

The China Coast Guard's militarisation and its operations around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands

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China's Coast Guard (CCG) has acted with increased assertiveness in recent years in its conflict with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. The aim of the CCG operations has been to slowly undermine Japanese authority and to establish a semi-permanent paramilitary presence in this maritime area. China's strategy has been to outnumber, outperform, and outlast the Japanese coastguard, while keeping the conflict below the line of escalation into war or the involvement of naval forces. As explained in this memo, China's motives for these aggressive operations in the East China Sea are both military and economic in nature, but are equally driven by concerns over political legitimacy and the "regime survival" of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

CHINA'S MARITIME CAPABILITIES have increased tremendously in the last two decades, and the presence and power projection of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) now constitute a serious challenge in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the East China Sea. As a result, China's naval strength has decidedly altered the balance of power in this maritime area, and especially within the first island chain,¹ which China regards as strategically important for its national security and economic development.

Besides the PLAN, other Chinese maritime actors such as the China Coast Guard (中国海警), the maritime armed militia, and large fishing fleets have assumed important supplementary roles in the contested waters of the Western Pacific. The CCG has over the last ten years patrolled and exercised "protection and law enforcement" in maritime areas that China claims are under its jurisdiction. Doing so entails an intrusion into neighbouring countries' exclusive economic zones (EEZs), and the territorial and contiguous waters surrounding islands that so far have been administered by other states.² This long-term strategy by China's Coast Guard is deliberate and sanctioned by higher political and military authorities. China's maritime operations are therefore challenging both *de jure* and *de facto* the traditional sovereignty claims of other nations in the region.

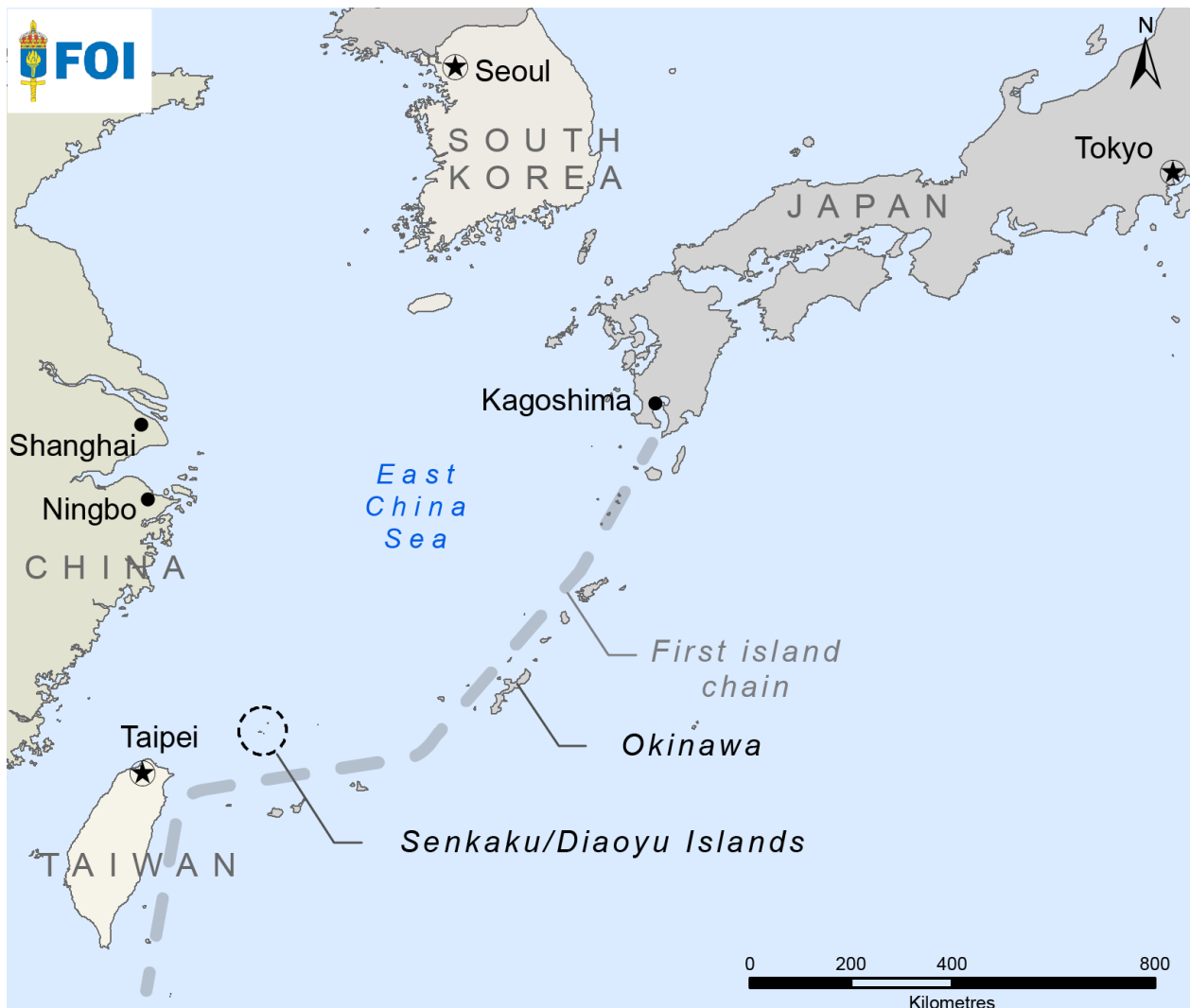
Most important is what appears to be a shift in the role and official mandate of the China Coast Guard

over the last ten years or so. There is clearly an increased militarisation of the CCG, where its vessels often take the front line in maritime conflicts, engage in patrolling and policing of disputed waters and islands, and appear in stand-off situations with foreign coast guards. Meanwhile, the Chinese PLAN usually takes a rear position, monitoring these events from afar but at the same time offering an intimidating presence. Such naval tactics can be seen in both the South China and East China Seas. The disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the southwest corner of Japan's island chain—the Ryukyu—are a case in point.

