

August and September 2020 Show A Significant Increase in Large Ships near Pag-asa (Thitu) Island

Analysis By Similarity In Collaboration
With AllSource
October 2020



Recent History of Chinese Ships Near Pag-asa Island

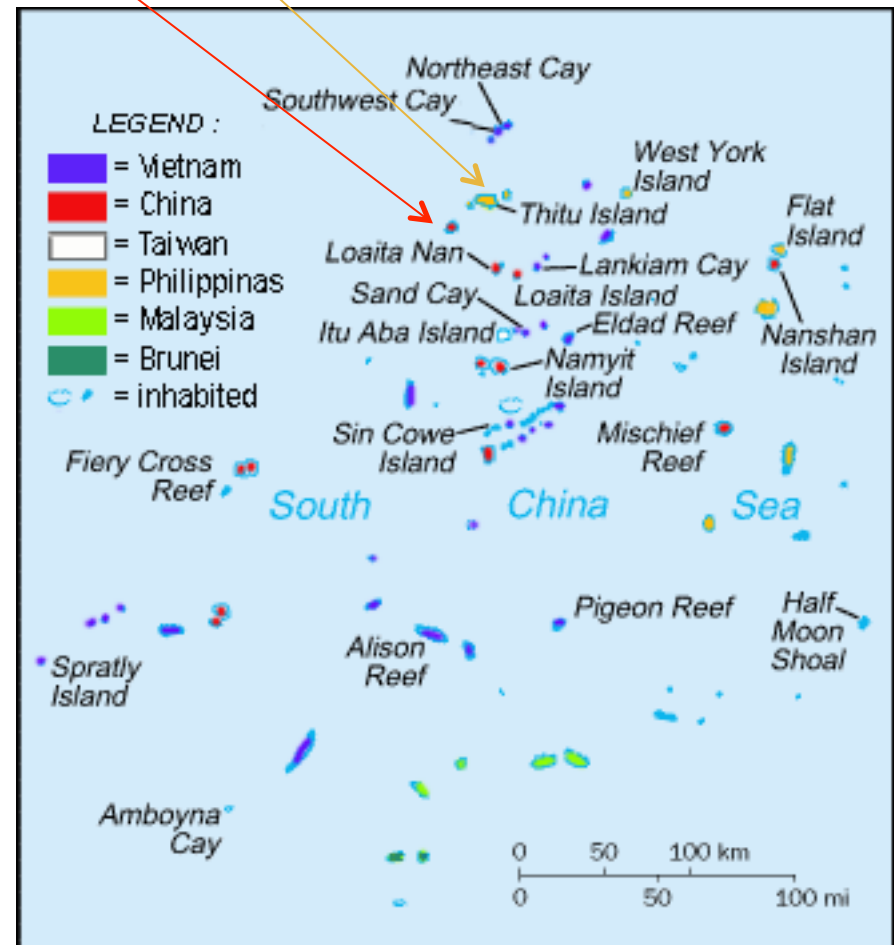
Since 2017 Chinese “fishing vessels” have been reported in the Pag-asa (Thitu) Island area. These ships have become known as “China’s Maritime Militia.” These ships threaten the [aerial and sea routes](#) to the island. They create a blockade cutting off Sandy Cay from Pag-asa and preventing local fisherman access.

[This report](#) from Stephenson Ocean Security Project indicates that in 2018 clusters of around 10 large Chinese fishing vessels were seen gathered around Philippine-occupied Thitu and Loaita Islands and Taiwan-occupied Itu Aba Island. These clusters remained for weeks at a time and only a few vessels showed signs of fishing during the time period imagery was collected. Overall, the Chinese fleet in the Spratlys spends far less time fishing and far more time at anchor than is typical of vessels elsewhere.”

