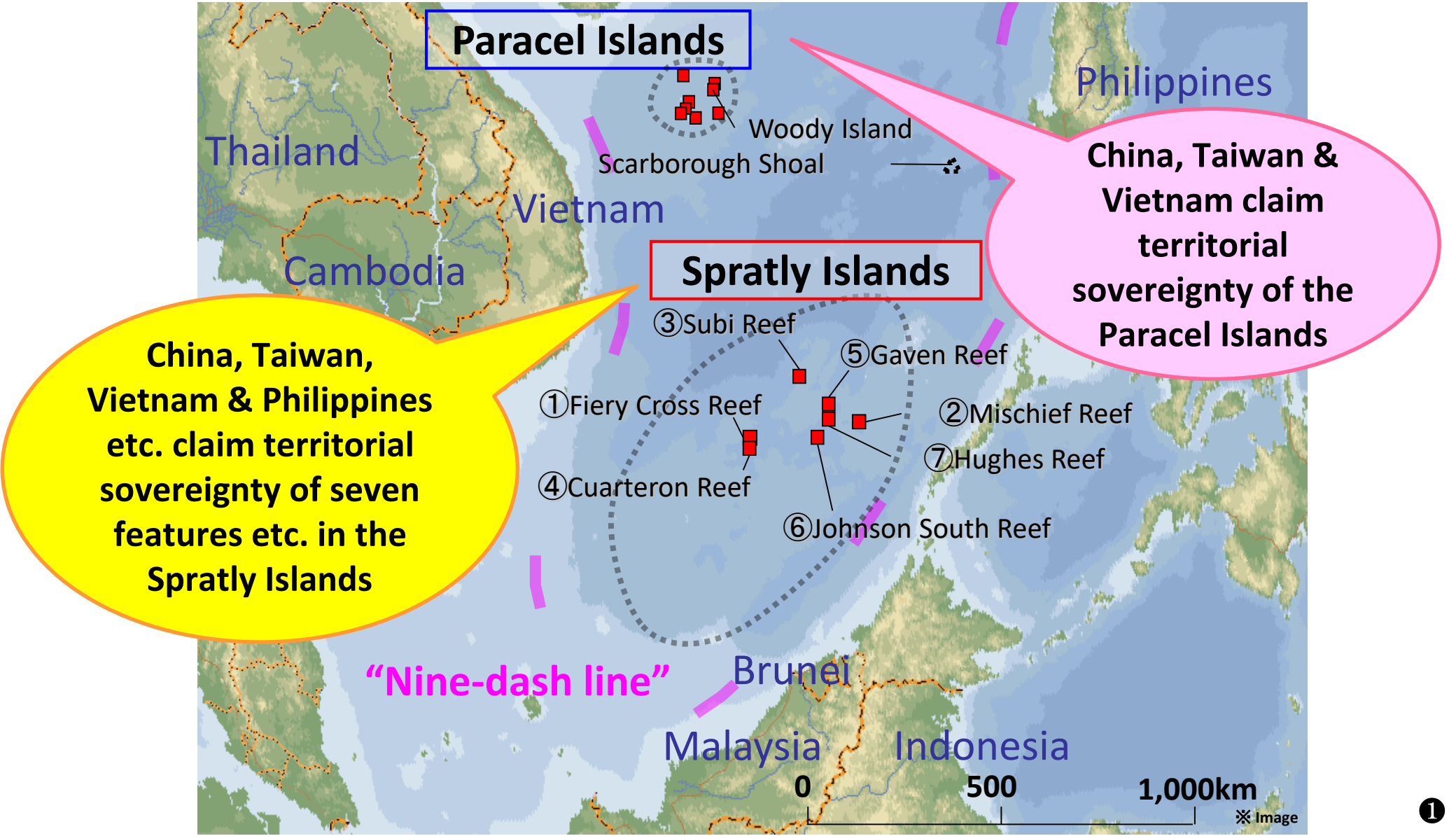
China's Activities in the South China Sea (China's development activities on the features and trends in related countries)

June 2026

Japan Ministry of Defense

(Summary 1/3) Overall View of the South China Sea (SCS)

● In the SCS, **claims conflict between ASEAN countries and China over the territorial rights of Spratly and Paracel islands**

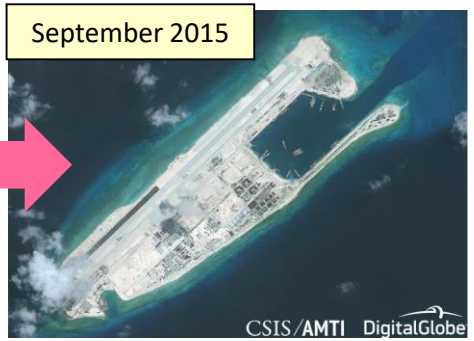


（Summary 2/3） China's Reclamation Activities in the SCS

- Since 2014, China has pressed ahead with **rapid and large-scale land reclamation works in 7 features in the Spratlys.**
- By the late-2015 when the reclamation had been mostly completed.
- After completing reclamation, **China militarizes the features further, continuously developing various infrastructure and deploying military assets.**

Fiery Cross Reef

https://amti.csis.org/fiery-cross-reef/#jp-carousel-24054



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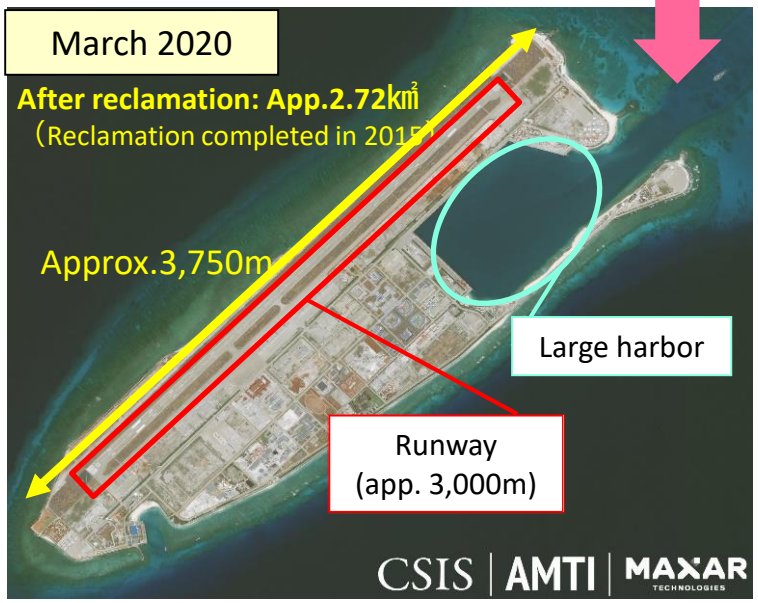

