

**Effective Resistance: Evaluating Vietnam's Artificial Island Building in Response to
China's Aggressive Expansion**

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Abstract

China began building artificial islands in 2013 to project its military power, gain control of disputed territories, and further direct what occurs in the South China Sea. In comparison, Vietnam started this venture in 2015, mainly in response to China's rapid expansion to protect its sovereignty, increase deterrence capabilities, and stabilize operational capacity within the South China Sea. After examining the motivation behind China and Vietnam's artificial island building, their capabilities, and how they have responded to incidents, Vietnam's artificial island building has not been a deterrent to China's aggression. Experts have discovered that China has only continued to expand its number of artificial islands since 2015, increasing confrontations with foreign vessels and expanding its aggression. China's newest project at Antelope Reef in the Paracel Islands is a clear example of its aims to continue artificial island building and gain access to disputed territories. Vietnam's effectiveness in deterring China's aggression toward its own vessels and China's continued building of artificial islands is measured by examining if there have been increased confrontations or new construction over the last five years. Artificial island building has allowed China access to vital shipping lanes, contributed to environmental damage, and increased the likelihood of aggression within the South China Sea due to a larger presence of Vietnamese and Chinese vessels.

Introduction

China has been building artificial islands since 2013, and Vietnam began in 2015, but both began this venture for different reasons, leading to vastly different responses from the world stage. While China began building artificial islands for power projection, territorial claims, and control of the Indo-Pacific region, Vietnam began this venture in response to China as a way to protect its territory and increase deterrence against China's aggression and possession of features. The world has responded to China's activities largely through condemnation and criticism, but most have not commented on Vietnam's expansion due to the difference in motivation. Despite the world's response being different, the ramifications of artificial island building will affect the globe, but most importantly, the Indo-Pacific region. While Vietnam may have begun its artificial island building in response to China's, it has not slowed or lessened China's expansion in the slightest, with an increase in projects and aggressive behavior over the last five years.

Creation of Artificial Islands

When a country decides to construct an artificial island, they select a submerged reef, shoal, atoll, or other landmass that is close to the surface (Southerland, 2016). These have typically been selected within contested areas, such as the Spratly Islands or the Paracels, to strengthen one's claim to that region. To create the island, dredgers are used to move sand, coral rubble, and other sediments from nearby to pile on top of the structure that will become the artificial island (Southerland, 2016). Bulldozers and other machinery are transported to the new island to compact the sand and ensure it will be a stable and level environment upon which to build structures (Southerland, 2016). Once the land is ready, construction of facilities and other useful infrastructure can begin, including airstrips, harbors, radar technologies, military equipment, and support facilities, to aid a country in nearby operations (Southerland, 2016).

China's Artificial Island-Building

China began building artificial islands and other structures along its coast during the 1940s, but in 1988, China began to study “reef geology” after “PLA forces first occupied Fiery Cross Reef” (Dahm, 2020). This is evident in China's five-year plan released in 1990, which focused on further research into the geology of these reefs and “engineering assessments of Chinese-held SCS reefs” (Dahm, 2020). Years later, in 2008, studies conducted by the Chinese Academy of Sciences discovered that the large limestone structures around Fiery Cross, Subi, and Mischief Reefs would be suitable for engineering projects such as runways, airports, and communications facilities (Dahm, 2020). China began building artificial islands in 2013 in the Spratly Islands, now holding seven artificial islands in the Spratly Islands and an additional twenty in the Paracel Islands. This

accounts for a total of 3,200 acres of land that China has created for its artificial islands throughout the Indo-Pacific region (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, n.d.).

The features in the Spratly Islands include Cuateron Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, Gaven Reefs, Hughes Reef, Johnson Reef, Mischief Reef, and Subi Reef (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, n.d.). Of these, the largest and most advanced are Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, n.d.). These three artificial islands possess features such as power plants, underground storage, and fuel/water storage facilities to support operations on the islands and surrounding waters (Dahm, 2020). Power is thought to be supplied by diesel-electric power plants, shown in satellite images, and they possess anywhere from six to eight diesel generators (Dahm, 2020). These three artificial islands also possess airstrips, missile systems, radar technologies, and support vehicles on these islands (Dahm, 2020).