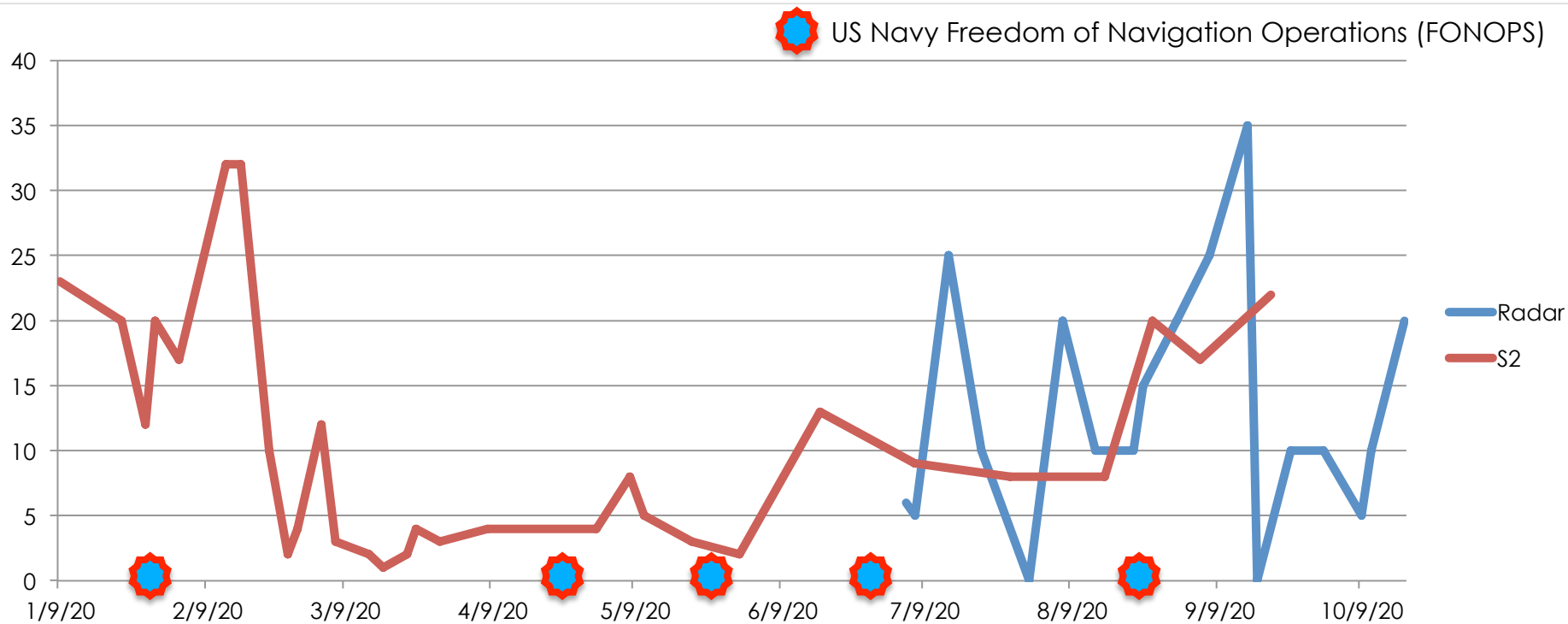
Chinese fishing vessels that are frequently spotted “apparently providing support to Chinese naval and coast guard operations” the West Philippine Sea, [this report](#) said, adding that a total of 322 such vessels with different bow numbers were monitored in the first half of 2019.”

On February 20, 2020, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana confirmed the [“intermittent” presence of Chinese vessels](#) surrounding Pag-asa Island in the West Philippine Sea.

Pag-asa Island, also known as Thitu Island, is occupied by the Philippines. In a group of islands in the South China Sea known as the Spratly Islands. Subi Reef, occupied by China, is just 9 nautical miles from the Pag-asa Reef.