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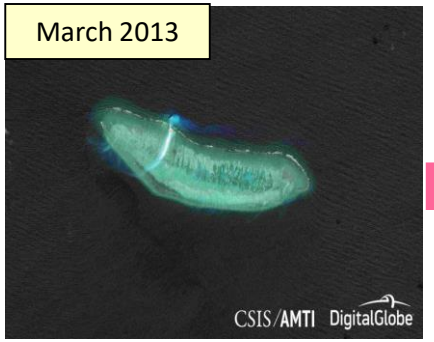
Cuarteron Reef



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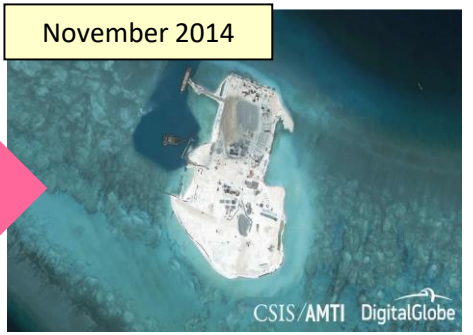

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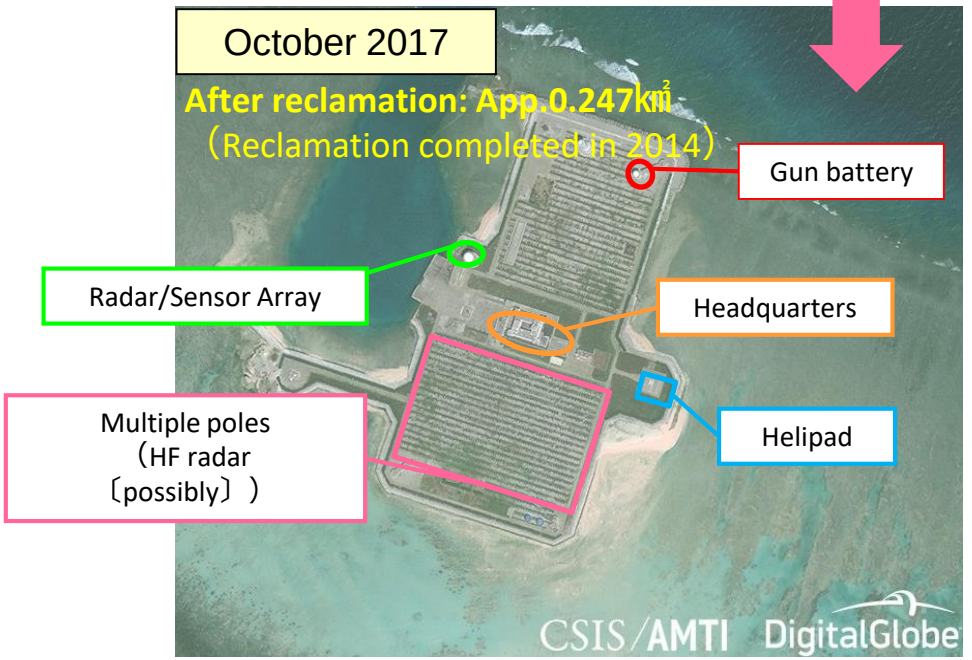
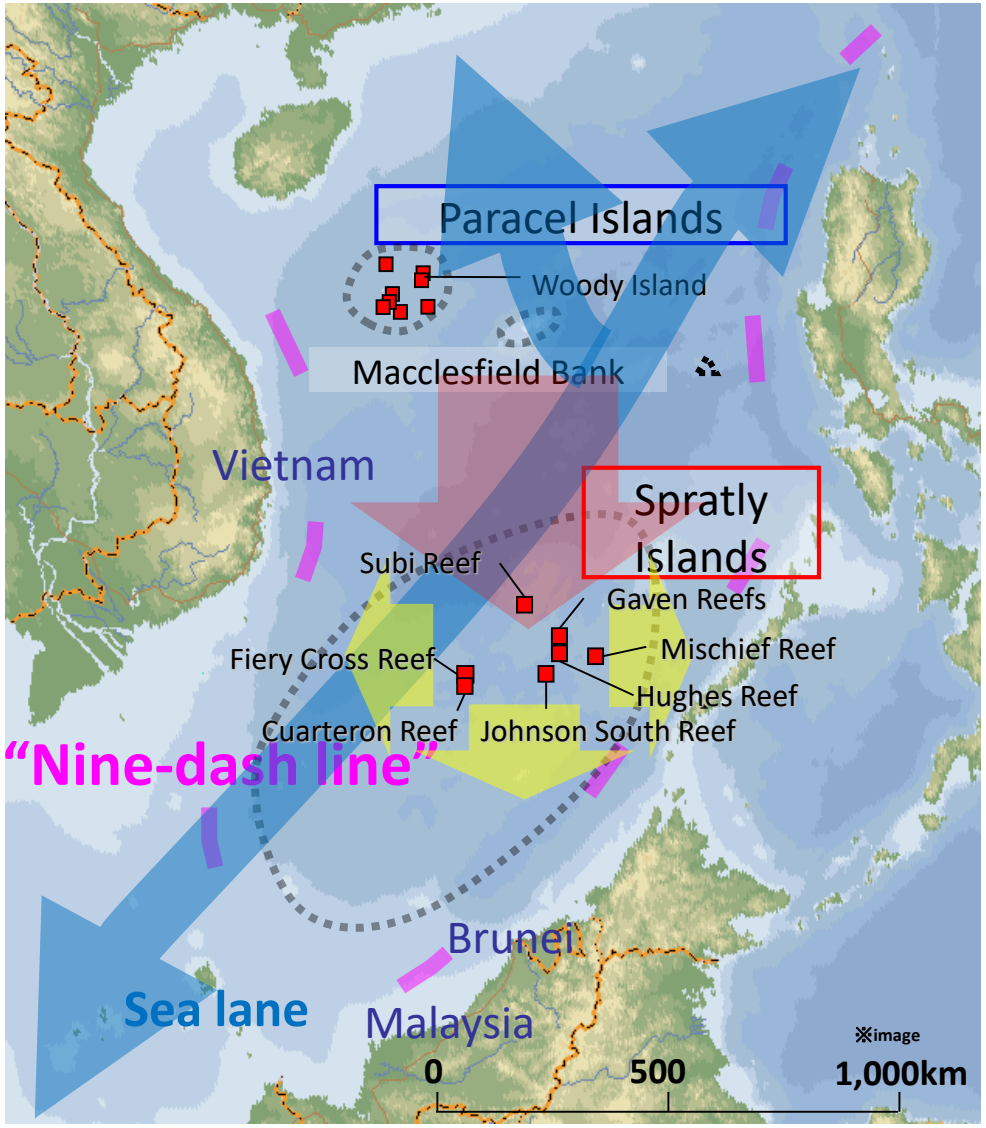


