The People's Liberation Army in the South China Sea: An Organizational Guide
This report profiles the organizational structure of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) on China's outposts in the South China Sea. The analysis draws heavily from Chinese-language open source materials, including state media reports, government websites, resumes, procurement records, academic writings, and patents, as well as visual materials, such as photographs, videos, and satellite imagery. The report will be of most interest to governments and militaries with an interest in Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region, companies seeking to comply with PLA-oriented export controls, and defense analysts focused on the PLA. The author, Zoe Haver, thanks Roderick Lee, Morgan Clemens, and Kenneth Allen for their generous support.

Executive Summary

People's Liberation Army (PLA) units operating from militarized outposts in the South China Sea defend China's expansive maritime and territorial claims while also projecting power into maritime Southeast Asia. To better understand the organization of the PLA in the South China Sea, Recorded Future identified and analyzed 9 specific PLA units that are deployed to Chinese outposts. These units are Unit 91431 (the “Nansha Garrison”), the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command, the 3rd Radar Brigade, the Yongxing Airfield Station, the Sansha Garrison Command, Unit 91531 (“a Navy engineering unit”), the Xisha Satellite Observation Station, Unit 92155 (“a naval aviation air defense brigade”), and Unit 92508. We also examined several other units that have maintained at least a marginal presence on China's outposts at various points, including the PLA Navy Marine Corps 1st Brigade, Unit 92690, Unit 92053, and Unit 91522.

Our report assesses the organizational structures, duties, and facilities, and assets of each identified PLA unit. The majority of these units are regiment leader-, division deputy leader-, or division leader-grade organizations. They are responsible for defending China's outposts in the Spratly Islands and Paracel Islands, operating radar installations, ensuring airfield support for aviation forces, training and commanding maritime militia forces, implementing engineering projects, supporting the launch and orbital management of spacecraft, and providing air defense. All of these units maintain a physical presence in the Paracel or Spratly Islands, but many also have supporting facilities on Hainan or the Chinese mainland.

Key Judgments

- Though China's outposts in the South China Sea have hosted PLA forces for many years, these outposts went through a period of significant militarization over the past decade, with multiple new units being established and existing units undergoing organizational upgrades, building improved facilities, and receiving new assets.
- Several PLA units are present in the South China Sea, including units from the PLA Navy’s shore command structure, the PLA Navy's naval aviation branch, China's national defense mobilization system, and the PLA Strategic Support Force.
- The PLA forces in the South China Sea include units that are primarily based in the Spratly Islands and Paracel Islands, such as location-specific garrisons, as well as detachments of units that are primarily based on Hainan, such as battalions under radar and air defense brigades.
- The PLA units present on China's outposts in the South China Sea actively participate in military-civil fusion programs, including engaging in joint operations and exercises with civilian forces, drafting regulations with civilian authorities, and coordinating the construction and use of physical infrastructure with civilian entities.
- PLA units in the South China Sea are positioned to contribute to broader strategic objectives, such as near-seas defense and space situational awareness, in addition to their primary focus on the protection of China’s maritime and territorial claims.
- In addition to the PLA forces that have a standing presence in the South China Sea, some units likely maintain a more limited presence on China's outposts, potentially deploying personnel on an ad hoc basis.
Background

The South China Sea is home to a series of overlapping maritime and territorial disputes between China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. China’s territorial claims include the Paracel Islands, Spratly Islands, so-called Zhongsha Islands (Macclesfield Bank and Scarborough Shoal), and Pratas Islands. Its expansive maritime claims, which cover several million square kilometers of sea area, involve sovereign territorial seas and internal waters, exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and continental shelf rights, historic rights, and the regulation of military activities. China’s maritime claims are typically referred to as “maritime rights and interests” (海洋权益), and the defense of these claims is generally called “rights defense” (维权).

2 “Sansha Overview” [三沙概况]. Sansha City People’s Government Net [三沙市政府网]. https://perma.cc/Y229-DKBH.
Figure 1: Map showing the South China Sea region and China’s main outposts
(Source: Recorded Future)
Chinese forces have occupied features in the Paracel and Spratly Islands for several decades. The civilian administration of the Paracel Islands, Spratly Islands, and Zhongsha Islands—as well as their surrounding waters—is the responsibility of Sansha City, which was established in July 2012 and is headquartered on Woody Island in the Paracel Islands. The PLA also maintains a sizable presence on these islands and reefs. Its footprint in maritime militia, the China Coast Guard (CCG), Sansha Comprehensive Law Enforcement (SCLE), and a contingent of the Hainan Province Public Security Department’s border defense force, which was recently reorganized into a new coastal police force. Though the exact number of personnel stationed on China’s outposts is unclear, a 2016 state media report claims that the forces stationed in Sansha City mobilized over 10,000 officers and soldiers to support a mass tree-planting effort across the Paracel Islands.

The various civilian and military entities present on China’s outposts cooperate through military-civil fusion (军民融合), a national strategy broadly aimed at synthesizing civilian and military resources to advance national security and economic development goals. The extent of military-civil fusion in the South China Sea increased significantly following the establishment of Sansha City in 2012. Notable aspects of this military-civil fusion collaboration include joint operations between military and civilian forces, the joint construction and common use of physical infrastructure by military and civilian entities, military and civilian entities supporting each other’s personnel, and investments in technologies that serve both military and civilian users. According to a state media report, the troops stationed in Sansha City also “actively contributed to building political power in the Spratly Islands” during China’s island-building campaign; in this context, “political power” refers to the capacity of Sansha City to govern the South China Sea as if it were Chinese territory.

Organization of the PLA in the South China Sea

Recorded Future analyzed the organizational structure, duties, and facilities and assets of 9 specific PLA units that maintain a presence on China’s outposts in the South China Sea using publicly available Chinese-language sources. We examined units belonging to the PLA Navy (PLAN), the naval aviation branch of the PLAN, the PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF), and China’s national defense mobilization system. The responsibilities of these units include the physical defense of China’s outposts, operating radars, airfield support, training and command of maritime militia forces, engineering support, space launch and orbital management missions, and air defense.

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6 Haver, Sansha City in China’s South China Sea Strategy, p.3.  
11 Haver, Sansha City in China’s South China Sea Strategy, p. 34-38.  
15 Haver, Sansha City in China’s South China Sea Strategy.  
17 Gao, “Sansha City Implements ‘Double Support 10 Major Projects’”.  
18 Haver, Sansha City in China’s South China Sea Strategy, p. 28.
### Table 1: PLA entities that maintain a presence on China's outposts in the South China Sea (Source: Recorded Future)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>MUCD</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Service (Branch)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nansha Garrison (南沙守备部队)</td>
<td>Unit 91431</td>
<td>Spratly Islands</td>
<td>Corps Deputy Leader</td>
<td>PLAN</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(91431部队)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Xisha Maritime Garrison Command (西沙守备区)</td>
<td>Unit 91892</td>
<td>Paracel Islands</td>
<td>Division Leader</td>
<td>PLAN</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(91892部队)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3rd Radar Brigade (雷达兵第三旅)</td>
<td>Unit 92261</td>
<td>Woody Island</td>
<td>Division Deputy Leader</td>
<td>PLAN</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(92261部队)</td>
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<td>(Naval Aviation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yongxing Airfield Station (永兴场站)</td>
<td>Unit 91427</td>
<td>Woody Island</td>
<td>Regiment Leader</td>
<td>PLAN</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(91427部队)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(Naval Aviation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sansha Garrison Command (三沙警备区)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Woody Island</td>
<td>Division Leader</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Navy Engineering Unit (海军某工程部队)</td>
<td>Unit 91531</td>
<td>Woody Island</td>
<td>Division Leader</td>
<td>PLAN</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(91531部队)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Xisha Satellite Observation Station (西沙卫星观测站)</td>
<td>Unit 63813</td>
<td>Duncan Islands</td>
<td>Regiment Leader</td>
<td>PLASSF</td>
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<td>(63813部队)</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Naval Aviation Air Defense Brigade (海军航空兵某防空旅)</td>
<td>Unit 92155</td>
<td>Woody Island</td>
<td>Division Deputy Leader</td>
<td>PLAN</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(92155部队)</td>
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<td>(Naval Aviation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>Unit 92508</td>
<td>Woody Island</td>
<td>Regiment Leader or</td>
<td>PLAN</td>
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<td>(92508部队)</td>
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</table>

This analysis focuses on PLA units whose South China Sea presence has been explicitly referenced in Chinese-language sources. We do not assume the presence of units based on known PLA capabilities or standard PLA organizational structures. As such, this report does not cover every PLA entity present on China’s outposts. For instance, the naval electronic countermeasures brigade under the Southern Theater Command plausibly has a footprint on Woody Island,19 but we did not encounter any specific references in authoritative Chinese sources to this unit having a presence in the South China Sea, and therefore do not discuss the unit.

