi Jinping has assumed leadership of in December 2012.

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63 Other positions and dates include: 2007–2008, member, Standing Committee, Political Bureau; and member, Secretariat, CPC Central Committee; president, Central Party School; 2008–2010, member, Standing Committee, Political Bureau; and member, Secretariat, CPC Central Committee; vice president, PRC; president, Central Party School; 2010–2012, member, Standing Committee, Political Bureau; member, Secretariat, CPC Central Committee; vice president, PRC; vice chairman, CPC and PRC Central Military Commission; president, Central Party School; 2012, general secretary, CPC Central Committee; chairman, CPC Central Military Commission; vice president, PRC; vice chairman, PRC Central Military Commission; president, Central Party School. See Xinhua, “Xi Jinping—PRC President, CMC Chairman,” March 14, 2013, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013npc/2013-03/14/content_16308383_2.htm.
65 Ibid.
67 Jakobson, China’s Unpredictable Maritime Security Actors, 12.
The group’s purpose is to make policy recommendations for CPC leadership and coordinate the work and implementation among several of China’s party-state organizations involved in bolstering China’s maritime sovereignty, particularly in the South China Sea. In July 2013 Xi led a high-level CPC study session to address how to “Build China Into a Maritime Power” with members of the CPC Political Bureau. In the session, he reportedly called for “efforts to learn more about and further manage maritime development.” Most likely, the Maritime Rights Protection Leading Group, as the collective leadership directly under Xi Jinping, is the lead CPC entity that since 2012 has been in charge of policy and guidance for land reclamation. This entity would have approved and directed the land reclamation, at least as early as 2012.

The Group would have included Liu Cigui, who was director of the State Oceanic Administration (SOA) from 2011 to 2014. Xi Jinping appears to be a patron of Liu; the relationship likely began while both served in various CPC leadership positions in Fujian Province from 1985 to 2002. Liu has become a leading and increasingly powerful official in developing and protecting China’s maritime interests in the East China Sea and South China Sea. In January 2015 Liu was promoted from his position as SOA Director to be the governor and deputy party secretary of Hainan Province, whose territorial administration includes the Nansha (Spratly Islands).

In March 2013 while Liu was the SOA Director, Xi Jinping was well-positioned to give Liu authority to implement and administer China’s national re-organization of the SOA, which folded several agencies under the jurisdiction of the “New SOA” in an effort to streamline and improve China’s maritime affairs. This re-organization was designed to enhance the planning and coordination of numerous Chinese entities at the national, provincial, and local levels for maritime-related development, protection, and...

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71 See http://chinavitae.com/biography/Liu_Cigui/career.
72 PRC State Oceanic Administration, “Normalized Patrol,” April 1, 2013.
sovereignty enforcement. The China Coast Guard was also re-designated to report administratively to the SOA, but operationally to the Ministry of State Security. It appears that the SOA is responsible for implementing China’s plans for land reclamation as well as subsequent facilities construction and maintenance, management and services, and logistics and re-supply.

**Strategic Maritime Geography for Defense and Offense**

Most accounts characterize Beijing’s views of the South China Sea as part of China’s “near seas” (as depicted in Figure 10) and as a historical and current avenue of invasion or intimidation by foreign military powers. It is a strategic area that provides a buffer for China’s defense as well as a “bastion” for its naval forces charged with defensive and offensive missions. Interestingly, China’s rapid land reclamation and new construction of military-related facilities during 2014-2015 coincides with the expected operational deployment in late 2015-early 2016 of China’s new sea-based nuclear deterrent, the JIN nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN). China has a total of four JIN SSBNs, with three currently based at the Chinese Navy’s Yalong naval base on Hainan Island. From a PLA

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73Ibid. According to the SOA website: “The new State Oceanic Administration was established on the basis of merging the contingents and functions of the China Marine Surveillance under the original State Oceanic Administration, the China Coast Guard under the Ministry of Public Security, the China Fishery Administration under the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Maritime Anti-smuggling Police Force under the General Administration of Customs. It is now subordinate to the Ministry of Land and Resources. At the same time, the State Oceanic Commission was established at the high level as a work planning and coordination organ, responsible for studying and formulating the state’s maritime development strategy and coordinating the handling of major maritime affairs.”


naval base on Hainan Island, the JINs can be expected to conduct operational nuclear deterrent deployments in or through the deep waters of the South China Sea and into in the western Pacific Ocean.\(^{80}\)