This memo firstly discusses the CCG, its strengthened capabilities, its organisational setup and relation to China's armed forces, the CCG's changed mandate in its operations, and its role in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands conflict. Secondly, the memo explores the strategies and motivations that might lie behind China's more proactive stance in this maritime dispute with Japan. In other words, why is China and its coast guard trying to challenge the status quo in the East China Sea? What are they trying to accomplish?

CHINA'S NATIONAL SECURITY AND "CORE INTERESTS"

By 2008, under CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao, China had already turned more authoritarian, focusing on internal social stability and a much more assertive



Map 1. The East China Sea and Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

Source: Made by Per Wikström, FOI.

approach to foreign relations under the label “protecting China’s rights and interests” (维权). This coincided with the global financial crisis, 2008–2009, and the view that the West was in decline and China was on the rise. China’s sense of self-confidence had increased, coupled with a wave of popular nationalism and an expansive foreign policy, which soon would result in flashpoints in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the East China Sea.³ China’s worldview was captured in an inadvertent remark by China’s foreign minister, Yang Jiechi, at an APEC conference in 2010: “China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that’s just a fact.”⁴

This statement reveals a realist perspective on international relations—with a hierarchy between big and small states, distinguished by economic and military strength, and by extension a notion that big states have

legitimate concerns and spheres of influence, even at the expense of smaller and weaker nations.

At the same time, in 2009–10, the expression China’s national “core interests” (核心利益) became more frequent in Chinese media, in academic publications, and in official diplomatic statements. As detailed by China specialist Michael Swaine, the concept of China’s *core interests* is closely linked to its views of national security, with some specifications and examples that entered into Chinese diplomatic language. Mentioning the phrase core interests with regard to a certain issue would signal China’s unwillingness to compromise and its view of the issue as non-negotiable and a zero-sum game between China and the other party.⁵ Otherwise stated, it was a way of saying diplomatically: this issue is of vital importance, we will not yield, and you need to back off.

Several broad categories are part of China's core interests, i.e. (1) China's basic state system and national security; (2) national sovereignty and territorial integrity; and (3) the stable development of China's economy and society. A fourth category, national unification, soon became part of the list,⁶ obviously with reference to Taiwan. Nothing about this is surprising, but it has potentially far-reaching implications when combined with China's maritime territorial claims in recent years.

Moreover, "sovereignty and territorial integrity" has often been described as the most important characteristic of China's core interests. This is most clearly defined in what China considers to be domestic affairs such as Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Therefore, China frequently uses core interests as a diplomatic warning signal in its interaction with other states, along with an implicit threat of force or coercion. Over time, the term has been used extensively to cover more contested issues and, of particular interest here, the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, especially since 2012.⁷

This closely connects with China's growing concern with its maritime periphery, seeing it as a vital area for transportation, trade, and economic growth, valuable for its maritime natural resources, and a strategic buffer zone for China's national defence against the United States (US) and its Asian allies in the region.⁸ Therefore, the first island chain, including the East China and South China Seas, has been an obvious candidate for incorporation as one of China's core interests, and has become a source of friction and conflict with neighboring states.

THE MILITARISATION OF CHINA'S COAST GUARD

Enhancing the capabilities of China's Coast Guard (CCG) has been a key goal over the last ten years, the purpose being to create a modern and well-equipped organisation capable not only of law enforcement along the coastline—i.e. standard tasks such as search and rescue, anti-smuggling, and environmental protection—but also of projecting power and securing China's sovereignty claims in deeper waters further out into the ocean.

Indeed, the reform of the CCG took place in stages, starting in 2013 when it was removed from the Ministry of Public Security, made part of the People's Armed Police (PAP), and transferred to the State Oceanic Administration (SOA). At that point, the CCG was combined with three other maritime law-enforcement agencies, but its primary mission was to patrol and safeguard China's maritime claims. Apparently, this organisational setup was not very efficient. In 2018, a second reform took place, transferring the CCG back to the PAP

and placing it indirectly under the leadership of the Central Military Commission (CMC).⁹

Thus, from an organisational viewpoint, the CCG is part of China's armed forces in a unified chain-of-command, although some of its operations are of a civilian nature. However, both in peacetime and in times of war, the CCG remains under the command of the People's Armed Police, with work targets assigned in accordance with those circumstances.¹⁰ This trend of militarising the CCG has been further reinforced since Xi Jinping assumed leadership of the CCP in 2012.