When possible, Recorded Future leveraged multiple sources to link an entity's Military Unit Cover Designator (MUCD) to the unit's true identity, also known as its True Unit Designator (TUD). The PLA generally uses MUCDs to obscure the identities of units between the regiment and corps levels.20 In our effort to produce a high-confidence judgment of each unit’s MUCD, we searched for overlapping leadership and personnel; shared addresses, facilities, and locations; matching uniforms, grades, and ranks; similar duties, engagements, and research activity; and other such evidence.


When assessing units’ grades, we used the PLA’s current grade and rank system, which was established with 15 grades and 11 ranks in 1988 and was later adjusted to 10 ranks in 1994. Under this system, grades determine vertical command and control relationships, as well as horizontal coordination relationships. The system currently appears to be going through major reforms, though specific details remain elusive. Appendix A provides further details about the PLA’s grade and rank system.

Unit names that reference a specific region or feature in the South China Sea often use a shortened version of that region or feature’s Chinese name. For example, Woody Island becomes “Yongxing” (永兴), the Paracel Islands become “Xisha” (西沙), the Spratly Islands become “Nansha” (南沙), and Sansha City becomes “Sansha” (三沙), hence units with names like “Nansha Garrison”, “Xisha Maritime Garrison Command”, “Yongxing Airfield Station”, and “Sansha Garrison Command”.

Unit 91431

Unit 91431 (91431部队), commonly referred to as the Nansha Garrison (南沙守备部队), is responsible for defending China’s outposts in the Spratly Islands. The unit is part of the PLAN’s shore command structure. It has facilities in the Spratly Islands as well as in Hainan and Guangdong. Chinese sources use “Unit 91431” and “Nansha Garrison” to obscure the unit’s ever-changing true identity (TUD). The unit is now very likely a corps deputy leader-grade naval base. The expansion of Unit 91431, which was enabled by China’s island-building campaign in the Spratly Islands in the mid-2010s, is among the most significant changes to the PLA’s organization on China’s outposts in the past decade.

Organizational Structure

Name and Organizational Status

Unit 91431 was very likely established after China occupied several reefs in the Spratly Islands during the late 1980s. Initially, Unit 91431 appears to have been called the “Nansha Patrol and Defense Command” (南沙巡防区), with the first Chinese media references emerging in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Sources continued to mention the Nansha Patrol and Defense Command somewhat regularly through at least 2016.

Figure 2: Photograph showing 1 of the PLA’s original small outposts in the Spratly Islands (Source: PLA Pictorial)

22 Allen, “Introduction to the PLA’s Organizational Reforms”, p. 16.
By the early 2010s, sources had also started referring to a “Nansha Garrison” (南沙守备部队), though a handful of earlier mentions also exist. Recorded Future observed multiple instances of the same individuals being described as members of the Nansha Patrol and Defense Command, the Nansha Garrison, and Unit 91431, including the unit’s former commander, Gong Yunchong (龚允冲). By the late 2010s, Nansha Garrison appears to have become a preferred term to obscure the unit’s TUD.

After this apparent transition from Nansha Patrol and Defense Command to Nansha Garrison, a pair of August 2018 PLA Daily articles referenced a “Nansha Maritime Garrison Command” (南沙水警区). This suggests that Unit 91431 was, at some point, upgraded to the level of maritime garrison command, which is a specific type (division leader grade) of PLAN shore command organization. The upgrade likely occurred after China built, then militarized, 7 artificial islands in the Spratly Islands in the mid-2010s. These references suggest that Unit 91431 survived post-2015 reforms to the PLAN’s shore command structure that largely abolished maritime garrison commands. However, as of late 2021, authoritative sources still rarely mention the Nansha Maritime Garrison Command, instead referring to the Nansha Garrison.

For the purposes of this report, Recorded Future uses “Unit 91431” to refer to the unit that sources have variously described as the Nansha Garrison, the Nansha Patrol and Defense Command, and the Nansha Maritime Garrison Command, and Unit 91431. The only exception is when we discuss potentially anachronistic characteristics of the Nansha Patrol and Defense Command; in such instances, we use “Nansha Patrol and Defense Command”.

### Grade

Recorded Future judges that the Nansha Patrol and Defense Command was very likely at least a regiment leader-grade unit, though the evidence is inconclusive and contradictory. A PLA Daily article from March 2017 indicates that the PLAN’s patrol and defense commands were, in general, regiment-level organizations in the 1970s. However, this was before the PLA adopted its current grade and rank system in 1988.

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38 Allen, “Introduction to the PLA’s Organizational Reforms”, p. 16-22; Xu, “The Evolution of Our Army’s Cadre Ranks After the Founding of New China”. 

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The resumes of former Nansha Patrol and Defense Command personnel from the 1990s and 2000s provide further clues. These sources reveal that the patrol and defense command’s headquarters department (司令部) had battalion leader- and battalion deputy leader-grade staff officers and branch (股) staff; that it had a political division (政治处) with battalion leader-grade staff officers and branch heads; and that it had a logistics division (后勤处) with subordinate branches and an equipment division (装备处).39 Prior to the latest PLA reforms, regiment leader-grade units typically had a headquarters department paired with political, logistics, equipment divisions as well as subordinate second-level branches.40 This pattern would seem to confirm that the Nansha Patrol and Defense Command was indeed a regiment leader-grade unit. However, in regiment leader-grade organizations, battalion leader-grade personnel would normally have served as deputy chiefs of staff in the headquarters department or deputy directors in the political division.41 A battalion leader-grade political section branch head should have belonged to a division leader-grade unit, though in division leader-grade units this position would have been a political department (政治部) office (科) head.42 As such, in the 1990s and 2000s, the Nansha Patrol and Defense Command had a contradictory set of organizational characteristics that defy standard categorization.

By the early-to-mid 2010s, Unit 91431 was very likely at least a division deputy leader-grade unit. The commander of Unit 91431, Xiong Yun (熊云), was photographed in 2013 wearing the insignia of a senior colonel,43 a rank that generally aligns with the division deputy leader, division leader, and corps deputy leader grades.44 Moreover, a July 2012 Global Times article described Unit 91431 as a brigade, which is a division deputy leader-grade organization.45 Additionally, by 2015, Unit 91431’s political department was a department (部) rather than a division (处),46 an organizational characteristic typically associated with units at the division deputy leader level and higher.47 Photographs of several Unit 91431 personnel published in 2013 and 2014 show these individuals wearing uniforms with 4 rows of ribbons that have red ribbons located at the top-center position.48 One example is “special technical senior colonel” Wen Libo (李文波), whose top-center red ribbon has 2 stars,49 a clear indicator that Wen is a level 6 special technical officer.50 This special technical officer level is equivalent to a division leader-grade officer.51 However, because Wen was not the unit’s commander or political commissar, his grade did not necessarily correspond to Unit 91431’s grade.

Figure 4: Photograph of Unit 91431 Commander Xiong Yun (left) from 2013 showing senior colonel rank insignia (Source: Sina)

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40 Allen, “Introduction to the PLA’s Organizational Reforms”, p. 35-37, 70-71.
41 Allen, “Introduction to the PLA’s Organizational Reforms”, p. 71.
42 Allen, “Introduction to the PLA’s Organizational Reforms”, p. 69.
43 Mu, “Nansha Garrison Commander Xiong Yun”.
44 Allen, “Introduction to the PLA’s Organizational Reforms”, p. 22.
47 Allen, “Introduction to the PLA’s Organizational Reforms”, p. 64-71.
49 “Wen Libo”,”Did Not Break Record Defending Reef Kings”.
50 The source describes this individual as being “technical level 5”, which corresponds to the corps deputy leader grade. This mention of technical level 5 is likely inaccurate, considering that the individual is clearly wearing division leader-grade ribbons, which are shared by level 6 special technical officers.
51 Xu, “The Evolution of Our Army’s Cadre Ranks After the Founding of New China”.
52 Mu, “Nansha Garrison Commander Xiong Yun”.
Organizational Components

Unit 91431 has the standard set of first-level departments. These include a staff department (参谋部), formerly a headquarters department (司令部); a political work department (政治工作部), formerly a political division (政治处); and a support department (保障部), formerly a pair of separate logistics (后勤) and equipment (装备) divisions (处), which were assumedly upgraded to departments before being combined into a support department. The unit’s first-level departments have also contained various second-level departments over the years, which have been responsible for tasks such as communications, training, propaganda, and logistics management.