https://amti.csis.org/cuarteron-reef/#jp-carousel-22629

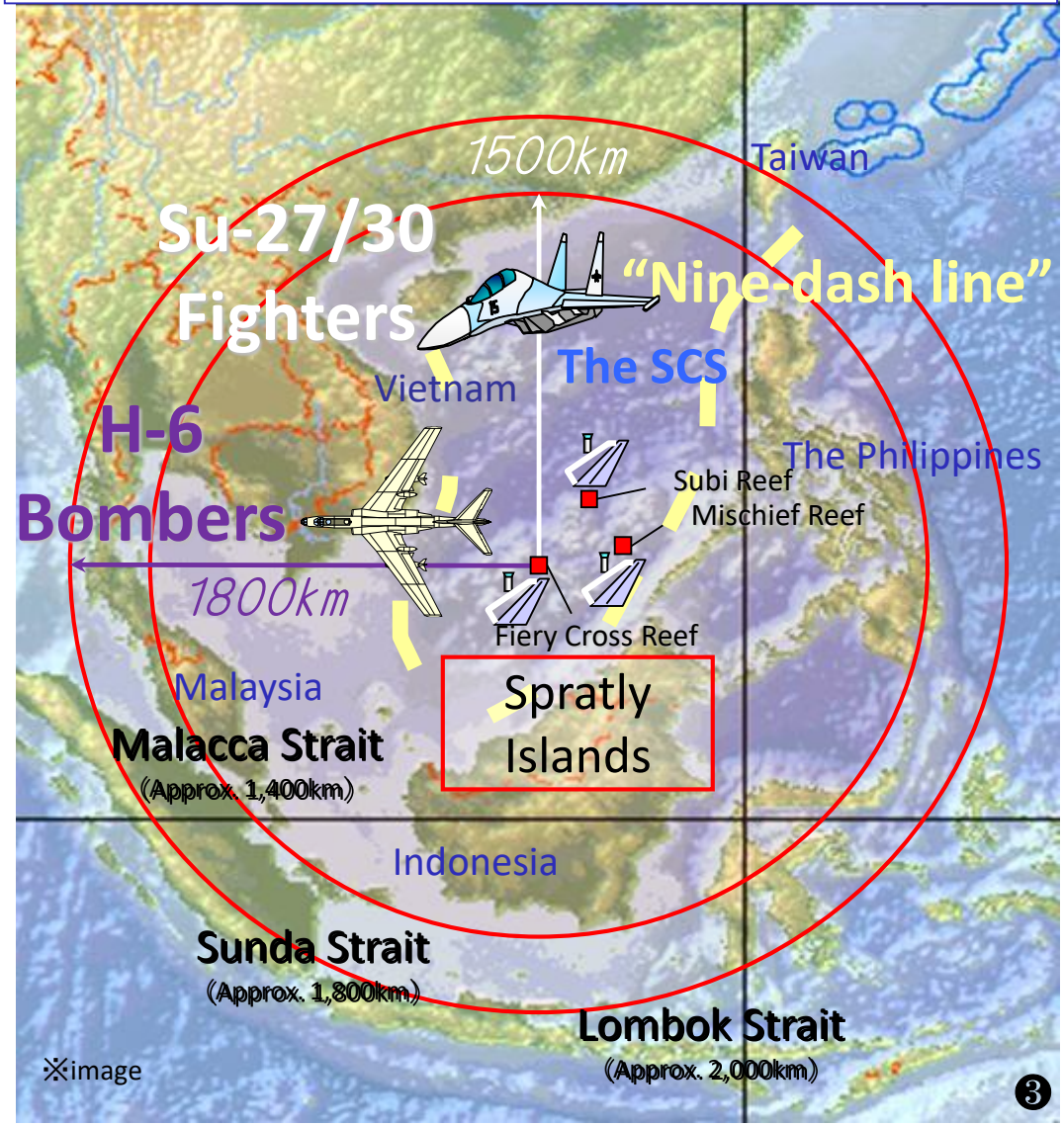
Sources：CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (photo) / U.S. DoD Annual Report to Congress 2016,2017 /Google Earth (length)/ Media reports etc.

(Summary 3/3) Security Implications

Building port facilities in the SCS could dramatically improve China's ISR and other mission capabilities in the SCS



Runway construction on the Fiery Cross, Subi, and Mischief Reefs (incl. 3,000m-class) would lead to increase in China's air force presence in the SCS



South China Sea

1. Developments in the Spratly Islands

1-1 China Makes Advances into the SCS

China has made advances into the SCS by exploiting power vacuums (to the Paracel Islands in 50s-70s and to the Spratly Islands since 80s.)

Timeline

1950s： France withdraws from French Indochina
↓
1950s： China occupies half of the Paracel Islands
（South Vietnam also advances to Paracel Islands）
↓
1973： U.S. withdraws from South Vietnam
↓
1974： China occupies the entire Paracel Islands after dislodging South Vietnam
(1975：Collapse of South Vietnam after the Vietnam War）