Experts have pointed to further expansion of China's artificial island building to other contested areas in the Indo-Pacific, namely the Scarborough Shoal. China has exercised control of the Scarborough Shoal since the 2012 standoff with the Philippines, but it has yet to announce official plans to construct an artificial island (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, n.d.). China did announce plans to create a nature reserve, which will mean an increased law enforcement presence and tighter restrictions on fishing for Filipino fishermen (Hong, 2025).

Vietnam's History of Island-Building

Vietnam began its large-scale artificial island building in 2021, about eight years after China (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2026). The majority of its island building has been within the Spratly Islands, but it has also constructed some artificial islands within the Paracels. The latest reports bring Vietnam's dredging to a total of 2,771 acres of artificial island built, with 4,120 acres of reef destruction (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2026).

Since 2021, Vietnam has created eleven harbors, bringing its total in the Spratly Islands to fifteen (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2026). Additionally, satellite imagery depicts that three more harbors are being built at Grierson Reef, Petley Reef, and South Reef within the Spratly Islands (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2026). Besides the creation of new infrastructure and islands, Vietnam has also updated outposts such as deepening channels to accommodate the movement of warships and other military vessels, positioning Vietnam to maintain a strong maritime law enforcement presence (Sharma, 2025).

Since March of 2025, Vietnam has continued its artificial island-building, with the addition of 534 acres of land within the Spratly Islands (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2026). Some additional areas include Barque Canada Reef, but it has also focused on smaller projects within the region (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2026). The landmass of Barque Canada Reef was finished by the spring of 2025 and is now Vietnam's largest base, with construction of specialized infrastructure underway (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2026). Satellite imagery shows communications systems that point to the potential for an airstrip on the landmass, similar to what China has done (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2026).

Comparison of China and Vietnam's Goals

Nearby countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and even China have released very few or no comments on Vietnam's island building, although they have been very outspoken about China's activities (Prétat, 2025). This is due to China's intent, which is to gain control of the area through aggressive military actions, but Vietnam does not share the same goal (Prétat, 2025). These countries understand that Vietnam is not likely to "use its bases to restrict freedom of navigation or launch challenges to fishing or hydrocarbon activity" (Prétat, 2025).

China began its island-building to gain an advantage in any conflict within the South China Sea, which can be seen through its doctrine of camouflage, concealment, and deception. China seeks to maintain a level of secrecy when conducting operations and projects, which is aided by its ability to work underground and prevent foreign reconnaissance on its assets. For example, the fuel tanks buried on China's artificial islands are covered with sand and concrete, which "may prevent intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) sensors from indicating tank storage levels, denying an adversary indications and warning of PLA operations" (Dahm, 2020). The Chinese Academy of Military Science and Chinese military doctrine emphasize the need for camouflage, concealment, and deception, especially through the use of decoys, netting, and other camouflaging systems such as hangars to prevent proper reconnaissance by foreign entities (Dahm, 2020).

Vietnam began its island-building in response to Chinese actions in the region, particularly China's artificial island-building in the heavily disputed Spratly and Paracel Islands (Prétat, 2025). With China's creation of artificial islands came an uptick in Chinese coast guard and military presence near the Spratly Islands, leading to the harassment of oil tankers and vessels belonging to other nations (Prétat, 2025). In response to this, Vietnam began building artificial islands to maintain a similar presence to prevent China from harassing Vietnamese vessels, but Vietnam has nowhere near the same capabilities as China, considering it has a much smaller fleet (Prétat, 2025). Vietnam hoped to increase its deterrence capabilities and protect its sovereignty, but China has continued to violate the sovereignty of nations in the Indo-Pacific and to harass foreign vessels.

With artificial island building, China hopes to solidify historical claims to the region under the "nine-dash line," despite international legal rulings stating that these claims are unfounded. With the artificial islands and a history of Chinese fishermen utilizing the waters of the South

China Sea, China had hoped to obtain exclusive economic zones (EEZs) around the islands, but in 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled that China's artificial islands within the Spratlys do not have EEZs and that China lacks any historical basis for its claims (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). When considering whether a feature possesses an EEZ, the Court examines a feature in its natural state and considers whether it can sustain human life, not changes a country may have made to make it possess such a characteristic (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). The occasional use of the waters within the Spratly Islands does not constitute "inhabitation by a stable community, and that all of the historical economic activity had been extractive" (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). Some of the features within the Spratly Islands fall within the Philippines' EEZ since they cannot generate their own EEZ, making it unlawful for China to interfere with Philippine fishing within those areas (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). The Court did not rule on rights to territories, but it did rule on whether one country can interfere with another's access to a region, such as the Philippines fishing within the Scarborough Shoal. This case was filed by the Philippines in response to aggressive actions by Chinese vessels, but no such case has been filed against Vietnam since it has not participated in the same activities as China. Despite this ruling, China continues to treat these islands as sovereign land by patrolling the surrounding waters with law enforcement vessels and creating permanent populations consisting of military personnel, coast guard, and logistics support (Kass, 2026).