Unit 91431 also appears to oversee a subordinate garrison (守备部队, “守备队”, or “守备”) on each of China’s 7 outposts in the Spratly Islands, such as on Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Hughes Reef. These garrisons have staff, communications,
medical, hydrometeorology, radar, and other billets. Recorded Future found multiple sources that suggest the garrisons on smaller features are organized as companies, though resumes from the 1990s and 2000s show that these garrison companies are likely at least battalion deputy-grade units. A state media report from early 2020 shows that Subi Reef's garrison is organized as a brigade with its own first-level departments, such as a political work department. A low-confidence blog post with censored photographic evidence claims that Mischief Reef's garrison is also a brigade. It is therefore plausible that the garrisons on China's 3 largest artificial islands in the Spratly Islands (Subi Reef, Mischief Reef, and Fiery Cross Reef) are all organized as brigades.

When sources refer to Unit 91431 by its MUCD, they also sometimes reference specific subunits, such as Unit 91431 Subunit 49 (91431部队49分队) and Unit 91431 Subunit 47 (91431部队47分队). We also observed references to Unit 91431 having subordinate dadui (大队) and zhongdui (中队) units, which are likely regiment-level and battalion-level surface vessel units, respectively.

Duties

Unit 91431 is responsible for the physical defense of China's outposts in the Spratly Islands. This includes detecting and handling responses to foreign ships, planes, and fishing boats; ensuring the safety of Chinese fishermen operating in the Spratly Islands; operating weapons and radar installations; and carrying out armed patrols on occupied features. For instance, Cuarteron Reef reportedly has a "special situation handling group" (特殊处置小组) that deploys on boats to drive away foreign vessels.

Beyond this defensive role, Unit 91431 has an assortment of other responsibilities. For example, technical specialists attached to Unit 91431 have collected hydrometeorological data in the Spratly Islands for decades, which helps the PLAN understand the area's "ocean battlespace environment" (海洋战场环境). Likewise, Unit 91431 works with the CCG and other forces to carry out rescue operations in the Spratly Islands.
Facilities and Assets

Procurement records reveal that Unit 91431 has facilities in Haikou, Hainan and that it uses an address in Zhangjiang, Guangdong. The Zhanjiang address is "No. 16 Haibin East Road 1, Xiashan District, Zhanjiang City" (湛江市霞山区海滨东一路16号). Using Baidu Maps and Google Earth, Recorded Future observed a gas station marked with PLAN insignia on Haibin East Road 1 near what appears to be a compound, which is visible at the following coordinates: 21°13'54.89"N, 110°25'11.85"E (UTM: 49 N 439810 2347925; MGRS: 49Q DD 39809 47924). However, we could not confirm the presence of Unit 91431 facilities in this area.

China’s outposts in the Spratly Islands are bristling with military and dual-use capabilities. Open-source analysts have identified a range of different capabilities that are (or could be) present in the Spratly Islands, including undersea fiber optical cables, satellite communications, high-frequency communications, inter-island communications, air and surface radar, counter-stealth radar, electronic warfare and signals intelligence, special mission aircraft, unmanned systems, hardened infrastructure, battlespace environment management, counter-reconnaissance, and offensive and defensive strike capabilities. It is not entirely clear which assets belong to Unit 91431 and which belong to other parts of the PLA.

Xisha Maritime Garrison Command

The Xisha Maritime Garrison Command (西沙水警区) is responsible for the defense of China’s outposts in the Paracel Islands. The maritime garrison command is part of the PLAN’s shore command structure and appears to have survived recent reforms that largely abolished maritime garrison commands. It has facilities in the Paracel Islands as well as on Hainan. Recorded Future judges with high confidence that Unit 91892 is the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command’s MUCD.

Organizational Structure

The Xisha Maritime Garrison Command, which is a division leader-grade unit, was established in 1976, replacing the former regiment-level Xisha Patrol and Defense Command (西沙巡防区). Provincial party-state documents indicate that the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command is likely subordinate to the Yulin base in Sanya, Hainan, an arrangement that is consistent

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87 Source documents held by Recorded Future
88 Dahm, South China Sea Military Capabilities Series.
90 Lee and Clemens, Organizing to Fight in the Far Seas, p. 7-8.
91 Huang, “The Xisha of 35 Years Ago”.
The Xisha Maritime Garrison Command has subordinate garrisons (“守备队” or “守备”) on 6 outposts in the Paracel Islands, namely Woody Island, Triton Island, Lincoln Island, Duncan Islands, Pattle Island, and Money Island. Some sources describe these garrisons as companies when discussing the late 1980s, but references to more contemporary times tend to describe these garrisons as battalions. Such descriptions are also confirmed by video evidence. These garrisons oversee lower-level organizations such as communications squads and radar squads.

93 Lee and Clemens, Organizing to Fight in the Far Seas.


95 "Representatives List".


99 "Defending the Island is Defending the Position, Faraway Sentinel Takes Root in Xisha Guarding South China Sea Frontier” [守岛就是守阵地 天涯哨兵扎根西沙守护南海疆], CCTV, August 1, 2020, https://tv.cctv.com/2020/08/01/artTjsjCLDdIac2S3GHVwG8200801.shtml.

100 "Cruising the Ancestral Sea, South China Sea Island and ReefsForging Loyalty” [巡航祖宗海 南海岛礁铸忠诚], HNNTV [海南网络广播电视台], August 1, 2019, http://www.hnntv.cn/video/jishi/dsdrw/2019-08-01/329838.htm.

101 "City Government Local History Office Division of Leadership”.

102 "Defining the Island’s Defending the Position”.


104 "City Government Local History Office Division of Leadership”.


106 "Cruising the Ancestral Sea”.

107 "Cruising the Ancestral Sea”.

108 "Cruising Xisha, China Navy Guards Treasure Island Like This” [巡航西沙 中国海军守护宝岛], QQ Video [腾讯视频], https://v.qq.com/x/page/w0518b4abed.html.


110 "Defending the Island is Defending the Position; "Cruising the Ancestral Sea”.

111 "Cruising the Ancestral Sea”.

112 "Cruising the Ancestral Sea”.

113 "Cruising the Ancestral Sea”.

114 "Cruising the Ancestral Sea”.

115 "Cruising the Ancestral Sea”.

116 "Cruising the Ancestral Sea”.

117 "Cruising the Ancestral Sea”.

118 "Cruising the Ancestral Sea”.

119 "Cruising the Ancestral Sea”.

120 "Cruising the Ancestral Sea”.
Duties

According to a People’s Republic of China (PRC) Ministry of National Defense spokesperson, the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command is responsible for “defensive combat missions” in China’s jurisdictional waters. In practice, the maritime garrison command is tasked with the defense of China’s outposts in the Paracel Islands. This includes identifying and reporting foreign ships and planes, patrolling the waters of the Paracel Islands, intercepting foreign ships, carrying out armed patrols on occupied features, and mobilizing shore-based defenses to prevent unwelcome parties from landing on occupied features.

The Xisha Maritime Garrison Command also carries out joint operations and exercises with civilian forces in the South China Sea. Personnel from the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command participated in a PLAN, CCG, and SCLE joint patrol in the Paracel Islands in May 2018. Whether the patrol’s PLAN surface vessel belonged to the maritime garrison command is unclear. During this joint patrol, 3 ships (1 from each force) reportedly detected and identified over 40 vessels, drove away 10 foreign fishing boats, and inspected each island and reef in the Paracel Islands.

Likewise, during a 2016 “sea-air three-dimensional search and rescue exercise” in the Paracel Islands, leaders from the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command, Sansha Garrison Command, CCG, and Sansha Maritime Safety Administration (MSA) served as deputy commanders under the city’s deputy mayor, who served as commander. This exercise also involved the Yongxing Airfield Station, the SCLE, and Sansha City’s maritime militia, among other units.

Facilities and Assets

Based on our analysis of video footage and satellite imagery, Recorded Future believes that the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command is likely headquartered in a 4-story, off-white building marked with PLA insignia near a flag square at the center of Woody Island, which is visible at the following coordinates: 16°50’8.22”N, 112°20’6.42”E (UTM: 49 N 642248 1861850; MGRS: 49Q FU 42248 61850). Satellite imagery from Google Earth confirms that this building has been present since at least 2005, though it is likely older. The maritime garrison command also maintains an office on Hainan, which the maritime garrison command reportedly uses to train PLAN and other PLA personnel deploying to the Paracel Islands.