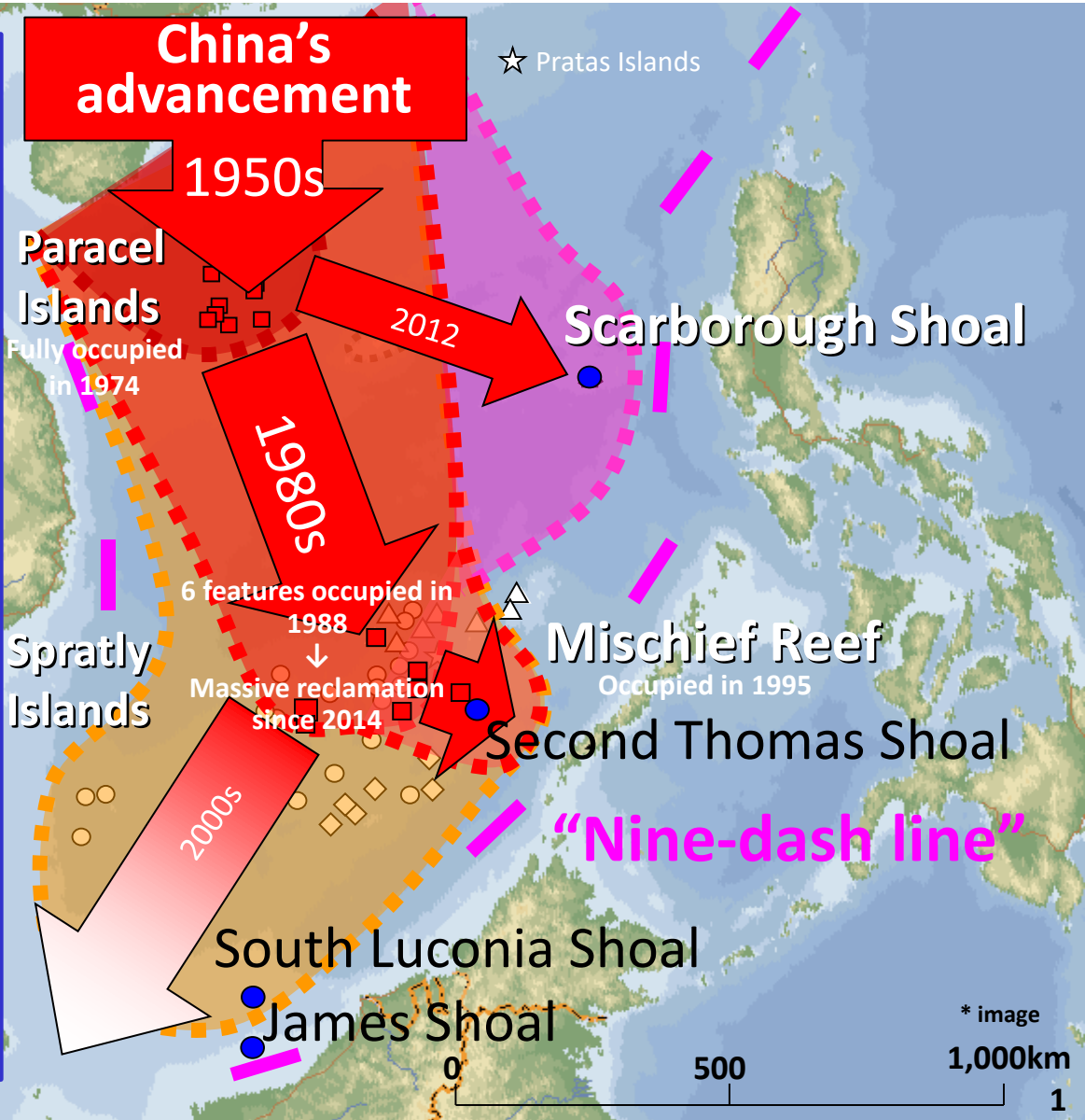
Mid-1980s： Soviet military in Vietnam decreases
↓
1980s： China advances to the Spratly Islands
1988： China occupies 6 features of the Spratly Islands

1992： U.S. withdraws from the Philippines
↓
1995： China occupies Mischief Reef

2000s： China advances to the southern SCS

2012： China gains *de facto* control over Scarborough Shoal

2014-： China conducts rapid and large-scale reclamation and infrastructure building in the SCS



1-2 China's Occupation in the SCS (before reclamation)

(Source: Media reports etc.)

- China gained *de facto* control over 7 maritime features in the Spratlys and built structures at all of the 7 features
- Based on its sovereignty claim, China has taken legislative and administrative actions such as the enactment of the Law on Territorial Sea (1992), the establishment of Sansha City and the Sansha Security District (2012), and the establishment of Xisha and Nansha Districts under Sansha City (2020).

Structures on features etc.

- : China's
- : Taiwan's
- : Vietnam's
- : the Philippines'
- : Malaysia's

※ Thin dash lines show 200 NM from coasts geographically

Paracel Islands

The Philippines

Bombay Reef

Macclesfield Bank

Scarborough Shoal

Subi Reef

Gaven Reef

Vietnam

"Nine-dash line"

Fiery Cross Reef

Hughes Reef

Cuarteron Reef

Johnson South Reef

Spratly Islands

Mischief Reef

Brunei

Malaysia

0 500 1,000km

※ image

1-3 China's Occupation in the SCS after Reclamation

- Since 2014, China has pressed ahead with rapid and large-scale land reclamation works in 7 features in the Spratlys. By the late-2015 when the reclamation had been mostly completed, area of the reclamation work was approx. 12.9 km^2.[4]
- After the completion of the reclamation, China continues developing infrastructure which can be used for military purposes , with further militarization.

Structures on features etc.

- : China's
- : Taiwan's
- : Vietnam's
- : the Philippines'
- : Malaysia's

※ Thin dash lines show 200 NM from coasts geographically

Antelope Reef

Possibility of constructing 2,700m-class runway [7]

Woody Island

Approx. 3,000m-class runway[5]

Gaven Reefs

CIWS, anti-aircraft guns[2] etc.

Paracel Islands

Subi Reef

3,000m-class runway[5], hangers [6], and CIWS[2] etc.

Scarborough Shoal

No reclamation

Hughes Reef

CIWS, anti-aircraft guns[2] etc.

Fiery Cross Reef

3,000m-class runway (where test flight forcibly conducted) [3], hangers [6], and CIWS [2]

Spratly Islands

Cuarteron Reef

CIWS, anti-aircraft guns, radar/communication facilities[2] etc.

Johnson South Reef

CIWS, anti-aircraft guns, radar/communication facilities[2] etc.

Mischief Reef

Approx. 3,000m runway[5], hangers, and CIWS[6]etc

0 500 1,000km

【参照】

1. " China quietly upgrades a remote reef". *CSIS AMTI*, 20 Nov, 2018, http:// amti.csis.org/china-quietly-upgrades-bombay-reef/
2. " China's new spratly island defenses". *CSIS AMTI*. 13 Dec, 2018. http:// amti.csis.org/chinas-new-spratly-island-defenses/
3. " Airstrips near completion". *CSIS AMTI*. 14 Jan, 2016, http://amti.csis.org/airstrips-near-completion/
4. "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments involving the People's Republic of China 2016". *U.S. Department of Defense*, 26 April,2016.
5. "A new Chinese runway in the Paracels? Probably not". *CSIS AMTI*, 18 August, 2023, http://amti.csis.org/a-new-chinese-runway-in-the-paracels-probably-not/
6. "UPDATED: China's Big Three near completion". *CSIS AMTI*, 29 June,2017, http://amti.csis.org/chinas-big-three-near-completion/
7. "Antelope reef could now be the largest island in the South China Sea" CSIS AMTI, 19 Mar, 2026, http://amti.csis.org/antelope-reef-could-now-be-the-largest-island-in-the-south-china-sea/