Similar to Vietnam, China seeks to project its military in the South China Sea, which it has been able to do through the artificial islands. The majority of military personnel are stationed on China's three largest islands: Fiery Cross, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef, which also include "aviation units, missile batteries, and radar installations" (Kass, 2026). These troops operate radar and surveillance equipment; operate anti-ship missiles to protect China's claim to the island;

maintain the infrastructure, such as runways; operate the desalination plants or power systems which keep the island inhabitable (Kass, 2026). With personnel on these islands, China is able to extend its aircraft reach “800-plus miles from the mainland,” greatly increasing China’s abilities to intercept foreign vessels or control shipping lanes (Kass, 2026).

Unlike Vietnam, China seeks to gain economic and resource control by monitoring shipping lanes within the South China Sea through radar and surveillance technologies. One intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) technology operating on some of China’s artificial islands is high-frequency direct finding (HF/DF) sites, which can “assess a line of bearing” to nearby ships (Chang, 2021). When two of these sites collect this information, the positioning of a ship can be deciphered, although this is dependent on weather conditions and how turbulent the sea is (Chang, 2021). A second technology is satellites, which are positioned in different layers of the Earth's orbit (Chang, 2021). Geostationary satellites are positioned at high altitudes, allowing the monitoring of one area, and low-Earth orbit satellites are used to track the movement of ships through the South China Sea (Chang, 2021). This requires a network of satellites, but they allow China to establish a pattern of travel for ships, which would be beneficial in a conflict (Chang, 2021). A third technology is land-based radars, which allow China to track the positioning of nearby ships and aircraft, with those located on the coast of an artificial island being the most effective (Chang, 2021). “China has even built massive over-the-horizon backscatter (OTH-B) radar sites, which use the ionosphere and the surface of the sea, to detect aircraft and ships thousands of kilometers away” (Chang, 2021). Land-based radar systems can have gaps in coverage, so China has utilized air- and sea-based radars to make up for the information not recorded by land devices, allowing for broader coverage of the South China Sea (Chang, 2021).

Effectiveness of Vietnam's Artificial Island Building

While Vietnam began artificial island building in response to China's aggression and possession of features, it does not appear to have stopped or lessened China's leverage in the South China Sea. China's expansion has increased despite attempts to slow it, with more land created in the region for military bases and positioning, especially considering current large-scale projects in the Paracel Islands like Antelope Reef (Global Watch, 2026). This artificial island is expected to surpass China's largest island at Mischief Reef, with features such as "berths for roll-on/roll-off vessels, a helipad, a concrete plant and more than 50 structures" (Global Watch, 2026). Dredging for this project began in late 2025, raising protests from Vietnam in March of 2026, condemning such activities on the disputed territory (Global Watch, 2026).

If both China and Vietnam continue to increase their military presence in the Spratly or Paracel Islands, neighboring countries may also see it as necessary to build islands in the region (Prétat, 2025). For example, if the Philippines sees an uptick in Chinese and Vietnamese presence over the next decade, the Philippines may decide that it needs artificial islands to support its claim to the region and maintain a similar coast guard presence (Prétat, 2025). This could lead to further tensions between nations, an increase in aggressive encounters, and a higher likelihood of a conflict. This could work against Vietnam's goal of lessening China's aggression and expansion in the South China Sea, leading China to launch more projects.

Control of shipping lanes is another concern regarding China and Vietnam's aggressive expansion of artificial islands, but more so concerning China's continued expansion since 2013, which Vietnam has not been able to curb (Congressional Research Service, 2023). Critical shipping routes flow through the South China Sea, particularly past the Spratly and Paracel Islands, causing concern that China could use these islands to control or close vital shipping routes that

serve to transport a third of global trade (Congressional Research Service, 2023). Most of the oil going to Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan flows through the South China Sea, making this a flashpoint that could be used to China's advantage in a future conflict, particularly with Taiwan (Congressional Research Service, 2023). Access to these routes allows China to control aid sent to countries experiencing conflict, whether that be military or humanitarian assistance (Congressional Research Service, 2023). Lastly, the proximity of China's artificial islands to these routes allows surveillance capabilities, providing China with valuable knowledge of military capacity or the reliance a nation may have on another nation (Congressional Research Service, 2023).