Chinese journals on maritime affairs, e.g. the *Journal of China Maritime Police Academy*, include many discussions on how the CCG should become a more professional organisation and what its prioritised work targets should be. For example, the Chinese scholar Li Peizhi argued in 2016 that the CCG reforms are necessary to make China a "great maritime power" (建设海洋强国) so that it can restore its "leading position and influence in the world."¹¹ In view of China's maritime disputes with other nations, such as the Diaoyu Islands issue, these tensions may lead to armed conflict. Therefore, the CCG must be strengthened in several areas, for example by upgrading ocean-going vessels, establishing a unified chain of command within the CCG, improving equipment, and enhancing legislation to guide its operations.

In some articles, it is argued that a "militarised system of management" should be implemented, the purpose being to successfully win battles at sea in line with "central strategic intentions". This last expression probably alludes to the strategic maritime intentions of the Central Military Commission.¹²

Likewise, the maritime affairs scholar Bai Junfeng mentions China's "overall national security concept," espoused by Xi Jinping in 2017, and portrays the CCG as being at the frontlines of national maritime security. In this view, China's national security is closely linked to "ocean security," and it is clear that China must protect its extensive "maritime strategic interests."¹³ Interestingly, the China Coast Guard and its operations are viewed as having a dual function, in charge of both internal and external security, but it is stressed that national sovereignty and security must be its top priority.

It has been argued that China has a good, but still insufficient, legal foundation for its CCG operations. There is the *Law of the PRC on the Territorial Sea and Adjacent Areas* (1992), the *Fisheries Law of the PRC* (1986), the *PRC Law on the Exclusive Economic Zone and the Continental Shelf* (1998), the *Marine Environmental*

Protection Law of the PRC (1999), and the *PRC Law on the Protection of Islands* (2009). However, as of 2017, Bai argues that China needs a better legal framework, especially a Coast Guard Law, to underpin CCG operations involving sovereign-rights protection and law enforcement in offshore maritime areas.¹⁴ The key argument is that the CCG needs a firmer legal ground to expel foreign ships from disputed maritime areas claimed by China.

The new Coast Guard Law (2021) arrived soon enough, taking into account the CCG's trend towards militarisation, as well as the need for clear procedural rules governing rights protection, law enforcement, and the handling of confrontations with foreign vessels at sea. In fact, arguments had been made within the CCG to establish very close links between the CCG and PLAN. In light of the similarities in basic functions, training, hardware and equipment, command structures, and so forth, it was argued that the CCG and PLAN should coordinate more closely, even integrating many operations, especially command systems, intelligence-sharing, and training programmes.¹⁵ It would be more efficient, since they operate almost identical ship models, combat position training, navigational support, and radar systems, all of which derive from the navy. In addition, most modern CCG vessels can be modified rather quickly in wartime to act as a naval reserve force, since they have reserved positions for extra weapons, electronic systems, and additional capabilities. There is also a significant number of transfers of staff and commanders between the CCG and PLAN.¹⁶

The enactment of the Coast Guard Law in 2021 triggered discussions among both Chinese and foreign analysts. One topic was whether CCG vessels, from a legal standpoint, should be seen as civilian ships or as warships, and whether they effectively constitute “a second navy” (第二海军).

This view was dismissed by Chinese maritime analysts, since although the CCG and PLAN share many features—such as vessel structures and equipment, staff training, and military status—the legal attributes and functions of the two are different. The CCG vessels are “public service ships,” whereas the PLAN vessels are “warships.” Also, the two kinds of vessels are clearly distinguished by white hulls for the CCG and grey hulls for PLAN warships, while CCG ships carry signs in both Chinese and English declaring themselves as China coast guard forces. In this line of argument, the CCG vessels have a strict constabulary function, namely to protect rights and carry out law enforcement in maritime areas under “China’s jurisdiction.”¹⁷

Chinese observers also rejected the idea that there was anything warlike or dangerous about the Coast Guard Law’s stipulations (Articles 17, 20, 21, 46–50) on the CCG’s “use of force during law enforcement at sea.” While admitting that situations might be “complex” when the CCG interacts with foreign ships in disputed waters, Chinese scholars like Zhou Hanke argue that the Coast Guard law is in line with international laws and conventions. He also claims that China’s legal stipulations on the “use of force” are designed to be restrained and proportional to the situation, while also taking into account whether confrontations take place in territorial waters off the shores of a coast or an island, the contiguous zone, the exclusive economic zone or on the high seas.¹⁸ Such arguments show that Chinese analysts are familiar with United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and relevant international maritime laws and practices.

Foreign experts, however, view the unification of the CCG under the PAP in 2018, its rapid capacity-building into a “militarised” CCG ocean-going fleet, and aspects of the 2021 Coast Guard Law as threatening to China’s Asian neighbors. One Korean maritime affairs expert argues that Articles 3, 20–22, 25, and 47 in China’s Coast Guard Law are especially problematic. For example, expressions such as “sea areas under China’s jurisdiction” are vaguely defined and include disputed waters; Articles 20–22 allow the CCG to take forcible measures in ways that ignore UNCLOS’ requirement for the peaceful settlement of disputes, and Articles 46–51 allow the use of police equipment and weapons that can be viewed as “overly broad and excessive.”¹⁹ Therefore, the implications of this law will be very negative for the handling of maritime issues such as the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute, as well as for similar conflicts in the South China Sea, and more generally for freedom of navigation in these ocean areas.