Satellite images:

Subi Reef: <https://amti.csis.org/subi-reef/#jp-carousel-27974>
Cuarteron Reef <https://amti.csis.org/cuarteron-reef/#jp-carousel-30463>
Johnson South Reef <https://amti.csis.org/johnson-reef/#jp-carousel-30528>
Mischief Reef <https://amti.csis.org/mischief-reef/#jp-carousel-27969>
Gaven Reef <https://amti.csis.org/gaven-reefs/#jp-carousel-30513>
Hughes Reef <https://amti.csis.org/hughes-reef/#jp-carousel-30523>
Woody Island <https://amti.csis.org/woody-island/#jp-carousel-30648>
Fiery Cross Shoal <https://amti.csis.org/fiery-cross-reef/#jp-carousel-27963>
Antelope Reef <http://amti.csis.org/antelope-reef/#jp-carousel-34403>
Scarborough Shoal <http://amti.csis.org/scarborough-shoal/>

1-4 Development Trends of Other Countries/Regions in the SCS

(Sources: CSIS AMTI, media reports,etc)

Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Taiwan in the 80s/90s built runways (approx. 600-1,200m) on the land features over which they have *de facto* control. All of them have done facility maintenance and development. Reports suggest that Vietnam has recently accelerated reclamation work*.

Structures on features etc.

- : China's
- : Taiwan's
- : Vietnam's
- : the Philippines'
- : Malaysia's

※ Thin dash lines show 200 NM from coasts geographically

- CSIS/AMTI points out that Vietnam 's current overall dredging in disputed areas of the South China Sea is approximately 13㎢, accounting for 71% of that by China.[1]

(CSIS AMTI: Center for Strategic Information Studies/Asia Maritime Initiative)

Paracel Islands

Pearson Reef (V)

It has been expanded to approx. 2,400m in length and has been pointed out the possibility of constructing runway in the future.[2]

Tennent Reef(V)

It has been pointed out that there is room to develop a straight runway of up to approximately 3,000m[2]

Thitu Island (P)

The Philippines

Itu Aba Island (T)

Spratly Island (V)

Ladd Reef (V)

Extended to approx. 2,400m, though its been pointed out that there is an existing facility in the center.[2]

Barque Canada (V)

Currently under construction of runway of approx. 2,400m. The potential to host 3,000m runway has been pointed out.[1]

Spratly Islands

Swallow Reef (M)

Brunei

"Nine-dash line"

Malaysia

0 500 1,000km

Sources:
1. "Scaling up: Vietnam's islands (and harbors) continue to grow". *CSIS AMTI*, 21 Mar, 2025, http:// amti.csis.org/scaling-up-vietnams-islands-and harbors-continue-to-grow-/
2. "How many runways is Vietnam building in the Spratly islands?". *CSIS AMTI*, 30 Oct, 2024,http:// amti.csis.org/how-many-runways-is-vietnam-building-in-the-spratly-islands/
3. "Hanoi in high gear: Vietnam's Spratly expansion accelerates". *CSIS AMTI*, 7 June, 2024, http:// amti.csis.org/hanoi-is-in-high-gear-Vietnams-spratly-expansion-accerelates/
4. "Philippines launches Spratly runway repairs". *CSIS AMTI*, 25 May,2018, http:// amti.csis.org/philippines-launches-spratly-repairs/
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Satellite Photos:
Barque Canada<https://amti.csis.org/scaling-up-vietnams-islands-and-harbors-continue-to-grow/#jp-carousel-33092>
Ladd Reef<https://amti.csis.org/scaling-up-vietnams-islands-and-harbors-continue-to-grow/#jp-carousel-33102>
Pearson Reef<https://amti.csis.org/how-many-runways-is-vietnam-building-in-the-spratly-islands/pearson-reef-1_09-29-2024-wm/>
Tenent Reef<https://amti.csis.org/how-many-runways-is-vietnam-building-in-the-spratly-islands/#jp-carousel-32870>
Spratly Island<https://amti.csis.org/spratly-island/#jp-carousel-28883>
Titsu Island<https://amti.csis.org/thitu-island/#jp-carousel-30738>
Itu Aba Island<https://amti.csis.org/itu-aba-island/#jp-carousel-30723>
Swallow Reef<https://amti.csis.org/swallow-reef/#jp-carousel-22963>

1-5 China's remarks about the activity on the SCS

Initially, China denied its intentions to pursue militarization, and repeatedly mentioned the necessity of "defensive facilities". Recently, government media reports that the reclamation works are "to strengthen the necessary military defences of the South China sea"

- **September 2015 : On his visit to the U.S., President Xi stated "China does not intend to pursue militarization" in the SCS.**
- **February 2016 : Foreign Minister Wang Yi said "(As an answer to the question regarding a report about the deployment of SAM systems on Woody Island, the report is a fake created by some western media, and) China's limited, necessary defense facilities on Nansha (Spratly) Islands are in accordance with international law, which endows every sovereign state with the rights of self-protection and self-defense. These facilities have nothing to do with militarization"**
- **December 2017 : CHINA NANHAI※ reported "To strengthen the necessary military defense of the South China sea within China's sovereignty, China has rationally expanded the area of its islands and reefs ."**

※ CHINA NANHAI (nanhai.haiwainet.cn) is a website jointly run by the National Marine Date and Information Service and the People's Daily Overseas Edition. The website opened in August 2016.

2. Recent activities of PLA in the South China Sea

2-1 Recent activities of PLA in the South China Sea

- 3,000m runways on Woody Island in the Paracels and on Fiery Cross, Mischief, and Subi Reefs in the Spratly (referred to as “Big Three”)
- On Woody Island, the deployment of fighters such as the J-10 and J-11, as well as H-6 bombers, has been noted.
- On the “Big Three” in the Spratly Islands, the deployment of aircraft such as Y-7 transport aircraft and Y-8 mission-support aircraft has likewise been pointed out.
- From harbor dredging to runway improvements, the performance-enhancement activities carried out on Woody Island have served as a blueprint for developments in the Spratly Islands, and it has been pointed out that the recent deployment of various equipment to the “Big Three” follows the existing pattern on Woody Island, which is the largest Chinese outpost in the Paracel Islands.