Using video footage and satellite imagery, we uncovered the facility’s likely location in Sanya, which is visible at the following coordinates: 18°13’1.27”N, 109°31’50.85”E (UTM: 49 N 344643 2014819; MGRS: 49Q CA 44643 14818). A slogan associated with the Xisha Maritime

The Xisha Maritime Garrison Command is involved in developing physical infrastructure in the Paracel Islands in line with military-civil fusion priorities. In 2014, the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command coordinated with Unit 91531 and the government of Sansha City to create a military-local government work coordination mechanism and draft the “Sansha City Double Support Projects Management Provisional Measures” (三沙市双拥项目管理工作暂行办法), which standardized the management and operation of military-civil fusion projects. In 2017, the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command worked with Huawei, local authorities in Sansha City, the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) Guangzhou Institute of Energy Conversion, and other organizations on a National Energy Administration-approved Internet of Things (IoT) project on Woody Island. The project, which was to be an upgrade to Woody Island’s smart microgrid, reportedly aimed to build an “island-wide energy internet” that would integrate distributed photovoltaics, diesel generators, energy storage, a distribution network, and loads like seawater desalination equipment and smart charging piles.

114 “Cruising the Ancestral Sea, South China Sea Island and Reefs Forging Loyalty”; Wang Tianyi [王天益], Xiong Yongxin [熊永新], and Xue Chengqing [薛成清], “Xisha Guardian: Rushing to Drive Away Foreign Ship” [西沙卫士：冲上去驱离外籍船], China Military Net [中国军网], April 10, 2016, http://www.81.cn/2016xsjx/2016-04/10/content_699899.htm.
115 Wang, Xiong, and Xue, “Xisha Guardian”.
116 Wang, Xiong, and Xue, “Xisha Guardian”.
117 “Cruising the Ancestral Sea, South China Sea Island and Reefs Forging Loyalty”; “Navy Xisha Maritime Garrison Command Officers and Soldiers on Xisha Woody Island Patrol” [海军西沙某水警区官兵在西沙永兴岛巡逻], China Military Net [中国军网].
118 “Defending the Island is Defending the Position”.
119 Xue Chengqing [薛成清], “Military, Law Enforcement, and Civilian Joint Biandui First Patrol in the Xisha Islands and Reefs, Duration of 5 Days and 4 Nights” [军警民联合编队首次巡逻西沙群岛，历时5天4夜],新华网 [XinhuaNet], May 20, 2018, https://perma.cc/F980-VWHP.
120 Xue, “Military, Law Enforcement, and Civilian Joint Biandui First Patrol in the Xisha Islands and Reefs, Duration of 5 Days and 4 Nights”.
122 “Sansha Sea Area Successfully Holds First Sea-Air Three Dimensional Joint Search and Rescue Exercise”.
124 Haver, Sansha City in China’s South China Sea Strategy, p. 46-48.
126 “From Xinjiang to Xisha, Uyghur Female Soldier Takes the Initiative to Apply for Border Defense” [从新疆到西沙 维吾尔族女兵主动申请戍边], QQ Video [腾讯视频], January 23, 2015, https://v.qq.com/x/page/g0815d3ajdg.html.
127 “From Xinjiang to Xisha”.
Garrison Command, “Love the Country and Love the Island, Happily Guard the World’s End” (爱国爱岛 乐守天涯), is visible on or near both the Woody Island and Sanya buildings. Notably, basketball courts attached to apparent Xisha Maritime Garrison Command facilities on Woody Island, Triton Island, Duncan Islands, Pattle Island, Lincoln Island, and Money Island as well as in Sanya all have unique white, red, and blue center circles adorned with an anchor and the aforementioned slogan. The observation and communications station on the northeastern tip of Woody Island may also belong to the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command. This station is called the Rocky Island Observation and Communications Station (石岛观通站), as Rocky Island was previously a distinct islet before it was incorporated into Woody Island in the mid-2010s. Some state media reporting has explicitly described the Rocky Island station as part of the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command. However, the station could also plausibly fall under the Southern Theater Command’s naval communications and observation brigade, which has various subordinate battalions and stations. The station is visible at the following coordinates: 16°50'40.36"N, 112°20'48.25"E (UTM: 49 N 643480 1862847; MGRS: 49Q FU 43479 62846).

The Xisha Maritime Garrison Command operates a hospital, likely on Woody Island. As part of broader military-civil fusion efforts, this hospital and the Sansha City People’s Hospital on Woody Island coordinate to provide care to military and civilian patients, including fishermen. The Xisha Maritime Garrison Command has access to various surface vessels. State media reporting indicates that the maritime garrison command has corvettes, likely organized as zhongdui units under a dadui unit. After reportedly being stuck with old 100-ton-displacement “gunboats” for a number of years, the observation and communications station on the northeastern tip of Woody Island may also belong to the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command. This station is called the Rocky Island Observation and Communications Station (石岛观通站), as Rocky Island was previously a distinct islet before it was incorporated into Woody Island in the mid-2010s. Some state media reporting has explicitly described the Rocky Island station as part of the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command. However, the station could also plausibly fall under the Southern Theater Command’s naval communications and observation brigade, which has various subordinate battalions and stations. The station is visible at the following coordinates: 16°50'40.36"N, 112°20'48.25"E (UTM: 49 N 643480 1862847; MGRS: 49Q FU 43479 62846).

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the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command received the Luzhou (泸州), a new Type 056 Jiangdao-class corvette, in the mid-2010s.143

Figure 13: The Luzhou, a Type 056 Jiangdao-class corvette, hull number 592 (Source: Xinhua Net)

3rd Radar Brigade

The 3rd Radar Brigade (雷达兵第三旅) operates radar installations on Woody Island. The brigade is part of the PLAN’s naval aviation branch and is based in Hainan. Recorded Future judges with high confidence that Unit 92261 is the 3rd Radar Brigade's MUCD. Recorded Future installations on Woody Island. The brigade is part of the PLAN’s departments as well as various subordinate battalions. 147

Organizational Structure

The 3rd Radar Brigade is almost certainly a division deputy leader-grade unit, as brigades are division deputy leader-grade units.145 A likely 3rd Radar Brigade leader was photographed in 2019 wearing senior colonel rank shoulder epaulets and a set of officer ribbons that would correspond to either a division leader or division deputy leader grade.146 However, the picture is not high enough resolution to precisely determine the individual's grade. The 3rd Radar Brigade has the standard set of first-level departments as well as various subordinate battalions.147

The 3rd Radar Brigade (雷达兵第三旅) operates radar units.145 The 3rd Radar Brigade's presence on Woody Island suggests that the 3rd Radar Brigade's activity in the South China Sea. The brigade's battalion on Woody Island, like other PLAN radar brigades, presumably carries out ground-based air surveillance.152

Figure 14: Likely 3rd Radar Brigade leader pictured in 2019 (Source: Haikou City Meilan District People's Government Net)

Duties

During our review of publicly available Chinese-language sources, Recorded Future did not observe any specific descriptions of the 3rd Radar Brigade’s activity in the South China Sea. The brigade's battalion on Woody Island, like other PLAN radar brigades, presumably carries out ground-based air surveillance.152

Facilities and Assets

Procurement records indicate that the 3rd Radar Brigade is based out of Haikou, Hainan and that it maintains stations


145 Allen, “Introduction to the PLA’s Organizational Reforms”, p.89-70.


148 “Meilan District Holds ‘8-1’ Visit to Forces Activities”.

149 “Liu Zhenling Resume”.


151 Source documents held by Recorded Future.

in other areas of Hainan, Guangxi, and Hunan.\textsuperscript{153} In addition to describing the brigade as a unit deployed to Woody Island,\textsuperscript{154} Chinese government websites have referenced both a “Woody Island Central Radar Station” and a “Yongxing Radar Station.”\textsuperscript{155} It is unclear which specific radar facilities on Woody Island belong to the 3rd Radar Brigade and which belong to other PLA units. Recorded Future did not observe any explicit references to the 3rd Brigade having a presence elsewhere in the Paracel or Spratly Islands, though previous analyses have identified extensive radar installations on China’s outposts in the Spratly Islands.\textsuperscript{156}

Yongxing Airfield Station

The Yongxing Airfield Station (永兴场站) supports the aviation forces that operate from Woody Island. The airfield station is part of the PLAN’s naval aviation branch. Recorded Future judges with high confidence that Unit 91427 is the Yongxing Airfield Station’s MUCD.