OPERATIONAL SETUP OF THE CCG

When the China Coast Guard was placed under the command of PAP and the Central Military Commission in 2018, Admiral Wang Zhongcai was appointed as head of the CCG. This transfer solidified the military’s leadership over the organisation and it represented a tightened central control—and Xi Jinping’s authority—over China’s maritime law enforcement.²⁰

Organisationally, the CCG has a national bureau in Beijing, and its parent agency is the People’s Armed Police. It has over 16,000 personnel across China. It has three regional branch bureaus (north, east, south)

located in Qingdao, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, which are led by PLAN officers. One level down in the hierarchy are 11 province-level CCG bureaus and further down are city-level CCG bureaus and workstations in a descending line of command. The three regional bureaus supervise six “directly subordinate bureaus,” which are in charge of most of CCG’s sovereignty enforcement operations. Overall, the CCG employs a fleet of over 150 large coast-guard vessels—cutters—with a displacement of 1,000 tons or greater.²¹ Some vessels were transferred from the PLAN in the 2010s, but a large number have been newly built to modern standards and requirements over the last ten years.

The pennant numbers of CCG vessels are organised as four- or five-digit numbers. This information is crucial for an analysis of how CCG fleets operate in the East China Sea, as shown below. The provincial/local CCG vessels have five-digit numbers. However, CCG vessels belonging to the directly subordinate CCG bureaus have four digits. The first digit shows the bureau to which the ship belongs, and the second digit indicates ship tonnage. Thus, a second digit 3 = 3,000 tons, and so on. This pennant system allows for observation of trends in CCG fleet formations across time, in the size of different ships, and in the average or total tonnage of ships in use.²² With regard to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute, the CCG vessels most likely to be sent out for patrols in that maritime area belong to the “directly subordinate” eastern CCG bureaus based in Shanghai and Ningbo, which are indicated by pennant numbers 1 *** and 2 ***.

ENHANCED CAPABILITIES OF THE CCG

In the period since 2012, China expanded and modernised the capabilities of its Coast Guard in an impressively rapid and comprehensive manner, partly thanks to its cooperation with the PLAN and partly due to China’s dynamic shipping construction industry. China has the largest law enforcement fleet in the world, outperforming and outnumbering by far the coastguards of neighbouring Asian nations. The modern CCG vessels are larger, can sail farther away from shore, and can remain on patrol for much longer periods than in the past.

While the CCG has over 150 oceangoing vessels (over 1,000 tons), Japan only has 65–70 similar-capacity coastguard vessels as of today.²³ The larger CCG vessels include over twenty corvettes transferred from the PLAN and modified for coastguard operations. Modern CCG vessels are equipped with helipad facilities, high-pressure water cannons, several high-speed interceptor boats, and deck guns ranging from 30 to 76 mm. These

vessels are typically designed with reinforced steel hulls that can be used for bumping, ramming, or other aggressive manoeuvres against foreign ships.²⁴

It is obvious that the CCG now constitutes a paramilitary maritime actor and law enforcer. Its vessels may be white-hulled and carry signs of “China Coast Guard” in Chinese and English, but it can now be seen as the functional equivalent of China’s second navy. These vessels may not have quite the warlike appearance of the PLAN grey-hulled ships, but they do have the capacity, official sanction, and mission to carry out China’s maritime rights protection with sufficiently intimidating force.

CCG OPERATIONS AROUND SENKAKU/DIAOYU ISLANDS

According to Japanese sources, the China Coast Guard started sending patrol vessels to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands area in 2008, and since then there has been an intensification of these constabulary CCG patrols. The higher frequency and longer duration of Chinese patrols became obvious after 2012 with a noticeable upward trend.²⁵ There are three obvious reasons for this mounting pressure from the Chinese side: incidents at sea that sharply worsened Sino-Japanese relations, a change of political leadership in China, and a substantial technical modernisation of the CCG ship inventory.

Table 1. Chinese CCG patrols/incursions into Senkaku/Diaoyu waters, 2015–2025

Year/date	CCG fleet # vessels
2015-01-09	2151, 2337, 2115
2015-01-19	2305, 2306, 2102
2015-03-16	2306, 2350, 2102
2015-11-30	Three CCG vessels
January-Nov. 2015 (total)	32 CCG patrols
2016-01-14	Two CCG vessels
2016-08-08	Seven CCG vessels
January-Aug. 2016 (total)	20 CCG patrols
2016-11-06	2401, 2101, 2502, 35115
2016-12-11	2305, 2308, 2302
2017-01-04	2307, 2337, 2101, 31239
2017-03-23	2308, 2337, 31239
2017-05-08	2307, 2502, 2337, 2302
2017-08-25	2502, 2166, 2101, 33115
2017-09-25	2307, 2305, 2337, 2106
2018-01-07	2307, 2501, 2305, 2302

Year/date	CCG fleet # vessels
** CCG homepage reports starting here ...	
2020 – November	vessel # 2301 and fleet
2020 – December	vessel # 2502 and fleet
2021 – January	vessel # 1401 and fleet
2021 – March	vessel # 2502 and fleet
2021 – May	vessel # 2502 and fleet
2021 – June	vessel # 2301 and fleet
2022 – Feb.	vessel # 1301 and fleet
2022 – March	vessel # 2302 and fleet
2023 – Sept.	vessel # 1302 and fleet
2023 – Oct.	vessel # 2502 and fleet
2023 – Nov.	vessel # 1301 and fleet
2023 – Dec.	vessel # 2502 and fleet
2024 – Jan.	vessel # 1301 and fleet
2024 – Feb.	vessel # 2502 and fleet
2024 – March	vessel # 1301 and fleet
2024 – April	vessel # 2502 and fleet
2024 – May	vessel # 1301 and fleet
2024 – July	vessel # 1301 and fleet
2024 – Aug.	vessel # 2204 and fleet
2024 – Sept.	vessel # 1303 and fleet
2024 – Oct.	vessel # 2503 and fleet
2024 – Nov.	vessel # 1303 and fleet
2024 – Dec.	vessel # 1303 and fleet
2025 – Jan.	vessel # 1302 and fleet