Significant military deployment to each outposts
(Indications and assessments based on publicly available information, including aircraft type classification）

Paracel Islands (Woody Island)

April 2016：J-11B[1]

May 2025 ：KJ-500 and Y-20[5]

May 2025 ：H-6 Bomber[5]

Big Three

April 2018：first reportedly confirmed Y-8 on Subi Reef[1]

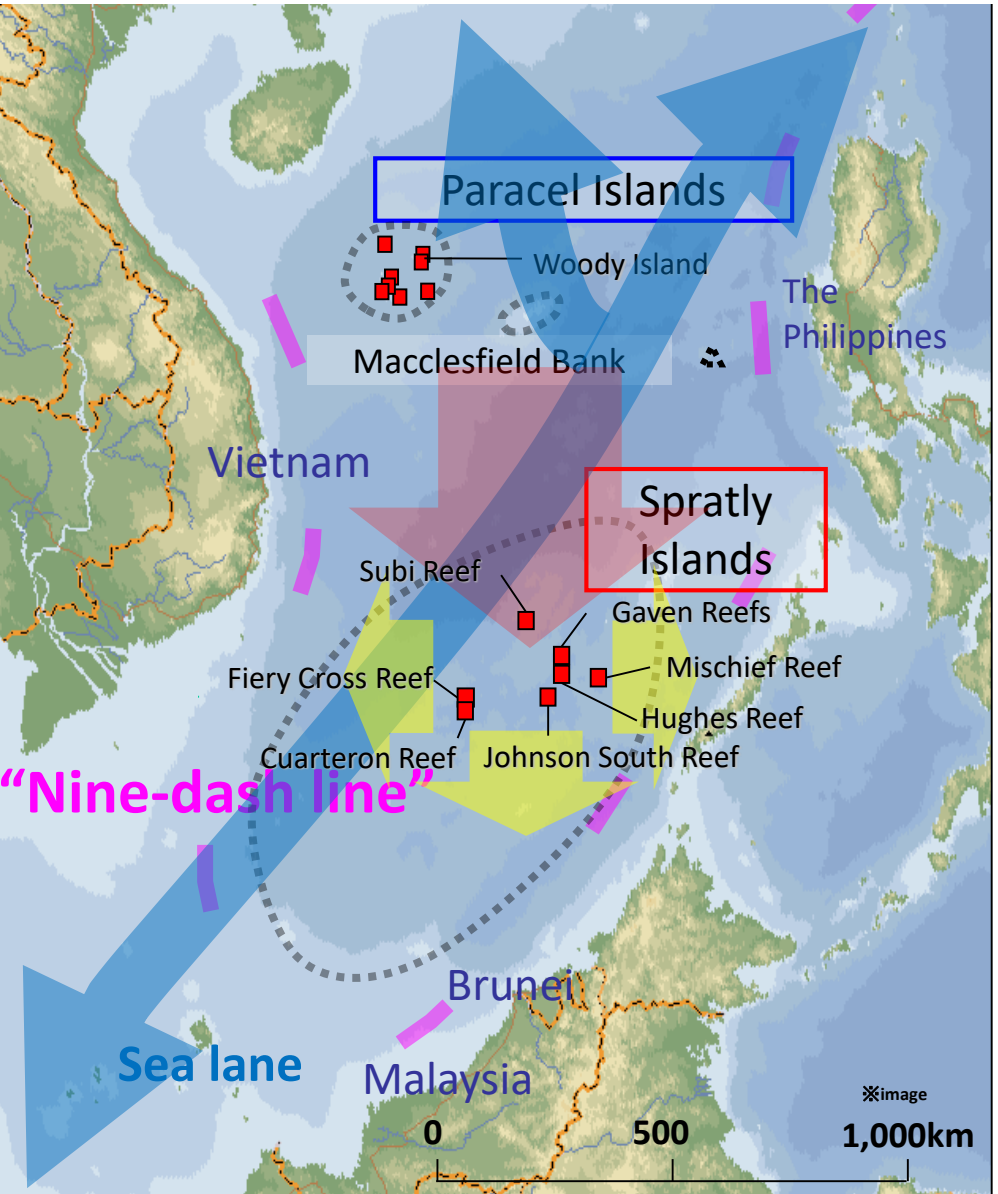
May 2018：military jamming equipment on Mischief[1]

1.“An Accounting Of China’s Deployment to the Spratly Islands” *Center for Strategic Information Studies(CSIS)/Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI)*. 9 May, 2018, http://amti.csis.org/accounting-chinas-deployments-spritely-islands/
2. Sean O’Connor,Gabriel Dominguez. “Chinese military aircraft spotted at Fiery Cross Reef in South China Sea”. *Janes Defence Weekly*, 12 May, 2020.
3. Brad Lendon. “South China Sea:Satellite image shows Chinese fighter jets deployed to contested island. *CNN*, 20 June, 2019, http://edition.cnn.com/2019/06/20/asia/china-fighters-satellite-image-woody-island-intl-hnk
4.”A new Chinese runway in the Paracels? Probably not”. *CSIS AMTI*, 18 August, 2023, http://amti.csis.org/a-new-chinese-runway-in-the-paracels-probably-not/
5. George Torode. “Exclusive:China’s most advanced bombers seen on disputed South China Sea island. *Reuters, 28* May, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/chinas-most-advanced-bombers-seen-disputed-south-china-sea-island-2025-05-28/

3. Security Implications by China's Militarization in the Spratly Islands

3-1 Possible Impact of Building Port Facilities in the Spratly Islands

Building port facilities in the SCS could dramatically improve China's ISR and other mission capabilities in the SCS



