

China's claim to the South China Sea



The original map of China's claim to the South China Sea has a nine-dashed line that takes in about 90% of the 3.5 million square kilometres of that sea. This vague boundary was first officially published on a map by China's Nationalist government in 1947 and has been included in subsequent maps issued under Communist rule.

In the last 20 years China has begun to enforce the entirety of its claim, culminating in the declaration in August 2012 that its claim area had become the Chinese city of Sansha. China claimed the right to exclude foreign shipping and aircraft from Sansha and stated that it would enforce its claim. Chinese and Vietnamese forces have fought a number of battles and skirmishes in the Paracel and Spratley Islands from 1974 to 1988. Now China is stealing territory from the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia as well.

Sansha is administered from one of the Paracel Islands (Woody Island) which has a 2.4 km airstrip and refuelling facilities for aircraft. Most of the rest of the South China Sea has only tiny islands and reefs, many of which are only above water at low tide. China has now built bases on a few of these reefs. The southern-most base is at Mischief Reef in the Paracel Islands, 114 kilometres from the Filipino Island of Palawan. This started as a mini-base on stilts on the reef in 1995. It was recently expanded to a more substantial edifice.



Chinese base at Mischief Reef.

Another recently completed base is at Subi Reef which includes an elevated radome.



The Chinese base at Subi Reef under construction



Chinese map of the South China Sea showing their “nine-dashed” line and the location of Fiery Cross Reef in the centre of the claim area.



The Chinese base at Fiery Cross Reef



Chinese troops at Fiery Cross Reef.



The Chinese base at Subi Reef in the Spratly Islands under construction. An elevated radome is on the left. An elevated walkway connects to a helipad on the right.

One of the more contentious Chinese seizures is of Scarborough Shoal, 250 kilometres west of Manila. In April 2012, the Philippines Navy found eight Chinese fishing boats in the lagoon of Scarborough Shoal, illegally fishing in Filipino waters. Before they could be seized and the Chinese fishermen arrested, two Chinese maritime surveillance ships approached and positioned themselves between the Filipino ships and the Chinese fishing boats. The standoff continued to June 2012 when both countries agreed to withdraw their ships from the area. Only the Filipino ships did so.