Source: Compilation by the author and based on (A) news items in the online Chinese newspaper Global Times, on various dates (during 2015–2018), and (B) reports on CCG patrols in the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands area posted on the CCG Bureau official webpage (<https://www.ccg.gov.cn/wqzf/>) under the subheading “rights protection and law enforcement” [维权执法] (during 2020–2025). Note: this is an incomplete data set, due to lack of solid information, on the real number of CCG vessel fleets sent to patrol the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, but it reveals an overall pattern. It is certainly an underestimate of the actual number of CCG patrols in the area. Original URL links on file with the author.

First, in 2010 and 2012, there were two major incidents around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. These confrontations raised diplomatic tensions and triggered storms of anti-Japan protests across China.²⁶ In fact, the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has a slightly complicated and long history. Suffice it to say that Japan

has maintained *de jure* and *de facto* administrative control and sovereignty over the islands since the late 1800s, and regards them as part of the Ryukyu islands chain.²⁷

A second factor was the arrival of Xi Jinping as the top leader of the Chinese Communist Party. While China’s maritime assertiveness had been evident under his predecessor, Hu Jintao, this trend was now reinforced. Under Xi’s command, foreign policy took an authoritarian turn, and the Chinese Navy and the CCG were given the resources and a mandate to develop their capacity and act more assertively in waters beyond China’s immediate coastlines.

Third, the CCG has achieved a massive improvement in its capacities over the last 10 years, not only in terms of its ocean-going vessels, but also in its relatively smaller vessels (500–1,000 tons), many of which have specialised functions. This development offers a new range of seagoing possibilities, flexibility, and fleet formations that were previously absent.²⁸ It is likely that the sheer increase in capacity and new equipment has given the CCG incentives to act with more force and assertiveness.

With regard to CCG operations vis-à-vis the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands since 2015, we can see a few interesting trends, although they are not crystal clear (see Table 1). In the period 2015–2018, nearly all CCG vessels had 4-digit pennants starting with the digit “2” and originating from the CCG base in Ningbo, Zhejiang. This is a directly subordinate CCG Bureau, and therefore in charge of missions focusing on “rights protection and law enforcement.” This makes perfect sense, since the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands were the destination of these CCG fleets.

A second pattern is that the number of CCG vessels in a fleet formation seems to have increased over time. In the earlier years, only 2–3 vessels typically took part in a constabulary patrol, whereas in later years the CCG fleets increased to 3–4 vessels. Also, while the Ningbo CCG vessels had prime responsibility for the operations, sometimes “guest vessels” from the Tianjin and Liaoning CCG bureaus joined their fleets.

A third pattern is that the size and displacement of the vessels have increased over the years. Whereas in 2015–2016, the deployment of 1,000-ton CCG cutters was still common, in the years 2017–2018 it became normal to send out larger vessels, i.e., around 3,000–5,000 tons. Naturally, this may be due to the fact that the CCG fleet has been undergoing an upgrade and modernisation. However, it is clear that the CCG patrols around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands became more heavily equipped and increasingly intimidating over time.

Then, from 2020–2025, there has been a routinisation of the CCG patrols. Earlier patterns have certainly remained, such as the use of fleet formations and 3,000–5,000-ton CCG vessels. However, as shown by the pennant numbers, a new pattern has emerged in which the Ningbo CCG branch takes turns with the Shanghai CCG to monitor the Senkaku/Diaoyu area. In 2024, every other month a coastguard fleet was led by CCG #2502 (Ningbo), followed the next month by a fleet led by CCG #1301, 1302 or 1303 (Shanghai), and so it has continued. This pattern reveals a shared responsibility between these two eastern CCG Bureaus. It also indicates a heightened level of routinisation of such patrols in the disputed waters. The China Coast Guard wants to establish a semi-permanent paramilitary presence in this maritime area; this goal stands out as one of the key motives behind its operations.

GREY-ZONE TACTICS

Foreign observers have labelled China's use of its CCG vessels in disputed maritime areas as a form of grey zone activity. Instead of using grey-hulled warships of the Chinese Navy (PLAN), the “law-enforcing” CCG vessels are placed at the frontline of maritime disputes. The underlying logic is that the white-hulled ships of the China Coast Guard will keep tensions and conflicts at a calibrated level, below the point where the confrontation can escalate into war. Nevertheless, the modernisation of the CCG in recent years, and its placement under the PAP and the Central Military Commission, have turned it into a maritime force with a dual purpose for peacetime and war.²⁹

China has pursued a strategy of “salami-slicing” tactics in order to gradually undermine Japanese authority in this maritime area. The objective seems to be to wear down Japanese resistance over time, and slowly act more assertively while outnumbering and outlasting the Japanese. This pattern can be seen in a number of metrics. Since 2012, the CCG has sent fleets with increasing frequency and enhanced capabilities to the Senkaku/Diaoyu area. This is a trend in which 1–2 patrols per month are then upgraded to 3–4 patrols per month, while the duration of each patrol is extended from a few hours to a few days.