When complete, the port and airfield facilities on China’s reclaimed reefs could also sustain surface ships, additional submarines, and antisubmarine warfare and intelligence collection aircraft to conduct routine air and maritime surveillance and protection duties throughout the South China Sea and western Pacific areas. In addition, the airfields on Fiery Cross and Subi Reef and potentially Mischief Reef would serve as alternate divert landing fields for aircraft from China’s current and future aircraft carriers. However, the main operational purpose of the new facilities on the reclaimed reefs appears to be for stationing and sustaining a myriad of PLA Navy surface combatants, intelligence and surveillance ships and aircraft, logistics and resupply platforms, and Chinese Coast Guard ships and aircraft to enforce China’s sovereignty claims throughout the South China Sea.\(^{81,82}\)

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure10.png}
\caption{China’s “Near Seas” and the South China Sea\(^{83}\)}
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\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{81}Doven, \textit{Chinese Land Reclamation}, 8–9.
\bibitem{82}Department of Defense, Annual Report 2015, 72.
\end{thebibliography}
China’s South China Sea Sovereignty Claim and Communist Party Legitimacy

A key domestic internal driver for China’s recent land reclamation is the linkage between China’s overall sovereignty claim to the South China Sea and Chinese Communist Party legitimacy. Since 1958, when China (PRC) officially declared that the South China Sea is the “…territory of the People’s Republic of China [and] includes the Nansha (Spratly) Islands,” Beijing has consistently and vigorously espoused this narrative through many official forums to both domestic and international audiences. This causal variable is thoroughly documented and explained in numerous articles. Therefore, this section will only describe in a cursory manner the connection between China’s land reclamation and its sovereignty claims to water, land, and other features in the South China Sea.

China’s claim of sovereignty in the South China Sea is officially expressed in the often referred to Nine-Dash Line (as depicted in Figure 11). Beijing has never actually formally claimed or announced the specific latitude and longitude coordinates of a territorial sea baseline that would comprise a formal legal claim to maritime sovereignty for the South China Sea under international law. China’s extensive land reclamation on seven reefs that it occupies in the Spratly Islands and its future use of these new artificial islands are directly linked to ensuring China’s sovereignty claims to the South China Sea. In 2009 Beijing officially submitted two Notes Verbales to the UN that contained a version of the Nine-Dash Line map along with justification for China’s claims to sovereignty in the South China Sea.


External Drivers

The U.S. Rebalance and U.S. Military Activities

The enhanced U.S. military posture near the South China Sea as a result of the U.S. Rebalance, announced by President Obama in 2011, was possibly another significant new development that influenced Beijing to embark on extensive land reclamation in the South China Sea. For example, since 2011 the United States has officially specified or implied that China

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is a potential threat to U.S. interests in East Asia and as a consequence announced several military and security initiatives to improve and increase U.S. military forces in the region. On January 5, 2012, President Obama released the U.S. DoD’s Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense, which stated that the United States will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region. It noted:

Our planning envisages forces that are able to fully deny a capable state’s aggressive objectives in one region by conducting a combined arms campaign across all domains – land, air, maritime, space, and cyberspace. This includes being able to secure territory and populations and facilitate a transition to stable governance on a small scale for a limited period using standing forces and, if necessary, for an extended period with mobilized forces. Even when U.S. forces are committed to a large-scale operation in one region, they will be capable of denying the objectives of – or imposing unacceptable costs on – an opportunistic aggressor in a second region.

More specifically, U.S. leaders’ references to tensions in the South China Sea have increased since 2010. In 2012 then Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced several U.S. military initiatives to increase U.S. combat power in East Asia, including regular rotational deployments of U.S. Marine Corps personnel to Australia, a shift of U.S. naval power from a roughly even 50 percent of naval combatants stationed on the U.S. west and east coasts to 60 percent on the U.S. west coast, hence quicker access and deployment capability to Asia. Secretary Panetta also mentioned other enabling U.S. defense initiatives, such as the Air-Sea Battle and Joint Operational Access Concepts aimed at countering anti-access/area denial

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capabilities of potential adversaries such as China. As a result, Beijing likely perceived that the U.S. Rebalance would result in an increased U.S. military threat to China’s claims in the South China Sea in the near term, as well as that other competing claimant nations would be emboldened to take actions to enforce their claims. Beijing also likely concluded that time was not on China’s side, thus leading to Beijing’s decision to either speed up the execution or refinement of existing plans—or create and quickly implement detailed land reclamation and infrastructure construction plans for the South China Sea.