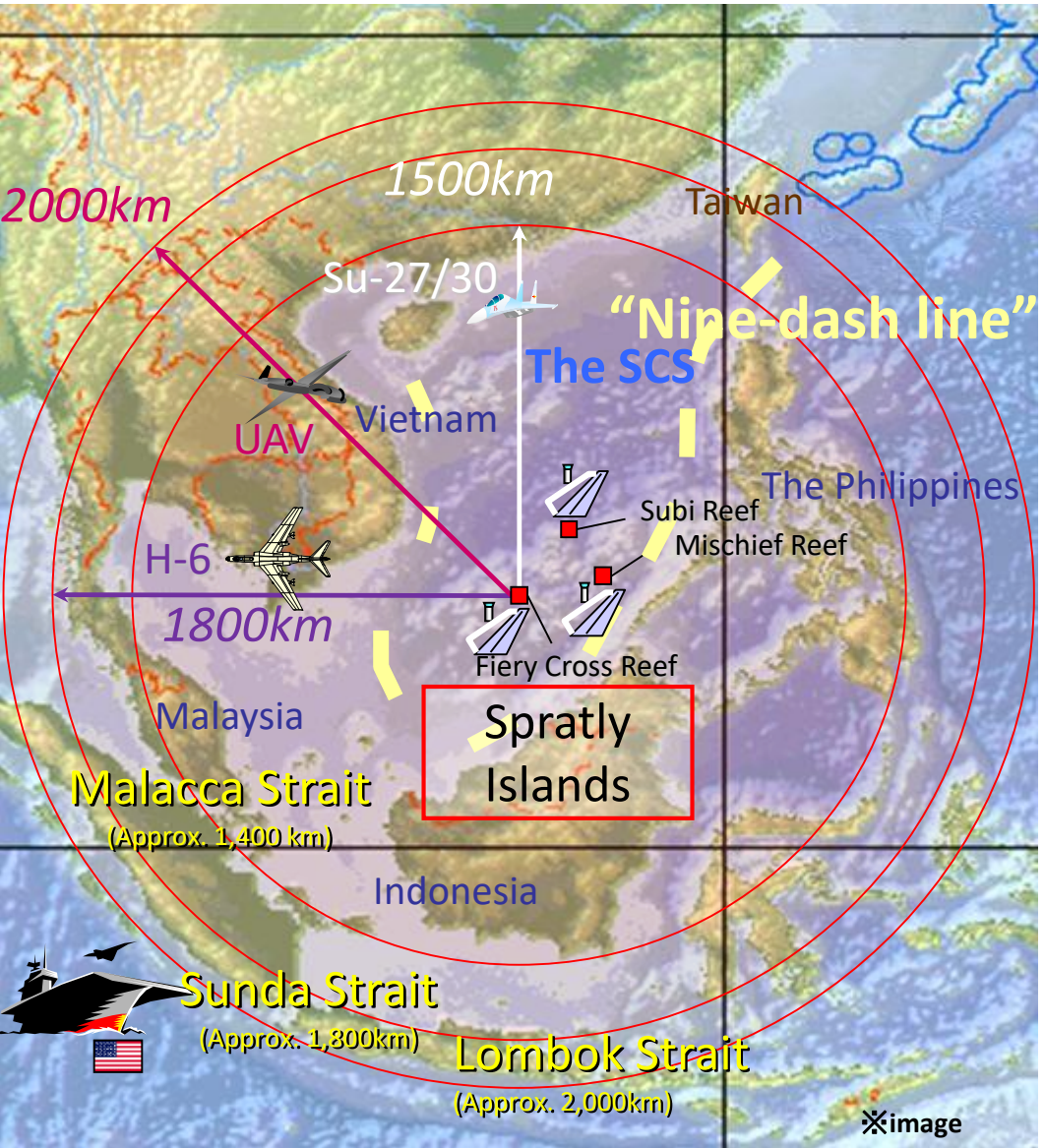
- **Building port facilities of certain size capable of berthing, resupply and maintenance would enable China to maintain more robust naval and maritime law enforcement presence in the entire SCS**
- **This development would dramatically improve China's ISR and other mission capabilities in the central and southern portions of the SCS**
- **Some observers refer to considerable impacts on coastal states in the SCS as well as on the sea lane**

E.g., Fiery Cross Reef

Satellite Image: https://amti.csis.org/fiery-cross-reef/#jp-carousel-27963

3-2 Possible Impact of Building Runways in the Spratly Islands

Runway construction on the Fiery Cross, Subi, and Mischief Reefs (incl. 3,000m-class) would lead to increase in China's air force presence in the SCS



- The three features with runways and support facilities would enable China to forward-deploy various aerial platforms (incl. fighters, bombers and UAVs)

- In general terms, its ramifications potentially include:
  (1) China's improved air power-projection capability over the entire SCS (especially, significant improvement in China's ISR and other mission capabilities in the central and southern portion of the SCS);
  (2) enhanced China's air superiority over the SCS; and
  (3) improved "Anti-Access/Area-Denial" capabilities against the U.S. military presence and its intervention to contingencies; and

- It could lead to possible declaration of an "SCS Air Defense Identification Zone" by China in the future

  [See.] "Regarding when to declare such a zone [SCS ADIZ], it will depend on whether China is facing security threats from the air, and what the level of the air safety threat." (China Defense Ministry, June 2016)

4. Current Situations concerning South China Sea

4-1 The abstract of the Award of the SCS Arbitration (1)

Abstract

- On 12th July 2016, the Tribunal, in the South China Sea Arbitration, issued an Award. The Tribunal concluded that China's 'nine-dash line' is invalid, that none of the features in the Spratly Islands are fully entitled islands, which is capable of generating extended maritime zones, that China had violated the Philippines' sovereign rights, and that China had caused severe harm to marine environment, resulting in agreement with the majority of Philippines' claims.
- "The award shall be final," and "shall be complied with by the parties to the dispute."

Historic Rights and the 'Nine-Dash Line'

- The Tribunal concluded that historical navigation and fishing by China in the waters of the South China Sea represented the exercise of high seas freedoms, rather than a historic right, and that there was no evidence that China had historically exercised exclusive control over the waters of the South China Sea or prevented other States from exploiting their resources.
- The Tribunal concluded that there was no legal basis for China to claim historic rights to resources within the sea areas falling within the 'nine-dash line.'

4-2 The abstract of the Award of the SCS Arbitration (2)

Status of Features

- Under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, “rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own shall have no exclusive economic zone or continental shelf.” The Tribunal concluded that this provision depends upon the objective capacity of a feature, in its natural condition, to sustain either a stable community of people or economic activity that is not dependent on outside resources.
- The Tribunal concluded that Scarborough Shoal, Johnson Reef, Cuarteron Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, Gaven Reef (North) and McKennan Reef are high-tide features and that Subi Reef, Hughes Reef, Mischief Reef, and Second Thomas Shoal were submerged at high tide in their natural condition.
- The Tribunal concluded that all of the high-tide features in the Spratly Islands (including, for example, Itu Aba, Thitu, West York Island, Spratly Island, North-East Cay, South-West Cay) are legally “rocks” that do not generate an exclusive economic zone or continental shelf.

Lawfulness of Chinese Actions / Harm to Marine Environment

- The Tribunal found that China had violated the Philippines’ sovereign rights in its exclusive economic zone by such means as interfering with Philippine fishing and petroleum exploration and constructing artificial islands. The Tribunal also held that China had interfered with traditional fishing rights of fishermen from the Philippines at Scarborough Shoal in restricting access. The Tribunal further held that Chinese law enforcement vessels had unlawfully created a serious risk of collision when they physically obstructed Philippine vessels.
- The Tribunal found that China’s recent large scale land reclamation and construction of artificial islands at seven features in the Spratly Islands has caused severe harm to the coral reef environment. The Tribunal found, however, that China’s recent large-scale land reclamation and construction of artificial islands was incompatible with the obligations on a State during dispute resolution proceedings

* The Tribunal found that it lacked jurisdiction to consider the implications of a stand-off between Philippine and China at Second Thomas Shoal.

