China Coast Guard ships are becoming an increasingly visible presence in the region, as “rights-protection missions have expanded in number and intensity.” Concomitantly, “the geographic scope of Chinese maritime activism is also expanding.”

and intensity. Prior to 2010, the fleet engaged in mostly declaratory law enforcement: tracking and verbally harassing foreign surveillance vessels operating in China’s EEZ and patrolling disputed waters to show administration. However, the weiquan fleet is increasingly tasked with missions that transcend the symbolic and declaratory.

Before December 2008, Chinese law-enforcement vessels had never been to the Senkaku Islands. Now they haunt the islets, undermining Japanese administrative control and denying Japanese civilian access to them. Scarborough Shoal is now under China’s “effective control.” The same dynamic appears to be playing out with the Second Thomas Shoal, which Chinese Coast Guard cutters have lately resolved to blockade. Underpinning these events are expanded “regular rights-protection patrols” in disputed waters. The frequency and intensity of recent events at sea inspired He Xuming, Deputy Commander of the CMS East Sea Department, to describe the current situation as “war without gunsmoke” and prompted Chinese analysts to conclude that China has recalibrated its overall approach for dealing with maritime disputes away from weifeng in favor of weiquan.19

The geographic scope of Chinese maritime activism is also expanding. In the early 2000s, CMS forces rarely took to blue water. Now, China Coast Guard ships are on constant deployment hundreds of miles from the mainland coast. Weiquan forces continue to push the boundaries of their operations. In August 2013 China Coast Guard vessels began patrolling the North and South Luconia Shoals, claimed by Malaysia.19

These conclusions fit the known facts. They also align with the explicit objectives of Chinese policy. The 12th Five-Year Plan for Maritime Development (2011–2015), for instance, clearly states PRC aspirations to “increase the time and space coverage of rights-protection patrols within jurisdictional waters” and “strengthen effective control over jurisdictional waters.”20 During his tenure (2011–2014), State Oceanic Administration Director Liu Cigui regularly highlighted the need for China to strengthen “administrative control” in disputed waters. While it is impossible to predict the future trajectory of Chinese maritime rights protection, it is safe to assume that China has built the world’s largest coast guard fleet to turn these aims into reality.★

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