**Land Reclamation and Related Actions of Other Claimants**

Small-scale land reclamation and development of reefs, shoals, and islands in the South China Sea by Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Taiwan during the past 50 years are also key drivers for Beijing’s initiation of large-scale land reclamation in the Spratly Islands in 2014. However, it is likely that the more recent infrastructure upgrades by Vietnam, Taiwan, and Malaysia from 2003 to 2012 in the South China Sea, that preceded China’s recent land reclamation activities, were the most relevant developments influencing Beijing to act in early 2014. Historically, Chinese government officials of both the Republic of China (ROC, Taiwan) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC, mainland China) have cited the intrusion or illegal occupation of Chinese-claimed features in the South China Sea by France, Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia since the 19th century. An official Chinese (PRC) CPC media organ recently referred to other countries’ land reclamation in the South China Sea by stating:

> Since the 1970s, the Philippines, Vietnam, and other countries have illegally occupied some of China’s islands and reefs of the Nansha Islands and have for a long time carried out large-scale reclamation activity on the relevant islands and reefs. Vietnam has carried out large-scale reclamation on more than 20 islands and reefs of China’s Nansha Islands and has simultaneously built harbor basins, runways, missile sites, office buildings, barracks, hotels, lighthouses, and a large number of other fixed facilities.\(^\text{95}\)

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\(^{95}\) Jia Yu and Zhang Xiaoyi, “China’s Construction on the Islands,” 3.
The Philippines and Malaysia

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Philippines constructed a 3,000-foot unpaved airstrip on Thitu (Pagasa) Island in the Spratlys after reclaiming 14 acres of new land (as depicted in Figure 12). Since the 1980s, the Philippines has made only marginal improvements to Thitu Island’s infrastructure. However, despite a lack of significant land reclamation or other improvements by the Philippines on its Spratly Island holdings, two recent key developments leading to an increase in tensions between Beijing and Manila are worth noting as factors influencing Beijing to act in 2014.

During 2012, following the arrest by the Philippines of Chinese fishermen in Scarborough Reef, a standoff over the occupation of the reef ensued with China prevailing after overwhelming the Filipinos with larger numbers of China Coast Guard ships and armed fishing boats. Second, as a consequence of the 2012 Scarborough and several other related incidents, on January 22, 2013, the Philippines formally initiated arbitration proceedings versus China with The Hague’s international Permanent Court of Arbitration to determine “maritime entitlements and the lawfulness of Chinese activities in the South China Sea,” as provided for in Part XV of the United Nations

Figure 12. Thitu Island Airport Runway and Facilities, the Philippines

Regional Issues

Convention on the Law of the Sea.\textsuperscript{98} Beijing certainly would have viewed this legal challenge, and the court’s future rulings that would likely be unfavorable toward China, as a legitimate threat undermining Beijing’s claims in the South China Sea.

For decades, occupation and development of islands, reefs, and shoals in the South China Sea have caused tension between China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia. More recently, significant developments include the 2003 completion of extensive land reclamation to accommodate the expansion of Malaysia’s airfield on Swallow Reef, which resulted in the lengthening of the runway from 3,500 feet to 4,500 feet. This follows Malaysia’s land reclamation and original construction of the airfield from 1991 to 1995, which included building aircraft hangars and a tactical air navigation tower (as depicted in Figure 13).\textsuperscript{99}

\textit{Figure 13.} Malaysia’s Airport Runway and Facilities on Swallow Reef\textsuperscript{100}

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\textsuperscript{100}See http://amti.csis.org/airstrips-scs/.
Another key development that caught Beijing’s attention occurred in 2004 when Vietnam refurbished and modernized its 2,000 foot airstrip on Spratly Island (as depicted in Figure 14). Constructed by the Vietnamese in the 1970s, the airstrip had only been marginally maintained before 2004. Beijing’s awareness likely reached a heightened sense of urgency during 2011 and 2012, when both Vietnam and Taiwan began a series of small-scale land reclamation projects, runway, port, and facility upgrades, weapons emplacement, and high-profile political leader visits on two of Vietnam’s reefs and one Taiwanese island and reef in the Spratlys.

In August 2011 Vietnam initiated a land reclamation project on Sand Cay in the Tizard Bank Reef of the Spratly Islands. By early 2015, Vietnam’s new land reclamation efforts on Sand Cay totaled five acres (as depicted in Figure 15). Sand Cay lies about 17 miles southwest of Gaven Reef and 40 miles southeast of Subi Reef, where China began land reclamation projects.

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102 See http://amti.csis.org/airstrips-scgs/.
103 See http://amti.csis.org/vietnam-island-building/.
104 Ibid.
Regional Issues

In 2014, Vietnam initiated two slightly larger, albeit small-scale, land reclamation projects totaling 16 acres on West London Reef, which lies about 35 nautical miles west of Cuarteron Reef and 60 miles south of Fiery Cross Reef (where China also began land reclamation in 2014). In total, from 2009 to 2015, Vietnam has reclaimed nearly 60 acres and built small-scale infrastructures on 7 of over 20 occupied features. Improvements include the following:

- Radar and communications equipment at 15 outposts.
- Quality of life improvements at 19 outposts.
- Point defense improvements at 18 outposts.
- Civilian infrastructure improvements at 5 outposts.