With an increased presence of China and Vietnam in the Spratly or Paracel Islands, there is a heightened likelihood of aggression, escalation, and regional conflicts between these nations. There have already been instances of aggression between Chinese vessels and those of other nations in the South China Sea, particularly with Philippine and Vietnamese vessels. A recent confrontation took place on October 12 of 2025, when Chinese cutters rammed and shot water cannons at two Philippine Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources vessels near Thitu Island and Sandy Cay (Lariosa, 2025). The Philippine vessels were anchored in the water to support fisherman that were being harassed by Chinese fishermen and facing harsh weather (Lariosa, 2025). Sandy Cay is a disputed territory between China and the Philippines, and it lies near Thitu Island, which is the Philippines' largest base within the Spratly Islands (Lariosa, 2025). Since this island is close to China's artificial island at Subi Reef, China claimed its actions were typical law enforcement activities, while the Philippines saw it as bullying and aggressive behavior (Lariosa, 2025). An aggressive encounter between China and Vietnam took place in October of 2024 when forty Chinese officers from the Sansha City United Law Enforcement Unit surrounded and boarded

a Vietnamese fishing vessel near the Paracel Islands (Lariosa, 2024). The Chinese officers launched three inflatable boats from their Maritime Safety Administration vessels to surround the Vietnamese fishing boat, preventing it from leaving the scene (Lariosa, 2024). The Chinese officers beat ten Vietnamese fishermen with metal rods, leaving four severely injured and the captain unconscious (Lariosa, 2024). This occurred within Vietnam's EEZ, which Chinese vessels frequently enter to disrupt Vietnam's oil and gas ventures or to attack Vietnamese fishermen (Lariosa, 2024).

If armed conflicts or skirmishes continue to increase in frequency, incidents like the Scarborough Shoal standoff in 2012 and disruptions in shipping lanes may increase in frequency. The Scarborough Shoal standoff of 2012 remains one of the most critical confrontations between the Philippines and China, where a Philippine Navy surveillance plane saw eight Chinese fishing vessels within the Shoal, suspected of illegal fishing (Wong, 2024). The Philippines quickly deployed a warship, the BRP *Gregorio Del Pilar*, which prompted the Chinese fishing vessels to send a distress call to Chinese authorities (Wong, 2024). Two China Maritime Surveillance (CMS) ships were dispatched to the scene, where they positioned themselves between the Philippine warship and the fishing vessels, impeding the warship from arresting the fishermen (Wong, 2024). In an attempt to de-escalate the situation, the warship was withdrawn, and a smaller Philippine Coast Guard patrol vessel replaced it, but China responded by dispatching another CMS ship (Wong, 2024). Over the next month, China significantly increased its numbers to a total of ninety vessels, while the Philippines maintained three (Wong, 2024). The United States became involved to facilitate a withdrawal, but after the Philippines withdrew, three Chinese vessels remained, and China has maintained control of the Shoal since (Wong, 2024).

Instances such as this could become more common if there is a heightened and growing presence of military or fishing vessels in the region, especially if a nation feels threatened or that they are entitled to a region, such as China with the Scarborough Shoal. Additionally, shipping lanes could be threatened if there are increased instances of ramming, boarding, or blockading of adversarial vessels, especially between Chinese vessels and those belonging to the Philippines or Vietnam. Artificial islands could be used to do this, operating as centers of surveillance equipped with anti-ship missiles that could prevent certain vessels from passing through contested areas (Congressional Research Service, 2023). If a blockade were to occur near a shipping lane, key choke points could be closed, supply chains disrupted, or commercial vessels could become caught in the crosshairs. Since China has established a pattern of aggression, coercion, and confrontation, a smaller nation such as Vietnam would not be able to prevent certain degrees of escalation due to a lack of means.