At an early stage, CCG fleets simply circumnavigated the islands. At first, this was just a matter of patrols in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ); subsequently, the incursions expanded into contiguous waters, and thereafter into the territorial waters around the islands. The purpose of this strategy has been to test the limits, the reactions of the Japanese, and their reaction time.

There is also a pattern in which CCG vessels have been present for extended periods in the Senkaku/Diaoyu area. For example, in 2023, they were present in the area for 352 days. Such an extended CCG presence has become standard in the last few years.³⁰ As shown in Graph 1, incursions into these territorial waters have averaged 25–30 incidents per month over the last 10 years.

CCG vessels also act as custodians of Chinese fishing boats in the Diaoyu islands fishing grounds, or they unilaterally impose summertime fishing bans (May to August) around the islands, enforced on both Chinese and Japanese fishermen. In addition, the CCG carries out maritime law enforcement by warning or expelling Japanese fishing boats from the area, or by engaging in stand-offs with the Japanese Coast Guard. Finally, CCG authorities accuse Japanese fishing boats and coast guard ships of making illegal incursions into China's territorial waters.³¹ In this way, through a strategy of eroding Japanese territorial authority, China builds the basis for claiming the Diaoyu Islands as *de facto* under its own jurisdiction.

ANALYSIS OF CHINA'S GOALS AND MOTIVATIONS

It is useful to distinguish between strategies and the end goals of an operation. China's grey zone activities and its “salami slicing” approach in the East China Sea are part of a broader effort to incrementally advance its strategic goals. But what are the motivations behind China's actions? As noted earlier, China's officially stated goal is to protect its “core interests,” i.e. national security, territorial integrity, stable economic development, and national re-unification—that is, the re-integration of Taiwan under Communist Party rule. Such core interests are used to legitimise CCG operations around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. China claims that this maritime area is historically an inalienable part of China, and that it is a question of territorial integrity, similar to that regarding Taiwan. This issue can also be seen as closely linked to China's national security and economic development, since the East China Sea is a key conduit of its maritime trade. China must establish itself as a maritime power capable of both asserting and denying sea control within the first island chain.³² The China Coast Guard operations are clearly a part of that puzzle.

However, these official goals declared by China are not the whole story. At a more practical and detailed level, the motives behind China's maritime actions and its use of the CCG as a para-military actor require further analysis. In broad terms, China's motives can be divided into three categories: economic, military, and political, and they overlap in several ways.

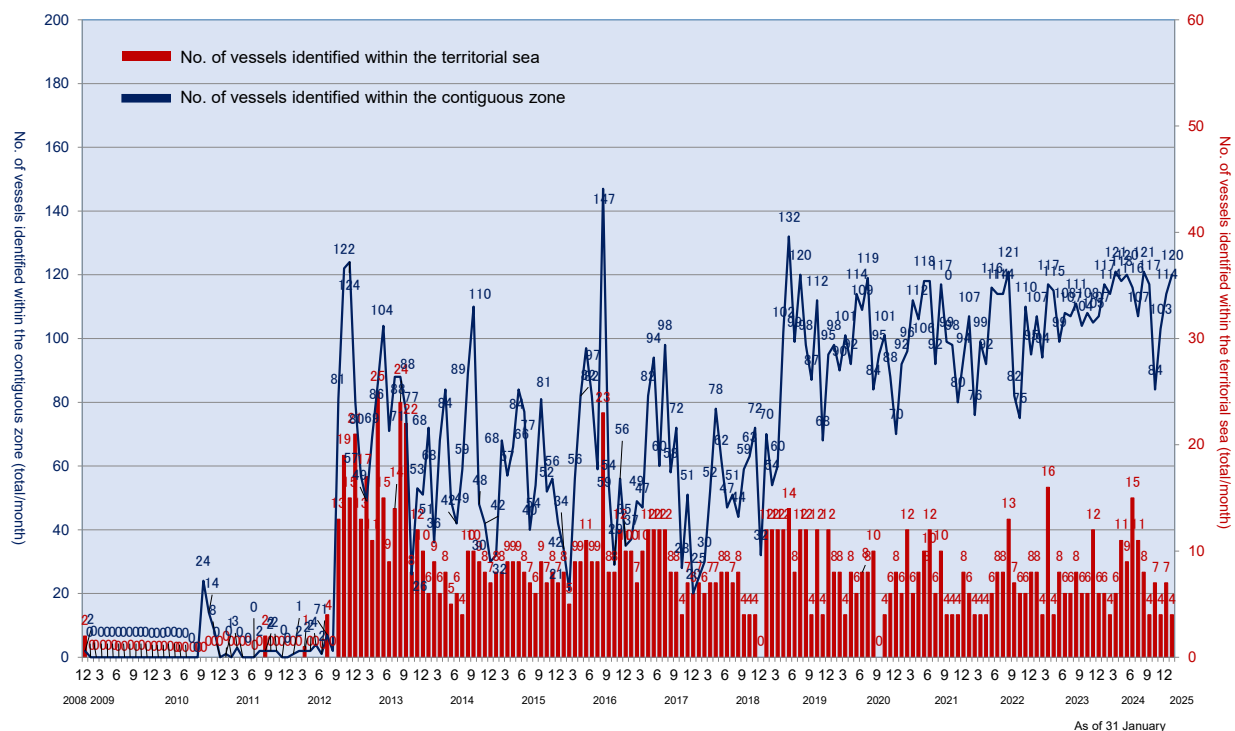


Figure 1. Incursions into the Senkaku/Diaoyu maritime area, 2008–2025.