Figure 15. Vietnamese Land Reclamation and Construction, Sand Cay

Beijing has been aware that since 1975 the Vietnamese have constructed and expanded small-scale military and civilian facilities on both Sand Cay and West London Reef, which has a small boat harbor, a lighthouse, and a helicopter pad. A deeper understanding of Beijing’s current behavior in the South China Sea can also be enhanced by examining Sino-Vietnamese tensions, actions, and counteractions involving territorial control and sovereignty over the Paracel Islands (Xi Sha) and the Spratly (Nansha) Islands just before 1975. In September 1973, South Vietnam (RVN) officially annexed 10 Spratly islands and reefs and began placing

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105 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
hundreds of troops at small outposts on several of those features.\textsuperscript{110} In January 1974 China reacted to what it considered to be illegal occupation of three of the Crescent Group islands in the Paracel Islands and forcibly evicted the South Vietnamese forces. Losing three islands in the Parcels and the desire to prevent the Chinese from occupying other islands in the South China Sea led to North Vietnam (DRV), just before the collapse of South Vietnam, occupying 6 of the 10 Spratly Island features in April 1975 that previously had been occupied by the South.\textsuperscript{111}

Vietnam (SRV) continued to occupy and build small facilities on several more reefs in the Spratlys during the 1970s and 1980s. Vietnam’s gradual occupation of over 20 islands and features in the Spratly Islands to a large degree influenced Beijing to establish a permanent presence in the Spratlys in early 1988. As a result, Sino-Vietnamese hostilities over the Spratlys accelerated in January 1988, when China first occupied a Spratly Island feature—Fiery Cross Reef. Reportedly, within nine days of four Chinese ships arriving with materials and personnel, China reclaimed just under two acres of land by blasting and dredging the coral reef.\textsuperscript{112} In response, Vietnam quickly occupied a few additional nearby reefs. At Johnson Reef, both sides clashed in March 1988, resulting in 64 Vietnamese killed and three Vietnamese boats sunk.\textsuperscript{113}

\textbf{Taiwan}

China’s first official occupation of a Spratly Island was made by government officials from the Republic of China (ROC) at Taiping Island (Itu Aba) on December 12, 1946. This was subsequent to Japan’s occupation of Taiping Island from 1939 to 1945. ROC military forces occupied Taiping Island until May 5, 1950, when they were withdrawn due to the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949. In 1956 the ROC (Taiwan) re-occupied Taiping Island and maintains possession of it to the present. During this period, Taiwan built a small, crude airstrip and a boat wharf.\textsuperscript{114} A significant development occurred in mid-2006, when Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense and Coast Guard Administration began significantly upgrading its 3,800-foot

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 79.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 83.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 95.
runway on Taiping (Itu Aba), a project it completed in 2008. In September 2013 Taiwan announced that it would invest $112 million over three years to lengthen its airstrip and upgrade its port facilities on Taiping Island to increase its Coast Guard and naval presence in the South China Sea. Construction progress on the new wharf enabled Taiwan in April 2014 to begin additional land reclamation of five acres, which boosted the total amount of land reclaimed since 2013 to eight acres. The land was used to lengthen the runway from 3,800 feet to 5,000 feet to accommodate larger and more aircraft. Figure 16 depicts these new facilities on Itu Aba. Figure 17 is a map identifying the islands mentioned above.

Figure 16. Extended Runway and New Port on Taiwan’s Itu Aba (Taiping Island)

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120 See http://amti.csis.org/airstrips-scs/.
122 Department of Defense, Annual Report 2015, 72.
123 Jennings, “Taiwan Plans New Infrastructure.”
Conclusion

The evidence from Chinese official sources suggests that Beijing had been analyzing and planning for land reclamation and infrastructure construction in the Spratly Islands at least since 2007, and perhaps as far back as 1998. A combination of internal and external developments during the past five years probably led China’s leadership to decide to initiate the large-scale land reclamation in the South China Sea in early 2014 (as illustrated by Figure 18).

\[^{124}\text{http://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/\text{.}}\]
**Regional Issues**

*Figure 18. Matrix of Internal and External Factors Influencing Beijing*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beijing’s Decision to Begin Spratly Island Land Reclamation in January 2014</th>
<th>Internal Causal Actors</th>
<th>External Causal Actors</th>
<th>Key Developments Prior to Land Reclamation Beginning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xi Jinping’s Consolidation of Power</td>
<td>Xi Jinping, Liu Cigui</td>
<td></td>
<td>2012-2013: Xi becomes CPC General Secretary, Chairman, Central Military Commission, PRC President 2012: Maritime Rights Protection Leading Group established</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

125 Author compiled matrix derived from sources and analysis used throughout this paper.