Organization

The Yongxing Airfield Station, which is also sometimes called the Xisha Airfield Station (西沙场站),\textsuperscript{157} is a regiment-level grade unit.\textsuperscript{158} It was almost certainly established in 1991 upon the completion of Woody Island’s airstrip.\textsuperscript{159} It has standard first-level departments and divisions.\textsuperscript{160} The airfield station also has subordinate entities like a communications company, oil transportation branch, and security company.\textsuperscript{161} Additionally, the airfield station can flexibly organize emergency dispatch teams.\textsuperscript{162}

Duties

The Yongxing Airfield Station supports the aviation forces operating from Woody Island’s airstrip. This includes managing flight dispatch, command, and coordinating support mechanisms, facilitating military-civilian communication, receiving radar signals, aircraft refueling, and meteorological support.\textsuperscript{163} For instance, in late 2013 the Yongxing Airfield Station facilitated a continuous 4-day-long search and rescue effort that involved 8 different kinds of aircraft and 59 flights.\textsuperscript{164} During this “high-density” operation, the airfield station dispatched high-altitude aircraft to serve as airborne command bridges for low-altitude aircraft, which had trouble maintaining their communications and radar connections when flying at an altitude of 20-30 meters.\textsuperscript{165} To what extent the aviation forces operating from the Paracel Islands, such as naval aviation shipborne helicopter regiment subunits and aviation regiments,\textsuperscript{166} maintain a permanent presence or deploy to the area temporarily is not clear.

The Yongxing Airfield Station also engages in activity oriented toward military-civil fusion. For instance, in July 2014 the Sansha City government and the Yongxing Airfield Station completed a 375-cubic meter “military-civilian jointly built preservation warehouse” that can preserve enough fresh fruits, vegetables, and other goods for a year.\textsuperscript{167} The warehouse also has subordinate entities like a communications company, oil transportation branch, and security company.\textsuperscript{168} Additionally, the airfield station can flexibly organize emergency dispatch teams.\textsuperscript{169}

153 Source documents held by Recorded Future.


156 Dahm, South China Sea Military Capabilities Series.


vegetables, and meat for over 800 people for 15-20 days. This warehouse is intended to improve the quality of life for soldiers stationed on the island, war preparedness training, and local emergency response capabilities. The airfield station also reportedly coordinates flight safety with the Civil Aviation Administration's Sanya Air Control Station on Woody Island. In July 2016, the Yongxing Airfield Station participated in a joint search and rescue exercise that involved the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command, the Sansha Garrison Command, the CCG, Sansha City's maritime militia, the SCLE, and other participants. Likewise, the Yongxing Airfield Station has participated in joint rescue operations with the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command and civilian entities in Sansha City.

The Yongxing Airfield Station also has a bookstore. The airfield station jointly opened Sansha Phoenix Xinhua Yongxing Bookstore (三沙凤凰新华永兴书屋) on Woody Island with Hainan Phoenix Xinhua Publishing Co., Ltd. in 2018. Corporate records list the bookstore's registered location as the "grassroots company classroom" of the Yongxing Airfield Station.

Facilities and Assets

The Yongxing Airfield Station likely operates numerous facilities on and near Woody Island's airstrip, such as the hangars lining the airship that house fixed- and rotary-wing military aircraft. Recent state media reporting suggests that the cluster of facilities adjacent to the airstrip on northeastern Woody Island, which were finished around early 2016, are a distinct military area belonging to the Yongxing Airfield Station.

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Sanasha Garrison Command

The Sanasha Garrison Command (三沙警备区) is the focal point of China's national defense mobilization system in the South China Sea. The garrison's most important duties are training and command of Sanasha City's maritime militia, a paramilitary force that masquerades as civilian fishermen. It has facilities on Woody Island and Hainan, including in Haikou, Wenchang, Sanya, and Danzhou. The establishment of this garrison in 2012 is among the most significant changes to the PLA's organization on China's outposts in the past decade. Recorded Future did not identify an MUCD associated with the Sanasha Garrison Command.

Organizational Structure

China's Central Military Commission (CMC) approved the establishment of the PLA Hainan Province Sanasha Garrison Command as division leader-grade organization on Woody Island in July 2012.177 Garrisons in prefecture-level cities are subordinate to provincial military commands,178 meaning that the Sanasha Garrison Command is subordinate to the Hainan Province Military Command (海南省军区),179 which was initially under the Guangzhou Military Region and is now under the CMC National Defense Mobilization Department.180

At the same time, prefectoral garrisons also answer to their city's Chinese Communist Party (CCP) committee and government.181 The leadership of the Sanasha Garrison Command often overlaps with the leadership of Sanasha City. Garrison commanders and political commissars have, at times, served on the standing committee of Sanasha City's CCP committee,182 which

177 Wang Hongshan [王洪山] and Ceng Zhengxiong [曾政雄], "Central Military Commission Approves and Agrees to Organize Sanasha Garrison Command, Is a Division-Level Unit" [中央军委批复同意组建三沙警备区 为正师级单位], China Net [中国网], July 23, 2012, https://perma.cc/XT74-6WWB.
180 "Sanasha Garrison Command Commanders and Political Commissars Have, at Times, Served on the Standing Committee of Sanasha City’s CCP Committee" [三沙警备区司令员、政治委员时在三沙市党委会上], China Net [中国网], June 29, 2009, https://perma.cc/6Z6Q-322X.
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is the highest decision-making body in the city. Moreover, Sanasha City's party secretary and mayor generally serves as the first secretary of the Sanasha Garrison Command's party committee,183 a standard arrangement for local PLA commands.184

Publicly available sources have referenced several departments and offices under the Sanasha Garrison Command over the years, including a headquarters department (司令部),185 political work department (政治部),186 political work division (政治工作处),187 mobilization division (动员处),188 support division (保障处),189 and war preparedness building division (战备建设处).190 Recorded Future observed recent evidence of other garrison commands in prefecture-level cities having first-level departments named as divisions (处), such as political work divisions,191 rather than departments (部) despite clearly still being division leader-grade organizations.192
The Sansha Garrison Command also oversees 4 grassroots-level People’s Armed Forces Departments (PAFDs), which are responsible for militia work on Woody Island, the Qilian Islets (based on Tree Island), the Crescent Group (based on Drummond Island), and the Spratly Islands.194 Like the Sansha Garrison Command, these PAFDs also answer to the municipal party-state’s leadership.195 When the Woody Island PAFD was created in 2015, a city official stated that “the establishment of grassroots People’s Armed Forces Departments in Sansha City actively supporting national defense construction, realizing the organic combination of militia work and Sansha’s construction and development, an important move for implementing the national-military-civil fusion development strategy”.196 Grassroots PAFDs are non-active duty organizations staffed by local civilian cadres.197

193 Zhu “Sansha Maritime Militia Company Established”.
195 Wang and Hou, “Hainan Province Sansha City 4 Grassroots People’s Armed Forces Departments Established”.
197 China’s National Defense in 2006; Kennedy and Erickson, China’s Third Sea Force, p. 3; Blasko, “The PLA Army/Ground Forces”, p. 272.

State media coverage of the garrison’s establishment in 2012 suggested that the garrison would be responsible for national defense mobilization and militia preparation work, coordinating military-local relations, commanding the “military operations and missions” of militia forces, and supporting local disaster relief and rescue efforts.198 In the years since 2012, the Sansha Garrison Command has worked to train Sansha City’s maritime militia, which the city had established in July 2013 based on the old Paracel Islands militia.199 By July 2016, the force had reportedly grown to more than 1,800 personnel and over 100 vessels,200 including both militiamen stationed on various Chinese outposts as well as a steel-hulled fleet that deploys from Hainan.201

Procurement records from 2019 reveal that the Sansha Garrison Command Mobilization Division has militia bases with training facilities near the Yazhou (崖州) and Baimajing (白马井) ports in Hainan.202 These are 2 of the 3 main ports that the Sansha City maritime militia fleet uses, the third being Qinglan (清澜).203 Reporting in state media reveals that the Sansha Garrison Command provides training in navigation, communications, international law, regional military dynamics, and other subjects both on Hainan and on the islets within Sansha City’s jurisdiction.204

198 Wang and Ceng, “Central Military Commission Approves and Agrees to Organize Sansha Garrison Command”.
200 Guo, “The Motherland’s ‘Southern Gate’ Becomes a ‘Great Wall of Steel’”.
201 Haver, “Unmasking China’s Maritime Militia”.
202 Source documents held by Recorded Future.
203 Haver, “Unmasking China’s Maritime Militia”.