Number of ships near Pag-asa Island As Seen By Optical and Radar Satellites



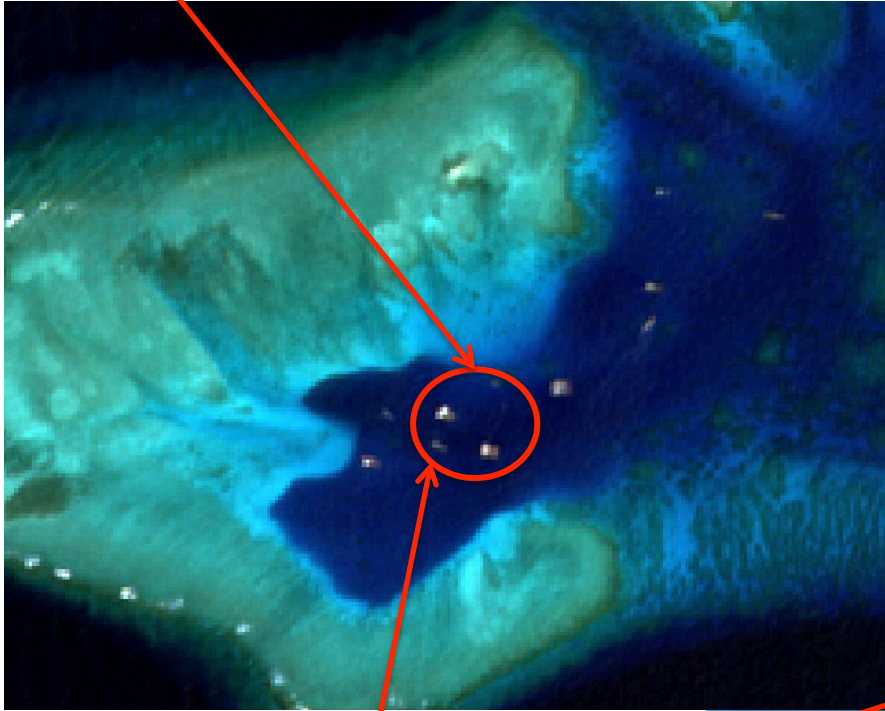
Analysis of European Space Agency's Sentinel 2 (S2) Satellite imagery through 2020 indicates that there was a heavy presence of large near Pag-asa Island in February 2020, but that the numbers tapered off significantly between March and May. The number of large ships in the area started to rise again in June and July, with a sharp increase in August and September, approaching the levels seen in February.

Since imagery is only available intermittently, both optical and radar detection of ships were used for these counts. The resolution of the optical imagery used (S2) is 10M, and likely resulted in under-counting of the actual number of ships, since ships usually moor together, but that can't be confirmed at this resolution.

similarity South China Sea Rapid Alert Service

The ship counts presented here are likely lower than the actual number of ships, because we counted the ships from 10M resolution satellite imagery.

These ships at 10M satellite imagery often look like these groups at higher resolution imagery.



Vessels at Thitu Reef on September 20, 2020.

Imagery credit: Sentinel 2 "European Space Agency - produced from ESA remote sensing data"

Multiple ships moored together were conservatively counted as a single ship, due to the unavailability of high resolution imagery for this time period that could provide more certainty as to the actual number.

[Chinese fishing vessels at Subi Reef on August 12, 2018.](#) © DigitalGlobe, Inc. and © Vulcan Technologies LLC. All Rights Reserved

Where Are The Ships Near Pag-asa Island From?