Vietnam and China have vastly different capabilities and means at their disposal, which affect what Vietnam can prevent in the South China Sea. Vietnam is the main target for China's coercion in the South China Sea, with some experts estimating that Vietnam is the target in 43.2%-59% of incidents (Phuong, 2024). Since Vietnam does not have anywhere near the same capabilities as a major power like China, Vietnam frequently handles these incidents through diplomacy or publicity, although sometimes confrontations occur (Phuong, 2024). These two nations attempted to settle disputes through agreements and meetings at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but the HD-981 crisis in 2014 changed how Vietnam responded to China's assertiveness (Phuong, 2024). In 2014, China deployed one of its oil rigs to explore and drill within the Paracel Islands, an area that overlapped with Vietnam's continental shelf. This action violated the "United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the Declaration of Conduct in

the South China Sea, and bilateral agreements between China and Vietnam” (Phuong, 2024). To protect the oil rig, China sent around eighty vessels: seven military, thirty-three coast guard, and some maritime militia and logistic vessels, which were to ensure no foreign vessel came within one nautical mile of the rig (Phuong, 2024). Vietnam decided to confront the oil rig with thirty small coast guard and fishing vessels, which were to be a show of force to prevent the Chinese oil rig from “establishing a fixed position,” but China quickly responded with aggression (Phuong, 2024). The Chinese vessels began ramming and shooting the Vietnamese vessels with water cannons, leading to a standoff that lasted from May until July (Phuong, 2024). The two nations eventually agreed to talks after Vietnam met some of China’s conditions and threatened legal action, but this case set a new precedent where Vietnam began confronting China’s grey zone tactics (Phuong, 2024). This case also highlights the disparity in capabilities, with Vietnam having to concede to some of China’s conditions in order to resolve this dispute and return some degree of peace to the South China Sea (Phuong, 2024). This disparity is also apparent in China’s rapid expansion in artificial island building, in which Vietnam has also participated but still lacks the military strength to support the protection of artificial islands or prevent coercion by Chinese vessels.

Environmental Impact

Both China and Vietnam have contributed to environmental damage by creating artificial islands, with China estimated to have damaged 4,648 acres of reef and Vietnam 4,120 acres (Prétat et al., 2025; Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2026). Environmental damage is widespread and unavoidable when artificial islands are created by nations such as Vietnam and China. When sand or gravel is taken from nearby areas and placed atop coral reefs or other structures, it damages those structures and harms marine life (Southerland, 2016). When China builds in the Spratly

Islands, it conducts shallow-water dredging, in which dredgers move sand or gravel from shallow areas to the designated site where the island will be built, which disturbs ecosystems, damages coral reefs, and eliminates organisms dependent on that region (Southerland, 2016). The damage done by these activities not only affects the ecosystem but also local communities because fisheries are damaged, forcing the fish away and harming the health of fish populations (Southerland, 2016). Additionally, there is the risk of contamination that building materials pose to the environment, along with changes in hydrodynamics that damage ecosystems (Mishra, 2025).

Conclusion

Vietnam and China have both built artificial islands, but the motivation and effectiveness behind these actions remain different. China's main motivation is to project military might and gain control of the South China Sea, but Vietnam aims to protect its sovereignty and ensure China does not continue to encroach on its territory. Vietnam has not attempted to violate the sovereignty of other Indo-Pacific nations, which explains why the international community has not spoken against Vietnam's artificial island-building. Both nations have built similar artificial islands with military capabilities, but China continues to rapidly expand within the Spratly and Paracel Islands. Vietnam's island building has not acted as a deterrent, with new and ongoing artificial island projects spearheaded by China. While it may seem that these activities are localized, they will have a global impact, whether that be a conflict or environmental changes. When China decides to launch a military campaign against Taiwan, its artificial islands will be vital in combatting any aid sent to Taiwan, whether that be military or humanitarian assistance. More will have to be done by other great powers, such as the United States, to combat China's aggressive expansion, most likely through continued or new partnerships with Indo-Pacific island nations that are better positioned

to oppose China's actions. Indo-Pacific nations seek stability when receiving aid, something the U.S. has lacked but China has been forthcoming with. If the U.S. were to provide more stable aid to support nations such as Kiribati, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, and Fiji, the U.S. could supplant some of China's influence in those nations opening the door for further U.S. access to the region. While doing this, the United States should be cautious of seeing these nations as a means to thwart China but instead focus on aiding these nations which could come with that benefit (Wilson, 2026).

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