Figure 18: A Guangzhou Military Region patch visible on the right arm of the Sansha Garrison Command's political commissar in July 2013 (Source: China Daily)”.
The Sansha Garrison Command is almost certainly responsible for commanding most of the city’s maritime militia operations, though local party-state authorities appear to have a role as well. Under the garrison, Sansha City’s maritime militia slots into a broader “military, law enforcement, and civilian joint defense” (军警民联防) system designed to protect China’s maritime rights and interests. In practice, the system facilitates the joint command of Sansha City’s maritime militia and maritime law enforcement forces. State media reporting indicates that, through this system, the Sansha Garrison Command has some degree of command authority over the city’s maritime law enforcement forces as well as its maritime militia. The joint command process very likely runs through a military, law enforcement, and civilian joint defense command center located on Woody Island, which is visible at the following coordinates: 16°49’57.10”N, 112°20’7.87”E (UTM: 49 N 642293 1861509; MGRS: 49Q FU 42293 61508).

In addition to the Sansha Garrison Command, Sansha City’s joint defense system appears to involve other PLA units like the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command and Yongxing Airfield Station. However, this joint defense system purposefully relies on ostensibly civilian forces, such as maritime law enforcement agencies and maritime militia units, rather than PLA combat forces. Such an approach allows Sansha City to defend China’s claims without sparking a major armed conflict.

**Facilities and Equipment**

On Woody Island, the Sansha Garrison Command appears to share office space with Sansha City’s CCP committee and government. Procurement records reveal that the garrison maintains a reportedly 8,351-square meter compound in the Xiuying District (秀英区) of Haikou and facilities in the Qinglan port area of Wenchang in addition to the aforementioned militia bases near the Yazhou and Baimajing ports. The address of the Xiuying District compound is “Binhai Road No. 104, Haikou City” (海口市滨海大道104号). Baidu Maps and Google Earth searches confirm the presence of a compound at this address, which is visible at the following coordinates: 20° 1’26.26”N, 110°16’35.71”E (UTM: 49 N 424337 2214296; MGRS: 49Q DC 24337 14296).

In late 2015, the Sansha Garrison Command received the PLA Ground Force (PLAGF) GY820 Comprehensive Support Ship. State media reporting indicates that the ship is 90 meters long, 14.6 meters wide, displaces 2,700 tons, and can withstand journeys of up to 3,000 nautical miles. It has a helicopter pad and can transport main battle tanks, smaller boats, and other such vehicles. Procurement records confirm this vessel to be a 90-meter-long Type 701 Comprehensive Support Ship.

The Sansha Garrison Command has also invested in unmanned systems, as demonstrated by a tender for 11 unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in mid-2020.
Unit 91531

Unit 91531 (91531部队) provides engineering support in the South China Sea. Due to a lack of publicly available information, Recorded Future cannot provide a high-confidence judgment of Unit 91531’s true identity (TUD) at the time of this writing, though it appears to be a PLAN engineering command (工程指挥部) or a unit subordinate to a PLAN engineering command. The unit has a documented presence on Woody Island and is likely active elsewhere in the South China Sea.

Organizational Structure

Unit 91531 is very likely either a division leader-grade PLAN engineering command or a division leader-grade unit under a higher-level PLAN engineering command, such as the South Sea Fleet Engineering Command (南海舰队工程指挥部). A bulletin posted to Sansha City’s website in October 2014 identifies individuals named Fan Jiyong (樊继永) and Chen Qijiang (陈启坚) as the commander and political commissar of Unit 91531, respectively. 222 2017 state media reports identify Fan and Chen as the commander and political commissar of a work area (工区) under a “newly organized” engineering command, referred to as “a Navy engineering unit”, and show Chen wearing division leader grade and senior colonel rank insignia. 223 This reporting specifies that the work area has first-level departments, such as a political department, and a 2016 Sansha City bulletin lists a work area among various military and law enforcement units on Woody Island.225 This evidence suggests that the work area could be a distinct unit with its own grade and MUCD.

Woody Island was previously home to a division leader-grade

Duties

Unit 91531 assists infrastructure construction efforts on Woody Island and elsewhere in the South China Sea, which involves working closely with the civilian authorities in Sansha City. As discussed previously, Unit 91531 worked with the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command and the Sansha City government to create a military-local government work coordination mechanism and draft the “Sansha City Double Support Projects Management Provisional Measures” to standardize the management and operation of military-civil fusion projects.228 In February 2016, state media reported that Unit 91531 had “played an important role in the construction of Sansha City’s infrastructure and

†Military-Civil Fusion Jointly Writes Sansha Development New Chapter”; Hong, “Our City and Unit 91531 Hold Military-Local Government Coordination Conference.”
military-civilian shared airport",229 referring to the airport attached to Woody Island’s airstrip. Unit 91531 personnel reportedly oversee the coordination, organization, arrangement, planning, and review of construction plans, personnel deployments, and building materials transportation in the South China Sea, which includes specific tasks like managing safety inspections, organizing the loading and unloading of materials, and coordinating communications.230 The unit also works with China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) personnel.231

Facilities and Assets

Recorded Future did not identify any specific facilities or assets belonging to Unit 91531. The unit has a documented presence on Woody Island;232 it is likely active elsewhere in the South China Sea as well. The unit likely also has a presence in Sanya, Hainan, as numerous academic articles authored by individuals affiliated with Unit 91531 list the unit’s location as Sanya.233

Xisha Satellite Observation Station

The Xisha Satellite Observation Station (西沙卫星观测站) supports space launches and helps manage assets already in orbit. The station is part of the PLASSF Space Systems Department and is located on Duncan Islands in the Crescent Group of the Paracel Islands. It is also associated with addresses in Wenchang, Hainan. Recorded Future judges with high confidence that Unit 63813 is the Xisha Satellite Observation Station’s MUCD. The operationalization of the Xisha Satellite Observation Station is among the most significant changes to the PLA’s organization on China’s outposts in the past decade.

Organizational Structure

The Xisha Satellite Observation Station, sometimes referred to as the Xisha Tracking and Control Station (西沙测控站),235 falls under the Wenchang Spacecraft Launch Site (文昌航天发射场) in Wenchang, Hainan.236 In turn, the Wenchang launch site is subordinate to the corps leader-grade Xichang Satellite Launch Center (西昌卫星发射中心) in Sichuan.237 The Wenchang launch site also oversees the Tongguling Tracking and Control Station (铜鼓岭测控站),238 which is located near the southeastern tip of Hainan. According to a 2015 bulletin posted to Sansha City’s website, the leaders of the Xichang Satellite Launch Center regularly meet with the local party-state officials responsible for administering the Crescent Group, which includes Duncan Islands.239 Recorded Future judges with high confidence that:

- Unit 63790 is the MUCD of the Xichang Satellite Launch Center
- Unit 63811 is the MUCD of the Wenchang Spacecraft Launch Site Command and Control Center (文昌航天发射中心指控中心)
- Unit 63810 and Unit 63812 are also MUCDs associated with the Wenchang Spacecraft Launch Site

229 Xiao and Wu, “Home of the Sunny Sea”; Deng and Li, “I Am Young, Can Take the Burden!”
230 Deng and Li, “I Am Young, Can Take the Burden!”
231 Deng and Li, “I Am Young, Can Take the Burden!”
232 Deng and Li, “Seeing the Sea as Family, Seeing Work as Life”.
The Xisha Satellite Observation Station is very likely a regiment leader-grade unit and was reportedly created in 2009. A photograph from March 2019 appears to show the commander and political commissar of the Xisha Satellite Observation Station wearing 3 rows of officer ribbons with a purple center ribbon, which indicates a regiment leader or regiment deputy leader grade, as well as colonel rank shoulder epaulettes, a rank that corresponds with the regiment leader and division deputy leader grades. Moreover, the station reportedly had a logistics division (处) in 2015, which is typical of regiment leader-grade units.

The station also has a technical office (技术室).

Figure 23: Photograph from 2019 that very likely depicts the commander (right) and political commissar (left) of the Xisha Satellite Observation Station (Source: Shenzhen Yantian Port Holdings Co., Ltd.)

Xisha Satellite Observation Station personnel are often depicted wearing ostensibly civilian uniforms, sometimes adorned with “China Space” (中国航天) patches and insignia. Similar uniforms are worn by other known PLASSF Space Systems Department units, such as the Xiamen Tracking and Control Station (厦门测控站), the Qingdao Tracking and Control Station (青岛测控站), and the Yuanwang 5 (远望5号) tracking and control ship. These uniforms are likely intended to obfuscate the fact that China's space program is largely under the PLA’s control.

Figure 24: Xisha Satellite Observation Station personnel wearing uniforms marked with “China Space” patches and insignia (Source: China Net)

Duties

As “the only deep-sea land-based observation station in [Chinese] territory”, the Xisha Satellite Observation provides radar and telemetry data capabilities during the last phase of ground observations for launches. Its specific duties include tracking, course measurement, and receiving and recording telemetry data. It also carries out long-term management duties for in-orbit spacecraft. By July 2020, the station had reportedly completed over 70 rocket observations and over 18,000 hours of satellite management missions. It supported the first Long March-5 launch, the Tianwen-1 Mars rover mission, and the first Long March-7 launch. Though some facilities...
in the ground segment of China’s space infrastructure assist missile instrumentation, we did not observe any references to the Xisha Satellite Observation Station carrying out missile instrumentation duties.