4-3 Efforts of the U.S. and other countries in the SCS

(Source: Department of Defense, Media reports)

PLA and Maritime Law Enforcement Forces (MLEFs):

- **improve ISR and other mission capabilities with port and runway construction and with sustained deployment of vessels and aircraft in the SCS**
- **improve A2/AD capabilities against U.S. intervention**

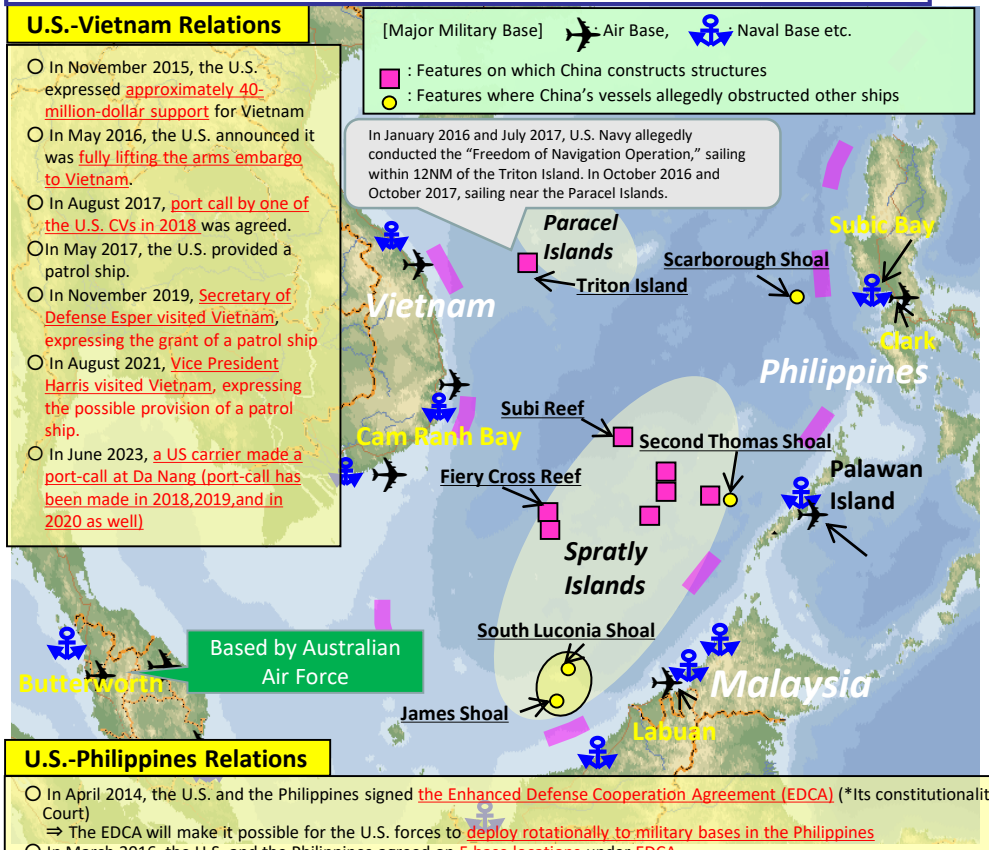
The U.S. concerns:

- **inhibition of freedom of navigation in the SLOC**
- **constraints of the U.S. military activities**
- **deterioration of security environment in the entire region**

⇒ The U.S. condemns China's dangerous action which undermines regional stability

U.S.-Vietnam Relations

- In November 2015, the U.S. expressed approximately 40-million-dollar support for Vietnam
- In May 2016, the U.S. announced it was fully lifting the arms embargo to Vietnam.
- In August 2017, port call by one of the U.S. CVs in 2018 was agreed.
- In May 2017, the U.S. provided a patrol ship.
- In November 2019, Secretary of Defense Esper visited Vietnam, expressing the grant of a patrol ship
- In August 2021, Vice President Harris visited Vietnam, expressing the possible provision of a patrol ship.
- In June 2023, a US carrier made a port-call at Da Nang (port-call has been made in 2018,2019,and in 2020 as well)



U.S.-Philippines Relations

- In April 2014, the U.S. and the Philippines signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) (*Its constitutionality is currently on trial at the Philippine Supreme Court)
  ⇒ The EDCA will make it possible for the U.S. forces to deploy rotationally to military bases in the Philippines
- In March 2016, the U.S. and the Philippines agreed on 5 base locations under EDCA.
- In February 2023, the two countries agreed on 4 additional locations under EDCA.
- In May 2023, the two countries released Bilateral Defense Guidelines, which serve as a roadmap of alliance cooperation modernization.
- In November 2023, U.S.-Philippine Navy and Air Force conducted Maritime Cooperation Activities (MCA) in water and air surrounding the Philippines incl. South China Sea.
- In April 2024, the U.S. army's Mid-Range Capability (MRC) missile system "Typhon" was deployed to the Philippines as the part of joint exercise Salaknib 2024
- In July 2024, the U.S. and the Philippines announced as the joint statement for 2+2 ministerial dialogue that the U.S. will allocate total of USD $628million to enhance the capability of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippine Coast Guard as well as to provide additional investment for EDCA.
- In April 2025, USMC' ground-based anti-ship missile system NMESIS and ground-based air defense system MADIS was deployed to the Philippines as a part of joint exercise Balikatan 2025
- In Oct 2025, U.S. and the Philippines announced establishment of a new U.S. Joint Task Force "Task-Force Philippines" upon US-Philippines Defense Minister's Meeting
- In May 2026, USMC deployed NMESIS and MADIS for Balikatan 2026. During the exercise, US Army allegedly live-fired a Tomahawk Land Attack Missile from MRC "Typhon"

The U.S. remarks about the SCS

Secretary Hegseth

・In the South China Sea, China harasses its neighbors
・We've all seen the videos and pictures of water cannons, and ship-to-ship collisions, and illegal boardings at sea.
・We're also seeing the illegal seizing and militarizing of lands in the South China Sea.
・These actions reveal a lack of respect for neighbors and they challenge sovereignty, freedom of navigation, and overflight.
・We are watching very closely China's destabilizing actions. And any unilateral attempt to change the status quo in the South China Sea and the First Island Chain by force or coercion is unacceptable.

(May 31st,2025, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth's remarks at the Shangri-La Dialogue)