Remarks: The lower bar chart indicates territorial sea incursions, averaging 25–30 incidents/month, and with some seasonal variations. The upper jagged line indicates contiguous zone incursions, averaging 100 vessels/month since 2018, with seasonal variations. Not all incursions are made by CCG vessels, however, but also by all sorts of other foreign vessels.

Source: Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Available at: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100647455.pdf>.

First, from an economic perspective, the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and surrounding waters could potentially be valuable for oil and gas exploration, and their rich fishing grounds are even more important.³³ However, the control of shipping lanes in the East China Sea is probably the key goal, and having a strong foothold on the Diaoyu Islands would be quite advantageous for that purpose. In addition, territorial control of the islands would allow China to dominate a strategic portion of the first island chain and maritime trade in that area.

Second, from a military viewpoint, the CCG vessel incursions into the Senkaku/Diaoyu area can fulfil a number of short- and long-term purposes. To a degree, they can be seen as a form of “training exercise” to test the China Coast Guard’s capabilities, and how well they can carry out their grey-zone operations, occasionally together with PLAN. This maritime area offers the CCG an opportunity to carry out “law enforcement” in a hostile environment in confrontation with the Japanese Coast Guard, to check their reactions and reaction times, and thereby collect valuable intelligence information.

Such CCG operations are also a potential test of the reactions of US military forces stationed in Okinawa.

Moreover, if Japan decides to activate the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Forces to protect the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, China would almost certainly claim the moral high ground and accuse Japan of escalating the conflict into war. Therefore, using the white-hulled but militarised CCG vessels at the frontlines of this maritime conflict offers both operational and diplomatic advantages for China. No matter how Japan acts or reacts—with less or more force—there will still be benefits for the Chinese side.

Also from a military perspective, under the pretext of CCG law enforcement in the area, China can establish *de facto* control over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and gain other strategic advantages. First, the Chinese CCG and PLAN can secure a safe eastward passage through the first island chain and into the Pacific Ocean. That would push the US-led naval alliance one step back and strengthen the security buffer zone from a Chinese perspective. Second, this strategy could entail a favourable division of labour in which the CCG assumes primary responsibility for asserting control within the first island chain, while the PLAN focuses its operations on maritime areas further away, thereby gaining strategic depth.

Finally, if China can establish control over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and surrounding waters, it would be advantageous in the case of a “Taiwan contingency”. For example, if China were to impose a naval blockade or launch a military attack on Taiwan, US forces based in Okinawa and Japanese allied forces would face greater obstacles in carrying out military operations north of Taiwan.

Third, and equally important, are China’s domestic politics, including political priorities at the highest levels of the CCP, and bureaucratic factors that shape the conflict with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. There is a close connection between China’s domestic politics and its foreign policies. China’s obsession with national security is driven by the issue of what may be called “regime survival”—that is, the survival of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This, in turn, hinges on regime legitimacy, which has been based on economic growth and nationalism. If the CCP fails to deliver on these fronts, the Party and the political system could be in trouble. As detailed by Jessica Chen Weiss, the CCP has spent considerable energy on promoting popular nationalism, mixed with a heavy dose of anti-Japanese propaganda.³⁴ Therefore, if the Chinese authorities are perceived as being soft in their diplomatic relations with Japan, or as showing signs of compromise in the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute, it could trigger a popular backlash and a decline in the “approval ratings” of the CCP.

There is also the problem of irrational bureaucratic incentives within China’s body politic. As argued by China scholar Kacie Miura, under Xi Jinping—amid rising authoritarianism and anti-corruption campaigns—there has been a tendency among China’s security agencies to play it safe and be extra diligent in their operations. Therefore, the CCG’s activities around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands may suffer from policy “over-compliance” with central political intentions. Partly, CCG officials may wish to avoid anti-corruption charges, and partly they have an incentive to increase their budgets or improve the promotion prospects for top officials.³⁵ Such factors may also contribute to their aggressive operations in the East China Sea.

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

As demonstrated in this memo, the China Coast Guard has undergone a substantial technical modernisation over the last 10 years, in cooperation with the PLAN and thanks to China’s dynamic shipbuilding industry. The CCG is now an intimidating maritime actor and can outperform and outnumber the coastguards of most neighbouring nations. The modern CCG vessels are larger, can

sail farther away from shore, and can remain at sea for longer periods. With regard to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the CCG fleets have increased in size and displacement, are technically upgraded and, in recent years, fleets from the Ningbo and Shanghai CCG Bureaus have taken turns conducting law enforcement around the disputed islands. The CCG patrols have become increasingly assertive and now maintain a presence in the area for around 250 days per year. China uses its militarised CCG vessels as a substitute for the PLAN to avoid a situation in which the conflict escalates into war, while still being intimidating enough to enforce China’s territorial claims. The CCG’s semi-permanent presence is gradually eroding Japanese authority over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and China can eventually claim the area as being *de facto* under its jurisdiction.