**Facilities and Assets**

The Xisha Satellite Observation Station is located on the eastern side of Duncan Islands in the Crescent Group in the Paracel Islands. State media reports suggest that the station's facility was completed around 2014, and satellite imagery shows that the facility was finished around 2014 as well. The station, with its 4 large radomes, is visible at the following coordinates: 16°27'3.87"N, 111°42'49.71"E (UTM: 49 N 576199 1818966; MGRS: 49Q EU 76199 18966).

Procurement records and patents show that the Xisha Satellite Observation Station, the Wenchang Spacecraft Launch Center Command and Control Center, Unit 63810, and Unit 63812 all use various addresses in Wenchang, Hainan. These include addresses on Shugang Road (疏港路). A May 2018 video produced by Unit 63812 depicts a compound that almost certainly belongs to the Wenchang Spacecraft Launch Site. Searches on Baidu Maps and Google Earth reveal that this compound is located on Shugang Road, visible at the following coordinates: 19°32'24.26"N, 110°47'15.51"E (UTM: 49 N 477722 2160601; MGRS: 49Q DB 77722 60600).

**Unit 92155**

Unit 92155 (92155部队) very likely performs air defense duties on Woody Island. Due to a lack of publicly available information, Recorded Future cannot provide a high-confidence judgment of Unit 92155's true identity (TUD) at the time of this writing, though it appears to be the naval aviation air defense brigade based in Sanya, Hainan. This brigade has surface-to-air missiles (SAM), radar, and AAA capabilities.

Several pieces of evidence suggest that Unit 92155 is a PLAN naval aviation air defense unit. Since the early 2000s, individuals affiliated with Unit 92155 have consistently authored studies on SAM units, air defense battalions, island and reef air defense operations, air attack threat assessment, radar technology,

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259 Wood, Stone, and Lee, China’s Ground Segment.
260 “The Xisha Star Shining in the South China Sea”; “No Seconds Error, No Missed Frames, No Deviation At All”.
261 “The Xisha Star Shining in the South China Sea”.
262 “The Xisha Star Shining in the South China Sea”.
263 Source documents held by Recorded Future.
coastal defense force exercises, and other similar topics. Many of these articles are co-authored with individuals affiliated with the former Navy Aviation Engineering Academy, which is now part of Naval Aviation University (海军航空大学). A number of these articles state that Unit 92155 is located in Sanya. Moreover, provincial party-state documents have listed Unit 92155 subunits as naval aviation units under the Southern Theater Command. Unit 92155 is very likely the naval aviation air defense brigade based out of Sanya. State media reports have referenced “a naval aviation air defense brigade” in Hainan under the Southern Theater Command that possesses SAM, radar, and AAA capabilities. This brigade has subordinate battalions, including at least 1 battalion in the Sanya area. Previous analyses have suggested that the naval aviation air defense unit in Sanya is the 7th Air Defense Brigade, though Recorded Future could not verify this claim. Given that brigades are division deputy leader-grade units, Unit 92155 is very likely a division deputy leader-grade entity, and its presence on Woody Island is presumably organized as a battalion.

Unit 92155 has a documented presence on Woody Island. A 2019 bulletin posted to the website of Sansha City describes Unit 92155 as being located on Woody Island. According to this bulletin, when visiting Unit 92155 on Woody Island, Sansha City’s party secretary discussed military-civil fusion, specifically mentioning the PLA’s contributions to Sansha City’s development and the city’s efforts to support PLA units stationed in the city.


267 Allen, “Introduction to the PLA’s Organizational Reforms”, p. 21.


271 Allen, “Introduction to the PLA’s Organizational Reforms”, p. 21.


273 Hong, “Zhang Jun Greets Sprint Festival Holding Fast to Posts Cadre Staff and Officers”.}

Figure 27: The Hainan-based naval aviation air defense brigade firing SAMs during an exercise in 2018 (Source: PRC Ministry of National Defense)
Other units tie Unit 92155 to Sanya, including state media reporting and the LinkedIn profiles of self-described Unit 92155 personnel. Shenzhen Yixonwei Electronics Co., Ltd. (深圳市怡讯威电子有限公司) claims to have provided services to a second-level department under Unit 92155's staff department in Sanya. A branch of ZTO Express (中通快递) in Hongsha Town in Sanya's Jiayiang District appears to provide delivery services to a vehicle company and artillery company belonging to Unit 92155 in addition to the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command, Yulin base facilities, and other PLA units. The unit also reportedly has a group training team in Wenchang, Hainan.

Unit 92508

Unit 92508 (92508部队) is very likely the MUCD of a PLA Navy entity that maintains a presence on Woody Island. Due to a lack of publicly available information, Recorded Future cannot provide a high-confidence judgment of Unit 92508's true identity or the scope of its responsibilities at the time of this writing. Bulletins posted to the website of Sansha City in 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2019 identify Unit 92508 as being located on Woody Island and interacting with the leadership of Sansha City. A bulletin from October 2014 identifies an individual named Yang Xiushan (杨秀山) as the unit's chief of staff. Given that Unit 92508 has an MUCD, it should be at least a regiment-level unit.

Other Units

The 9 units discussed above are not the only PLA forces present on the islands and reefs that China occupies in the South China Sea. Recorded Future identified a handful of other PLA units that maintain or previously maintained at least a marginal presence on China's outposts. These include the PLAN Marine Corps 1st Brigade (海军陆战队第—旅), Unit 92690 (92690部队), Unit 92053 (92053部队), and Unit 91522 (91522部队).

PLAN Marine Corps 1st Brigade

The modern PLAN Marine Corps was established in May 1980. It initially consisted of a single brigade, the PLAN Marine Corps 1st Brigade, which was established in Hainan and later moved to Zhanjiang, Guangdong. The PLAN Marine Corps 164th Brigade was then created in 1998 using forces from the former 164th Division of the PLA Ground Force (PLAGF) 41st Group Army. Both the 1st Brigade and the 164th Brigade now fall under the Southern Theater Command. The PLAN Marine Corps entered a period of significant expansion in 2017, adding multiple new brigades in locations across China.
credible evidence of the 1st Brigade maintaining a significant presence on China’s outposts beyond the late 1980s or early 1990s, nor did we observe any proof of the 164th Brigade being deployed to these outposts after its creation in 1998. As discussed previously, the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command and Unit 91431 are now responsible for guarding China’s outposts in the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Indeed, numerous sources specify that some Xisha Maritime Garrison Command and Unit 91431 personnel are ex-PLAN Marine Corps.

Unit 92690, Unit 92053, and Unit 91522

Unit 92690, Unit 92053, and Unit 91522 are PLAN units that have very likely deployed personnel to China’s outposts, potentially on an ad hoc rather than permanent basis. Due to a lack of publicly available information, Recorded Future cannot provide a high-confidence judgment of these units’ true identities (TUDs) or the scope of their responsibilities at the time of this writing. Individuals from these units have been included on recent provincial government lists of military personnel stationed on islands or in Sansha City, mentioned alongside personnel from units such as the Xisha Maritime Garrison Command, Sansha Garrison Command, and Xisha Satellite Observation Station.

Procurement records and other sources suggest that Unit 92053 performs engineering support duties, and the leaders of Sansha City have visited Unit 92053 on Hainan at least once. An October 2020 bulletin posted to the website of Zhanjiang City says that Unit 92053 is stationed in Zhanjiang, describes the unit as a “base” (基地), and shows the base’s director wearing senior colonel rank insignia, suggesting that he is a division deputy leader-, division leader-, or corps deputy leader-grade officer. Recorded Future did not observe any other references to Unit 91522.


290  Source documents held by Recorded Future.


290  Source documents held by Recorded Future.


Outlook

China significantly militarized its outposts in the South China Sea over the past decade. In addition to the well-documented deployment of new military capabilities to the Spratly Islands and Paracel Islands such as SAMs, bombers, and anti-ship cruise missiles, this militarization is also reflected in more subtle organizational changes. These changes include multiple upgrades to the Nansha Garrison’s organizational status, the establishment of the Sansha Garrison Command, the operationalization of the Xisha Satellite Observation Station, the likely creation of Unit 91531, and efforts to formalize cooperation between the PLA and civilian entities in the South China Sea via military-civil fusion programs.