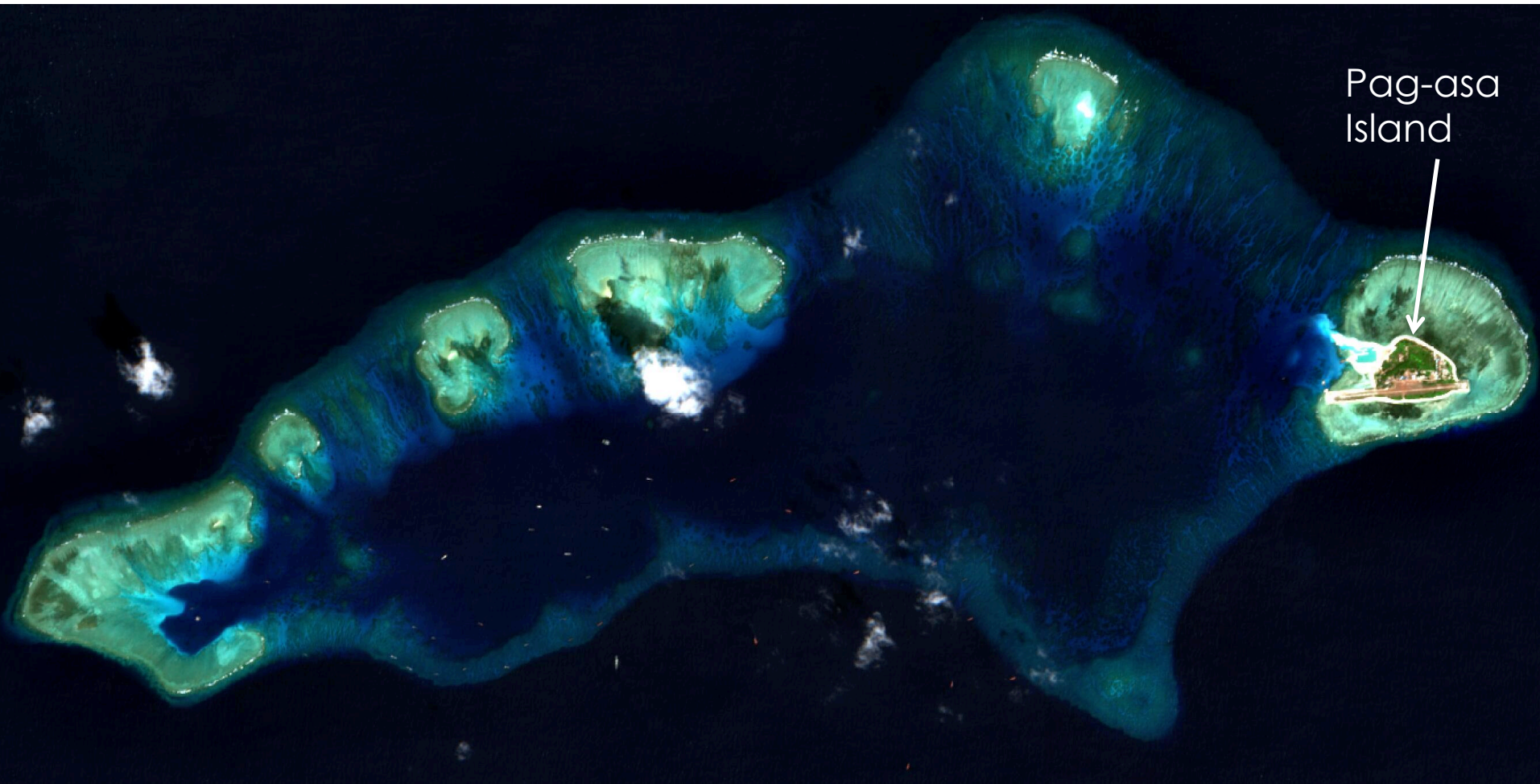


Analysis of Maxar radar imagery and MarineTraffic AIS data from 18 October 2020 revealed a group of approximately 20 vessels, one of which is identified as the Chinese-flagged fishing vessel XIAHAIDON008 (MMSI 412000008), at Thitu Reefs, about four nautical miles west of Philippines' Thitu Island.

Backscatter radar returns from several of these vessels, pattern-of-life understanding of Chinese fishing vessel operations in the South China Sea, and entity-level AIS identification of one vessel as a Chinese-flagged fishing vessel in the vicinity of 11.03682 114.19584, together suggests the entire group of vessels at Thitu Reefs are probably Chinese-flagged fishing vessels.

This observation indicates China continues to allow fishing vessels to operate nearby foreign-claimed territory in the South China Sea.

February 13, 2020: 32 ships near Pag-asa (Thitu) Island



Pag-asa
Island

August 26, 2020: 20 ships near Pag-asa (Thitu) Island



Pag-asa
Island

September 20, 2020: 22 ships near Pag-asa (Thitu) Island



Philippine Government Responds: Completes Upgrades For Pag-asa Island and Forms Paramilitary Units

New port and dock enhancements on Pag-asa Island were operational by May and June 2020

On May 19, 2020, a [Philippine Navy ship docked at Pag-asa Island](#) for the first time, a milestone achieved via the construction efforts this year to build a deep water port on the island.



[CNN Philippines](#) reported on October 21, 2020 that “after the Philippine government protested the presence of more than a hundred Chinese vessels, believed to be part of China’s sophisticated fishing militia, spotted swarming around Pag-asa Island and the West Philippine Sea last July, its military now wants to counter it the way they know best: deploy their own paramilitary units.”

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