China’s motives for acting assertively in the East China Sea are manifold, including reasons of maritime military strategy, economic security, and the CCP’s wish to boost its political legitimacy. From a military view, the CCG operations around Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands allow it to test its capabilities vis-à-vis the Japanese Coast Guard, monitor reactions, and assess whether Japan is willing to send in its navy and escalate the conflict. China’s goal is to establish *de facto* control over these islands, which would yield several benefits, e.g. breaking through the first island chain, expanding China’s maritime buffer zone, and making US–Japanese military action more difficult in the event of a Chinese naval blockade or invasion of Taiwan.

If China’s strategy is successful with regard to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, it could be replicated in other maritime conflicts, and the use of CCG fleets has already been observed both in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. The implications of this conflict are profound. Japan has a military treaty with the US, and the Americans have confirmed that the Senkaku islands are covered by this defence agreement.³⁶ Therefore, if the disputes escalate into armed conflict, the risk is high that US military forces will be involved, even if Japan and the US would prefer to avoid this scenario. A maritime conflict between these powers, in close proximity to Taiwan, could have ripple effects of a more serious nature.

In addition, a large volume of international shipping passes through the East China Sea and further south into the South China Sea. Some of the world’s largest trading partners, including China, the US, Japan, and South Korea, should have an interest in keeping maritime transport safe in this area. If maritime conflicts were to spread to the South China Sea, where a large share of global shipping takes place, the effects would

be severe for the EU and trade-dependent economies such as Sweden. Value chains for critical imports and exports would become slower, more costly, and less predictable. Thus, from an economic perspective, it makes

sense for these economic giants to reduce their conflicts. However, China may consider its own political rationality, i.e., regime survival and political legitimacy, to be more important. ■

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Endnotes

- 1 The first island chain is a string of major Pacific archipelagos in the waters east of the East Asian continental mainland coast—bordering Russia, North and South Korea, People's Republic of China, and Vietnam. It consists of the Kuril Islands, the Japanese archipelago, the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the northern Philippines, and Borneo. The first island chain physically separates the East Asian mainland from maritime areas further out in the Pacific Ocean, and is therefore seen as having a great geostrategic value.
- 2 These maritime standards were set by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), drafted in 1982 and entered into force in 1994 (www.unclos.org). One result of UNCLOS is the increasing enclosure of the oceans. The territorial sea was extended to 12 nautical miles, with a further 12-mile contiguous zone, and a 200-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ), in which a state has sovereign rights for the purpose of exploring and exploiting natural resources. Cf., Ian Speller, *Understanding Naval Warfare*, Routledge, 2014: p. 20–22. It is important to note that China signed the UNCLOS convention in 1982 and ratified it in 1996.
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- 4 Cited in Susan Shirk, *Overreach*, p. 17.
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- 6 Swaine, “China's Assertive behavior,” p. 4.
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- 8 Michael D. Swaine, “Chinese Views and Commentary on Periphery Diplomacy,” *China Leadership Monitor* 44, 28 July 2014, pp. 3–8. See also, Jinghan Zeng, Yuefan Xiao & Shaun Breslin, “Securing China's core interests: The state of the debate in China,” *International Affairs* 91:2, 2015: pp. 259–261; Jinghan Zeng, “Is China committed to peaceful rise? Debating how to secure core interests in China,” *International Politics* 54:4, 2017: pp. 618–636.
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- 11 Peizhi Li, “On Reforming the System of Chinese Maritime Law Enforcement against the Background of Constructing a Maritime Power,” [建设海洋强国战略背景下中国海警体制改革的思考], *Journal of Chinese Armed Police Force Academy*, 32:3, 2016: pp. 48–49.
- 12 Li, “On Reforming the System,” p. 51–52.
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- 14 Bai, “The Strategic Significance,” p. 5–6.
- 15 Yang Yang and Peizhi Li, “On the Integration Development of China's Coast Guard and Navy” [中国海警海军融合式发展问题探究], *Journal of China Maritime Police Academy*, 16:1, 2016: pp. 11–12.
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- 18 Hanke Zhou, “Research on the use of force in our National Coast Guard Law” [对我国海警法中武力使用相关问题的研究], *Journal of Ocean University of China*, Issue 9, 2022: pp. 106–111. See also, Qi Wang and Lili Jing, “Research on the use of Force in Maritime Law Enforcement by China Coast Guard” [中国海警海上执法武力使用研究], *Journal of China's People's Police University*, 39:3, 2023: pp. 51–57.
- 19 Suk Kyoong Kim, “An International Law Perspective on the China Coast Guard and Its Implications for Maritime Security in East Asia,” *The International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law* 37, 2022: pp. 1–15.
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- 21 Martinson, “Early Warning Brief,” 2021: p.1; see, also, Suk Kyoong Kim, “The Expansion of and Changes to the National Coast Guards in Asia,” *Ocean Development & International Law*, vol. 49, no. 4 (2018): 326.
- 22 See Martinson, “Early Warning Brief,” p. 1.
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- 24 U.S. DoD, *Military and Security Developments*, p. 77; see, also, NIDS, *China Security Report: China's Quest for Control of the Cognitive Domain and Gray Zone Situations*, National Institute for Defense Studies, Japan (2023): p. 63.
- 25 NIDS, *China Security Report*, pp. 64–65.
- 26 See, Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2014): Chapters 7–8.
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- 33 See, e.g., Midford, “The Confrontation over the Senkakus,” 2024: pp. 30–31.
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