In recent years, the PLA has generally played a background role in China’s strategy to consolidate control over the South China Sea, providing a deterrent cover for frontline maritime law enforcement and maritime militia operations. This being said, the PLA is also prepared to directly intercept foreign vessels in both the Spratly Islands and Paracel Islands, such as when a pair of Houbei-class missile boats (reportedly operating from Mischief Reef) chased off a Philippine vessel near the Spratly Islands in April 2021. Thanks to its efforts in the South China Sea, the PLA is now better situated to defend China’s maritime and territorial claims, achieve localized information superiority, project power within and beyond the first island chain, control access to vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs), maintain space situational awareness, or engage the United States in a conflict over the status of Taiwan. Moving forward, the PLA will likely continue building its capacity to carry out combat operations in the South China Sea, surveil foreign ships and aircraft operating in the region, and perform joint rights defense and rescue operations with China’s maritime law enforcement and maritime militia forces.

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294 Zhang and Su, ‘Making the First Become a Business Card’; Wang, Xiong, and Xue, “Xisha Guardian”.


296 Dahm, South China Sea Military Capabilities Series.

297 Lee and Clemens, Organizing to Fight in the Far Seas.


299 Wood, Stone, and Lee, China’s Ground Segment.

Appendix A: The PLA’s Grade and Rank System

The PLA currently uses a system of 15 grades and 10 ranks. In this system, every organization has a grade that corresponds to the grade of its leaders,\(^{301}\) typically its commander and political commissar. Ranks mainly provide quick indicators of hierarchical status and aid foreign military interactions.\(^{302}\) As such, even though the PLA is pursuing reforms to elevate the importance of ranks,\(^{303}\) grades remain the fundamental building blocks of the PLA’s organizational structure, determining vertical command and control relationships as well as horizontal coordination relationships.\(^{304}\) The following tables list each grade, the ranks that correspond to each grade, and the special technical officer level that corresponds to each grade.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Primary Rank</th>
<th>Secondary Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CMC Chairman (军委主席) / CMC Vice-Chairman (军委副主席)</td>
<td>- / GEN (上将)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMC Member (军委委员)</td>
<td>GEN (上将)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theater Command Leader (正战区职)</td>
<td>GEN (上将)</td>
<td>LTG (中将)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theater Command Deputy Leader (副战区职)</td>
<td>LTG (中将)</td>
<td>MG (少将)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corps Leader (正军职)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corps Deputy Leader (副军职)</td>
<td>MG (少将)</td>
<td>SCOL (大校)</td>
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<td>Division Leader (正师职)</td>
<td>SCOL (大校)</td>
<td>MG (少将)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division Deputy Leader (副师职)</td>
<td>COL (上校)</td>
<td>SCOL (大校)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regiment Leader (正团职)</td>
<td>COL (上校)</td>
<td>LTC (中校)</td>
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<td>LTC (中校)</td>
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<td>CAPT (上尉)</td>
<td>MAJ (少校)</td>
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<td>Company Leader (正连职)</td>
<td>CAPT (上尉)</td>
<td>1LT (中尉)</td>
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<td>Company Deputy Leader (副连职)</td>
<td>1LT (中尉)</td>
<td>CAPT (上尉)</td>
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<td>Platoon Leader (正排职)</td>
<td>2LT (上尉)</td>
<td>1LT (中尉)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: The PLA’s system of 15 grades and 10 ranks that has been in place since 1988 (Source: China Military Net; PLA As Organization v.2.0.; China Brief\(^{305}\))

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\(^{301}\) Allen, “Introduction to the PLA’s Organizational Reforms”, p. 16.
\(^{302}\) Allen, “Introduction to the PLA’s Organizational Reforms”, p. 16.
\(^{303}\) Wuthnow and Saunders, “A New Step Forward in PLA Professionalization”.
\(^{304}\) Allen, “China Announces Reform of Military Ranks”.
\(^{305}\) Xu, “The Evolution of Our Army’s Cadre Ranks After the Founding of New China”; Allen, “Introduction to the PLA’s Organizational Reforms”, p. 16-22; Wuthnow and Saunders, “A New Step Forward in PLA Professionalization”.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Officer Special Technical Level</th>
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<tr>
<td>CMC Chairman (军委主席) / CMC Vice-Chairman (军委副主席)</td>
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<td>CMC Member (军委委员)</td>
<td>Level 1 (1级)</td>
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<td>Level 2 (2级)</td>
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<td>Theater Command Deputy Leader (副战区职)</td>
<td>Level 3 (3级)</td>
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<td>Corps Leader (正军职)</td>
<td>Level 4 (4级)</td>
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<td>Corps Deputy Leader (副军职)</td>
<td>Level 5 (5级)</td>
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<td>Division Leader (正师职)</td>
<td>Level 6 (6级)</td>
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<td>Division Deputy Leader (副师职)</td>
<td>Level 7 (7级)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regiment Leader (正团职)</td>
<td>Level 8 (8级)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regiment Deputy Leader (副团职)</td>
<td>Level 9 (9级)</td>
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<td>Battalion Leader (正营职)</td>
<td>Level 10 (10级)</td>
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<td>Battalion Deputy Leader (副营职)</td>
<td>Level 11 (11级)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company Leader (正连职)</td>
<td>Level 12 (12级)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company Deputy Leader (副连职)</td>
<td>Level 13 (12级)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platoon Leader (正排职)</td>
<td>Level 14 (14级)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Grades and their special technical officer level equivalents
(Source: China Military Net)

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Xu, “The Evolution of Our Army’s Cadre Ranks After the Founding of New China”.
Recorded Future Threat Activity Group and Malware Taxonomy

Recorded Future's research group, Insikt, tracks threat actors and their activity, focusing on state actors from China, Iran, Russia, and North Korea, as well as cybercriminals — individuals and groups — from Russia, CIS states, China, Iran, and Brazil. We emphasize tracking activity groups and where possible, attributing them to nation state government, organizations, or affiliate institutions.

Our coverage includes:

- Government organizations and intelligence agencies, their associated laboratories, partners, industry collaborators, proxy entities, and individual threat actors
- Recorded Future-identified, suspected nation-state activity groups, such as RedAlpha, RedBravo, Red Delta, and BlueAlpha and many other industry established groups
- Cybercriminal individuals and groups established and named by Recorded Future
- Newly emerging malware, as well as prolific, persistent commodity malware

Insikt Group publicly names a new threat activity group or campaign, such as RedFoxtrot, when analysts typically have data corresponding to at least three points on the Diamond Model of Intrusion Analysis with at least medium confidence. We will occasionally report on significant activity using a temporary activity clustering name such as TAG-21 where the activity is new and significant but doesn't map to existing groupings and hasn't yet graduated or merged into an established activity group. We tie this to a threat actor only when we can point to a handle, persona, person, or organization responsible. We will write about the activity as a campaign in the absence of this level of adversary data. We use the most widely used or recognized name for a particular group when the public body of empirical evidence is clear the activity corresponds to a known group.

Insikt Group uses a simple color and phonetic alphabet naming convention for new nation-state threat actor groups or campaigns. The color generally corresponds to that nation's flag colors, with more color/nation pairings to be added as we identify and attribute new threat actor groups associated with new nations.

For newly identified cybercriminal groups, Insikt Group uses a naming convention corresponding to the Greek alphabet. Where we have identified a criminal entity connected to a particular country, we will use the appropriate country color, and where that group may be tied to a specific government organization, tie it to that entity specifically.

Insikt Group uses mathematical terms when naming newly identified malware.
About Recorded Future®

Recorded Future is the world's largest provider of intelligence for enterprise security. By combining persistent and pervasive automated data collection and analytics with human analysis, Recorded Future delivers intelligence that is timely, accurate, and actionable. In a world of ever-increasing chaos and uncertainty, Recorded Future empowers organizations with the visibility they need to identify and detect threats faster; take proactive action to disrupt adversaries; and protect their people, systems, and assets, so business can be conducted with confidence. Recorded Future is trusted by more than 1,000 businesses and government organizations around the world.

About Insikt Group®

Recorded Future's Insikt Group, the company's threat research division, comprises analysts and security researchers with deep government, law enforcement, military, and intelligence agency experience. Their mission is to produce intelligence that reduces risk for clients, enables tangible outcomes, and prevents business disruption.

About the Author

Zoe Haver
Associate Threat Intelligence Analyst, Insikt Group®

Zoe Haver specializes in the South China Sea disputes and other China-related security issues. She has worked on these topics for Radio Free Asia, the Center for Advanced China Research, SOSi's Center for Intelligence Research and Analysis, the U.S. Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute, C4ADS, and other organizations. She received her BA from George Washington University and is proficient in Mandarin Chinese.